

Hailey's Comet

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Chapter 1: “Wednesday”

The city of Malley was a fairly small town. It was also large enough to put a G.P.S. to work. It could numb a person’s ear canals with sedating silence. Or, it could scramble a person’s brain with screaming sirens and impatient car horns. Some cities are over engineered. They’re comprised of networks of interweaving bridges, highways on which cars intermingle then scamper away like mice, bums dotting sidewalks, billboards, toll booths, parking garages, five-story malls, tall buildings, short buildings, homes with swimming pools, apartments with lonely tenants, department stores, over priced restaurants, empty cigarette packs, run down bars, sleazy hotels, drug cartels, prostitutes, and museums. Malley had some of those. It just didn’t have as many as some cities or as few as some towns.

Glory High School was one of three scholarly choices for mid to late teens to waste nine months a semester trying not to fall asleep in. It was located at the heart of the city of Malley. It was an average sized campus. It housed 1,200 students and 70 teachers and faculty. On a typical day as was this particular Wednesday, the four parking lots of the campus were filled with students’ and teachers’ cars alike. The sun was shining from the west. The day was drawing to a close. A gentle, northern breeze carried a pack of puffy, white clouds across the sky. They would be no bother to anyone until the next evening, so much as the local weather forecaster could tell. Fall was on the way. But, the squishy grass that surrounded the campus was still a brilliant shade of green. Bushy trees buzzed with scampering squirrels and chirping sparrows.

Hailey and Wednesday sat across from one another. They were in their English class on the third floor. Mr. Watts had split the entire class into groups of two. Hailey and Wednesday had chosen a pair of desks at the back corner of the room. They sat by a window. The class was

in a state of constant chatter. A pair of students could have been plotting to overthrow the government or bomb some embassy in the Middle East. No one would have been the wiser. They were supposed to be discussing *Henry V*, but Wednesday had the discussion geared in another direction as usual. She slid a CD across their desks. She had recorded it the night before on her computer. Hailey stared at the bright blue disc through a pair of emerald colored eyes behind a set of golden framed spectacles with thick lenses. Her fire orange hair glowed in the sunlight.

"These are the guys I was telling you about," Wednesday whispered through a grinning pair of ruby red lips.

Hailey snatched up the album her friend had laid in front of her. "Yeah," she replied. "What're they called again... 'Blades of Shit'?"

"It's 'Blades of Sloth'!" Wednesday snapped. Hailey replied with a snicker. "So like...you've got to check them out, okay?"

Hailey looked up and squinted. "I don't even *like* this heavier music. Bunch of Satanic crap."

"No-no, they're cool though," Wednesday insisted. "Just check them out."

"Look, I really don't..."

"Just listen to the damn CD, you little bitch!" Wednesday yelled.

"All...right!" Hailey fired back. She dropped the CD in a compartment on the side of her backpack. Then, she returned to her copy of *Henry V*. "Now, can we please finish this up?" Wednesday looked at her book. She gave her eyes a rub and looked up. Hailey grinned. "What?"

"Ugh, this Shakespeare," Wednesday moaned. "Don't you get tired of looking at this

stuff?”

“Oh, come on. It’s ‘Henry the Fifth’. It’s not so bad.”

“I don’t even understand this stuff when I read it,” Wednesday said. “I mean what are they even talking about?”

“They’re about to have a big, huge battle,” Hailey explained. “We’re almost done with this.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because I watched the movie,” Hailey replied. Wednesday leaned across her desk and laughed. “Yeah, Shakespeare plays were meant to be watched, not read.”

Wednesday slammed her hand on top of her book. “Well, I know what *I’m* going to rent tonight.”

“Well, you do that,” Hailey returned. An electronic bell sounded over the loudspeaker. “But you *do* need to memorize some of these lines, okay?”

“Bah...shut-up!” Wednesday remarked. She shoved her book into her backpack. “If I have to look at this another minute, I’m going to be sick.” She sighed. “So, why don’t you come on over tonight and watch this thing with me?” Hailey slid her book and a three ring binder into her backpack. Then, she threw it over her shoulders.

“Can’t,” she replied. “I’ve got a wicked test coming up in Algebra Two. I have to study.”

“When’s the test?” Wednesday asked.

“Friday.”

They began to leave. “Friday?” Wednesday inquired. “You can study for that *tomorrow* night.”

“No, I’d better get started right away,” Hailey replied. “I’m going to need at least two nights on this one.”

Hailey and Wednesday were the last students to exit the classroom. Mr. Watts stayed behind to grade papers. They followed their classmates closely. Once through the door, they became infused in a river of students. They fought their way towards the stairs. Hailey looked down an adjoining hallway. She saw one of her fellow classmates from Psychology and Algebra II. He stood with his back against a locker. He was making out with his girlfriend, Jennifer. Hailey’s eyes became fixed upon Jennifer’s glossy, pink lips. They were pressed tightly against Travis’ not so glossy ones. She felt a tingle in the back of her brain. She watched them. Jennifer slid her fingers through his jet black hair. Then, she slowly tumbled them across his lean, muscular chest. Hailey imagined Travis’ lips pressed against her own. She imagined his hard body under *her* fingertips. The apples of her pale cheeks glowed bright red.

“What do you see in that guy?” Wednesday asked. Her voice sliced through Hailey’s thoughts like a razor blade. Hailey faced her friend, shaking the image from her mind.

“I don’t know. He’s cute.”

“He’s a creep, Hailey,” Wednesday assured her. “You don’t want anything to do with a guy like that. Trust me.” Hailey faced forward. “Besides, he’s taken.”

“I know that!” Hailey shouted back. “I don’t care. I heard they might break up, anyway.” Hailey looked at Wednesday through a pair of narrow eyes. “And what do you mean ‘he’s a creep’?”

“Ha!” Wednesday spat. They started down the stairs. “I know the type.”

Hailey smacked her lips. “Man, I’ve been with more guys than you, I’ll bet.”

“Hailey, you’ve gone on one date since I met you, and that was in junior high.”

“Exactly,” Hailey said with a smirk.

Wednesday slugged her on the shoulder. “That hurt my feelings, Hailey. Really.”

“Hey,” Hailey replied, rubbing her arm, “the truth hurts.” She slugged her friend back. She smiled at the squishy sensation of her friend’s jacket against her fingers. It was made of soft, black leather. “Nice coat, man.”

“Thanks,” Wednesday replied, rubbing her arm. “I stole it last week.”

Hailey turned to her. “You stole it?!”

“I’m kidding!” Wednesday assured her. “I bought it at a garage sale. The only thing I’ve ever stolen is a heart or two.”

Hailey and Wednesday hopped down the last couple of steps, exited the stairwell, and arrived at a set of double doors covering the exit. Hailey followed a couple of students through the door on the right. Each one dropped the door in the face of the person behind them as they stepped through. Wednesday made her way out after some *left* door students. She and Hailey stepped onto a concrete walkway. It led to a parking lot then turned into a length of sidewalk that encircled the campus. On either side of the walkway, rows of grass and trees were scattered about. On Wednesday’s side of the grass stood a block of concrete. Glory High’s flagpole protruded from the top. She darted across the grass, hopped onto the concrete block, and grabbed the pole in one hand. Then, she leaned away with her free hand stretched out. With closed eyes and a grin, she took a deep breath through her nose and exhaled a satisfied sigh.

“Wednesday, get down off that flagpole!” Ms. Goodwin yelled from the sidewalk. Ms. Goodwin was like an assistant to an assistant in the principal’s office. But, from the way she barked orders at the students sometimes, a person might get the impression that she *owned* the school. Still smiling, Wednesday hopped down. She stared across the grass at Ms. Goodwin’s

tightly knit, beehive hairdo. She looked like an old, burnt-out housewife from the fifties. Rigid rows of amber were stacked atop her head. Crinkles slithered from the corners of her eyes. She pressed her hands against her large hips.

“Sorry, Ms. Goodwin,” Wednesday told her. Ms. Goodwin pointed at her and stared through a pair of cold, dark eyes. Her index finger seemed like it was ten feet long.

“I’m watching you, missy!” she shouted. “You’d better straighten it up.” She dropped her hand at her side and turned her icy gaze on Hailey. Hailey crossed her arms over her chest. “You too, *Hailey*. I’ve got my eye own you, too. Both of you!”

“Okay, Ms. Goodwin,” Hailey replied with a wave of her hand. Ms. Goodwin frowned. She glanced at Wednesday then walked away to pester somebody else. Hailey and Wednesday moseyed down the walkway and entered the parking lot. Wednesday retrieved a pack of smokes from her coat pocket once they’d reached the second row of cars. She fished out a cancer-stick, popped it in her mouth, and offered one to her friend. Hailey looked up with a grin. She shook her head.

“Come on, bitch,” Wednesday beckoned. “Have a stogie with me.” The cigarette flopped up and down between her ruby lips as she spoke.

“Gee, I don’t know, Wednesday,” Hailey said in a nerdy voice. “They might give you cancer.” They laughed. Wednesday flipped open a lighter, lit her cigarette, and slapped the lighter closed.

“One of these days, I’m going to get you smoking, man,” Wednesday assured her. She returned the lighter to her pocket.

“No, I don’t think you are, *man*,” Hailey fired back. “Something about that wad of phlegm my mother coughs up every morning, you know? I just never felt the urge after that.”

Wednesday took a drag. She faked a harsh cough. *"I don't know what you're talking about,"* she whispered with a raspy voice. They weaved through cars until they reached the end of the parking lot. Sidewalk traced the edge of the parking lot as well. The streets around the parking lot were small, back roads. There wasn't a whole lot of traffic on them, yet. This is where Wednesday and Hailey usually parted ways. Hailey turned to her friend.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Wednesday."

"Yeah, sure," Wednesday replied, "since you won't come over and watch this movie with me."

"I have to study!" Hailey re-stated. She dashed across one street, and Wednesday crossed the intersecting one.

Back in the main parking lot, Travis was climbing into his truck. It was a four door, extended cab pickup. The paintjob was slick and furious. It consisted of a black background with orange flames sliding across the front fenders. Today, he had managed to get it parked one row back from the front. That was as close as a student could park to the school. The front row was reserved for faculty only. He shut the door behind him, cranked up the engine, and rolled down his window. He stuck his head out.

"Hurry up, douchebags!" he shouted. "Jenny! Gary! Tate!" His friend Paul walked up to the window. "Paul, you are *not* riding with me!" he shouted in his face. He peered into the blue lenses of Paul's sunshades. That was as close as anyone ever got to actually seeing Paul's eyes. Paul grinned, reaching out to tug on Travis' door handle. Travis pressed the door lock button before he could jerk the door open. Paul threw his hands out at his sides.

"Come on, Travis. Why can't I ride with you?"

"You're riding with Joe, Tommy, and Vicky, Paul." Travis stuck his pointer finger in his

face. “Now, get back!”

Paul smacked his lips. “Man, why do I have to ride with *them*?”

“Shut-up, Paul,” Travis returned. He situated himself in his seat. “Don’t start your crap.”

Paul opened his mouth to say something else. Travis reached inside a console between the two front seats. He retrieved the first CD he could get his hand on, popped it into the CD player, and cranked up the volume. His favorite band, YKC began to drown out the sound of Paul’s voice. He turned to Paul with a big grin. Paul continued to ramble about...something. Growing bored, Travis diverted his attention to the front of the school. The rest of his friends walked up to join them. There was Gary. A slight wind blew through his red, plaid outer shirt to reveal a t-shirt underneath. It had one of his favorite alternative bands on the front. There was Gary’s girlfriend, Tate. A head of long, red colored hair twisted around her arms in braids. There was Jennifer. Her glossy, pink lips were a bit smudged from when she and Travis had made out earlier. There was Vicky. Her dark brown eyes mirrored the sun. Her bell bottomed blue jeans were rolled up at the ends. And, there were Joe and Tommy. They were a couple of punkers. Joe spiked his black Mohawk in the bathroom on the first floor before leaving school everyday. Tommy wore his usual dark shades and a hair of short, blue spikes.

The six of them brushed past Ms. Goodwin. Her beehive hairdo bobbed in the wind and threatened to come tumbling down. She narrowed a set of crinkly eyes and slowly turned her head as they walked by. Tommy returned her gaze with a look from the tops of his dark shades. He offered her a warm smile of jagged, broken teeth. Ms. Goodwin, crossed her arms and dropped her head. She replied with a cold frown. Jennifer, Gary, and Tate reached Travis’ truck and piled inside. Jennifer sat next to Travis in the front seat. Gary and Tate shared the back seat. Vicky, Joe, and Tommy joined Paul. Joe reached through the driver’s side window and bumped

fists with Travis.

“Mayun, I hate thayut Miss Goodwin, Trav,” Joe remarked. “Someone ought to put her out of her Goddamn misery, already.” Travis smirked and cranked up the tunes. He began to rev the engine. Travis’ stereo and engine were both designed to be obnoxiously earsplitting. Tate widened her big, blue eyes and plugged her ears. Travis’ truck windows rippled with the rhythm of the current track. The truck rocked from side to side from engine torque. Jennifer threw out her arms. She grabbed the arm rest on her door with one hand and the back of her seat with the other. Ms. Goodwin turned to them. Her eyebrows fell in the middle with disgust. Her jaw dropped from a twisted face, and she threw her hands on her large hips. The eight of them stared back, awaiting her response. She pointed a ten foot finger at them.

“You’d better keep it down over there, MISTER!” she screeched.

“WHAT?!” Travis screamed. “TURN IT UP?!” No one thought it possible, but Travis actually turned the music up...louder.

“Woooooooooooh!” Tate screamed from the back seat, fingers jammed in her ears. Travis stomped the gas pedal to the floor and held it in place. Then, he threw the shifter into reverse. One of the rear tires began to shriek. A torrent of white smoke poured out. The truck didn’t move. It just sat there, stereo howling, engine growling, white smoke filling the air. Ms. Goodwin bowed her head and stuck her fingers in her ears. Several students walking by did the same. Then, Travis tapped the brake pedal. The truck flew backwards, and he swung the steering wheel to the left. Once he was out far enough to pull away, he let off the gas and stomped the brake pedal to the floor. He threw the shifter into drive and white-smoked the tire again. His pickup spun out to the end of the parking lot. Vicky, Joe, Tommy, and Paul turned their grinning gazes from Travis’ truck to Ms. Goodwin. She stared at them through a pair of

angry eyes, a set of crossed arms, and an open mouth. The four of them skidded away. They headed for Vicky's faded, olive green Station Cruiser. Vicky fumbled with her keys.

"Wait!" she yelled. Paul got to the car first. He began pulling on the front, passenger door handle and knocking on the window.

"Vicky!" he begged. "Vicky, let me in, dammit!" He framed his hands around the blue lenses of his sunglasses and put them to the window. "Vicky?" Joe arrived at the Station Cruiser next. He began banging on the rear, passenger window.

"Come on, Vicky. Let me in!" he shouted. "Vicky!"

"Shut-up, you guys!" Vicky screamed. "I'm coming!"

"Oh God, Vicky! Let me in!" Tommy spewed in frenzy. He ran to the rear of the car. "Vicky!" He ran to the rear window, pretended to slam into it, and jumped away. He rolled backwards through the parking lot.

"Man, you guys are dicks!" Vicky screamed. She ran up and hopped over Tommy. As she jumped, Tommy snagged her around the ankle and took her to the ground. Vicky let out a screech. Tommy dragged her across loose gravel and knelt on top of her.

"Vicky!" Tommy shouted. "Let me drive, man! Let me drive!" He tried to snatch the keys out of her hand. She jerked them away and clutched them against her chest.

"No!" Vicky screamed through laughter. Tommy grabbed her hands. He began to fumble with her fingers, trying to knock her keys loose. "Tommy! She's gonna get us, Tommy!"

"Come on, just let me drive, man," Tommy begged. "Come on!"

"Tommy!" Vicky yelled. "Guys, help me!"

Paul hopped on top of Vicky's Station Cruiser and threw his fists on his hips. "I'll save

you, my dear!” he valiantly shouted. He dropped to the opposite side of the car. Then, he jogged up and grabbed Tommy in a chokehold. Tommy released his grip and tried to stand up.

“*Hey, freak...*” he squealed through a clenched throat. “*Get off of me!*” Vicky dragged herself away from the grip of Tommy’s thighs. She scrambled to her feet and darted for the Station Cruiser. She unlocked the driver’s side door, climbed inside, and started the engine. A big puff of black smoke spat out of the tailpipe. Paul let go of Tommy’s neck. Tommy turned around and gave Paul a light shove.

“Man, Paul...*I* wanted to drive!”

“Dammit, Tommy!” Paul laughed. He dashed back to the front, passenger door. “Get in the car!”

Tommy threw his hands out at his sides and tore after him. “I wanna drive, dammit!” Vicky reached across the front seat. She unlocked the front and rear passenger doors just as Paul arrived. Paul and Joe climbed inside. They shut their doors with worn, rusty smashes. Tommy arrived at the rear, driver’s side door and jerked at the handle. *His* door was still locked. “Come on, guys! Let me in!” He banged on the window in a panic. Joe reached across the back seat and unlocked the door for him. Tommy jerked it open, hopped inside, and slammed it shut. As Vicky backed out of her parking spot, everyone rolled their windows down to let in some fresh air. Vicky stomped on the brakes, threw the shifter into drive, and smashed the gas pedal to the floor. The engine revved up for a couple of seconds. Then, the car took off with a short tire screech.

“Need transmission fluid!” Tommy yelped from the back seat.

Hailey was five blocks down Dora Lane. She had five to go. She was in a fairly decent neighborhood, much nicer than her own. It was clear sailing ahead. No one parked their

vehicles on the sidewalk, here. Rather, everyone either parked in a garage or on their driveway. All the lawns were green and neatly trimmed. Some yards had circular drives running through. Others were decorated with intricate rock gardens. One particular home that always caught Hailey's attention had these two enormous, twisting oak trees in the front yard. They were large enough to shade the entire yard, parts of the neighbors' yards, the sidewalk out front, and the street. They reached high into the sky. Their twisted trunks and branches twisted through one another, weaving across each other's space more and more the higher they went. Creating this dreamscape would have been a painstaking process, the likes of which Hailey figured had been going on for over 50 years. It made her smile every time she walked by.

The roar of a loud engine approached, and her thoughts scattered. She looked back and continued to walk. Soon, she could see a black pickup trimmed with orange flames racing towards her. Once it was a couple of blocks away, she heard rock music as well. Earth shattering sound waves bounced off the sides of brick houses as the truck passed. Hailey jammed her fingers in her ears. She watched as the truck approached. She heard the occupants of the pickup hooting and hollering. That's when she realized it was Travis and his friends. Travis took notice of Hailey and stopped shouting. Their eyes met. They turned their heads to face one another as the pickup flew past. The other three continued to shriek. Their gaze lasted until compression waves from the music and engine noise punched Hailey in the chest. She whirled around and watched. Travis' truck continued down the road.

"Wow," Hailey whispered, overcome with a grin. She looked down. Like most sidewalks, the one she traversed was made of squares of concrete laid in a long row. She continued her journey home, leaping across the sidewalk one square at a time. Her white, canvas shoes conveyed light echoes along the quiet neighborhood, left foot, right foot then right foot,

left foot. She skipped across twenty squares of concrete that way. Her red backpack flopped up and down behind her. Her orange hair, light blue turtleneck, and calf high khakis rippled in a slight wind as she hopped along. The roar of another car approached, and Hailey looked behind her. This time it was a green Station Cruiser. She stopped and turned completely around to watch.

“Let me drive! Let me drive!” she heard Tommy yelling as it rolled by.

“Shut-up, Tommy!” Vicky screamed back.

Vicky’s car passed. Hailey smiled then turned around and resumed the walk home. Dora Lane began to curve to the right. Half a block in front of her became obscured from view. The dreaded Patrick Peterson Freeway would be coming around that curve in a couple of blocks. Hailey’s heart began to beat faster. Soon, she would be crossing fourteen lanes of unspeakable traffic. She did it every evening on the way home from school. No matter how many times she did, Hailey always felt apprehensive about scurrying across the freeway. There was just something about it, a helpless feeling. There was something about walking amongst hundreds of two ton vehicles, all flying by at 70 miles an hour. Plus, it took forever for a clearing large enough to cross to present itself, especially at this time of day. Once, she had sat at the side of the freeway for ten minutes waiting for an opening

The next indication of impending doom presented itself in the form of a lawn ornament. It was a harmless, plastic flamingo with a rainbow colored windmill on either side twirling in the wind. It was yet another reminder that the dreaded crossing was about to commence. Hailey made it a block into the right curve of doom. The Patrick Peterson began to chant its ugly chorus of roaring engines, air whooshing across windshields, and rubber skipping over gravel. Hailey swallowed hard. She continued at a steady pace on wobbly legs. She spotted a spread brick

fence at the end of somebody's lawn. It was innocent enough, a waist high fence of red bricks. There was half a brick's space between each brick, creating a checkerboard of tiny windows. It meant the freeway would be coming into view at any moment. She sighed. After a few more steps, the road stopped curving and straightened out. This was it. There it was, the Patrick Peterson. The road in front of her came to a dead end at a small field of grass. She stopped walking. Her eyes widened.

Hailey looked above a waist high, concrete wall at the end of the grass. She took in the sheer magnitude of it. It was an awe inspiring sight. The freeway consisted of 6 driving lanes and a left turn lane of westbound traffic, followed by a left turn lane and 6 driving lanes of eastbound traffic. Every single one of the twelve driving lanes was filled with cars as far as the eye could see. They came from both directions. Each one flew down the road at mind bending speeds. The Patrick Peterson was a terrifying array of ordered chaos. Hailey's eyebrows fell in the middle. She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot. Her eyes panned from one end of the horizon to the other. They rolled across a torrent of interwoven, multi colored steel. It twisted across the plane in front of her.

Her eyes darted to the left then back to the right. She attempted to make sense of the giant jumble of confusion. After a minute, she saw a way through. It was going to be a combination of two holes in the opposing clusters of vehicles, a moment of absolute perfection when the two holes would exist side by side. Her chance to make it across was coming. But, she was going to have to run across the grass to her left in order to catch it in time. The two holes would not align where she stood. More cars would soon swallow them up. Without hesitating, Hailey dashed to the left for a block. She arrived just in time to fly through the traffic gap. There was a problem. Two cars merged into the left turn lane. Her jaw dropped. She cocked

her head to the side. She would have to wait on those two to turn before she could cross the second gap. By then it would be too late. Hailey didn't want to get stuck in the middle of the Patrick Peterson, so she stopped. She crossed her arms and watched. Cars flew in from the left and re-painted the road just as the hole in the eastbound traffic appeared. The left-turners made their turns. A moment later, the freeway was full again.

Hailey lowered her head. She slung her backpack into the grass. Then, she leaned on the concrete divider that separated her and the Patrick Peterson. She stood with her hands hung over the railing, crossed at the wrists. She pushed her pink lips to one side of her face. Her orange, shoulder length hair floated in front of her in the wind. She looked around. There was another hole in the eastbound traffic, but there were none in the westbound to pair it with. She watched grimly as it passed. Yet another came and went on the same side of the road. She sighed. Then, a hole drifted into sight in the westbound traffic, but there were none to match it in the eastbound traffic.

"Screw it," Hailey remarked. She bent over and retrieved her backpack. She slung it over her shoulders, hopped onto the railing, and waited for the hole to greet her. The gap presented itself, and she went for it. Now, she would be trapped right in the middle of all the commotion. She skirted across empty pavement towards the left turn lane. "*What if there's a wreck?*" Hailey thought to herself. "*What if someone else needs to turn left?*" She shrugged. "Oh, well." She stopped and stood in the middle of the fourteen lane thoroughfare. "They'll have to wait." After ten seconds, three more cars pulled into the turn lane. Hailey rolled her eyes in disgust. She turned to check the eastbound traffic. As luck would have it, a hole was on the way. She glanced back. The first car came to a jerky stop a few feet in front of her. The driver looked pretty surprised to see her there. Hailey smiled back, waving hello. She darted

across the last six lanes of the Patrick Peterson and hopped onto a chunk of sidewalk. Then, she stopped to catch her breath.

“Scuse me, miss,” a young lady’s voice popped in. Hailey whirled around to face the speaker. “Y’all got any cash?” Hailey relaxed. Due to the girl’s ragged appearance and worn out clothes, she deduced fairly quickly that she was just some drug-addict. She smirked, rolling her eyes. Then, she brushed on by.

“Nope,” she muttered without looking back. She shook her head. Her grin widened. Hailey got a few paces away before being battered with the girl’s kind reply.

“Man, fuck you den, *bitch!*” she screamed. Hailey snickered and pinched the bridge of her nose. She was definitely in her own neighborhood, now. She crossed her arms over her chest. Then, she rubbed them at a slight chill in the air. She rejoiced in the fact that she was only a couple of blocks from home. She felt really good about that for a fraction of a fraction of a second. But, as memories came flooding back, she wondered why.

Chapter 2: “Larry”

Some homes are cozy, laid back, and charming. Some families decorate their houses with pictures on shelves. Or, they hang little wooden hearts on the walls with warm words and short poems painted on them. Some residences have fireplaces with red brick mantles, glass enclosures with large televisions, acoustic audio systems, large and inviting dinner tables, plush, leather furniture, grandfather clocks, hot meals, fruity air fresheners, fresh trashcan liners, stainless steel sinks, clean dishes, fully stocked refrigerators, large backyards with white picket fences, family barbecues, soccer and football trophies, A+ essays tacked to refrigerator doors with magnets, and honor roll awards. Some homes are gloomy. They’re decorated with peeling, nicotine stained paint, old curtains nailed above windows, sun damaged, faded carpets with large stains, empty liquor bottles, broken wind chimes, lamps with no shades, ratty clothes piled at the bottoms of closets, losing scratch off tickets, broken electronics, movies with missing cases, cases with missing movies, ceiling fans with sagging blades, foggy windows, and funky smells.

Hailey’s home was gloomy. A stagnant aroma of old takeout food and half filled beer bottles awaited anyone that dared to walk through the floppy storm door. Or, a person could just crawl through the peeling screen. In the morning, one could typically find Hailey’s mother passed out on the living room couch. Usually, she was lying there with half a box of pizza resting atop her chest. She would have the television on way too loud to keep her company. She typically slept off her drunkenness from the night before until noon. Then, she would drag herself to her feet, throw on a pair of slippers, and drive to the nearest gas station to get some beer. It wasn’t always that way. Every once in a while, she would swing a job bagging groceries or something similar. She might keep a job like that for a couple of weeks to a month. Then, she would mouth off to the manager or punch out one of the customers. After that, she would live

off what little money she had managed to save. She would try to swindle more money out of boyfriends or anyone she could party with and get to feel sorry for her. On this particular Wednesday, she had not worked in months. The place was filthier and rattier than ever. A putrid odor flowed through a hole where the screen had peeled from the storm door. Hailey turned and pinched her nose at the smell. She yanked the screen door open and stepped inside. It slammed shut behind her and flopped in the frame. It startled her every time. Her eyes darted around. She tried to make sense of things. She was immersed in confusing darkness, scattered by flickering lights from the living room television. She managed to make out her mother and a couple of guys sitting on the couch. One of them was Larry.

“Wooooooooooh!” her mother screamed. She threw her skinny, white arms in the air. Larry and the other guy began to hoot and holler at something on TV. The unknown man looked up.

“Who the hell is that?” he asked. He had a pair of squinty eyes and a mouthful of decaying teeth. Hailey stared through the dim living room at his shaved head. She peered into his pale, blue eyes.

“That’s my little Hailey!” her mother squealed. Her face was decorated with a twisted, drunken smile. She hopped up from the squishy, worn out couch and dashed across the living room. She threw her arms around her daughter. “It’s so good...to see you!” her mother belched in her face. Hailey squinted and turned her head. Her mother’s breath was putrid and soaked with alcohol. Hailey wriggled to free herself from her tight grip. “And how...WAS YOUR DAY?” her mother asked.

“Okay,” Hailey replied. She hugged her mother’s bony body loosely. She leaned forward and placed her head beside hers. “*Is that Larry over there?*” she whispered. “*I thought*

you told him never to come back after last time.”

“Oh!” her mother gasped. She tore away and threw her hands on her hips. *“Come on, Hailey. He’s on his best behavior,”* she whispered back. *“Besides, we need the money.”*

Hailey shook her head. *“We’ve got to get you another job,”* she whispered back. She placed her hand over her heart. *“I’LL go get a job, okay? We’ll figure something out, but you have to get rid of him, alright? And who’s this other guy?”*

“Bah!” her mother spat. She stumbled back to the couch with a wave of her hand. She plopped down between Larry and what’s his face. “And THIS...is Dan!” she yelled. She pointed at the unknown man. Dan waved at her with a sip from his beer bottle. Hailey dared a glance at Larry. Long, curly hairs poked out of his black, sleeveless shirt. She could just make them out in the flickering light of the television. His shirt was an exhibition of an eighties hard rock band. She laid eyes on his face for the first time in four months. His black, Hitler style mustache and horseshoe shaped bald head surrounded by short black hair stared back. Little hairs stood up on the back of Hailey’s neck. She had hoped she would never have to see either of those two features again. Larry lifted his head and pursed his lips at her. Hailey cringed, narrowing her eyes. She pinched her eyes shut. She turned towards her mother and opened them.

“Mom...” she squeaked.

Her mother threw her skinny arms into the air at something on TV. “Woooooooooh!”

Larry turned to Dan and pointed at him. “I told you he’d get it!” he shouted.

“Shit, Larry!” Dan screamed. He stood and removed his billfold from his back pocket. He pulled out a twenty dollar bill and slapped it into Larry’s outstretched hand. Hailey shivered at Larry’s oversized hand. It was the size of a catcher’s mitt. She turned to the right, crept down

the hallway, and slid through the first door on the left. She immediately closed and locked the door behind her. Hailey hooked her thumbs underneath the straps of her backpack. She stood with her back against the door and looked around at her bedroom. It was her sanctuary. It was also the only decent place in the entire house.

As bedrooms go, Hailey's was pretty big. She looked down at a black and white, checkered, tile floor. She had always thought of it as a giant chessboard. She swept and mopped it regularly, so it was all clean and shiny. Her eyes rolled across the floor. They landed on an old, oak desk in the right corner. It had a dark, well maintained stain. It was glamorous. A pencil cup, a white stapler, and a small, black desk lamp sat on top. All of her papers and things were neatly organized into files in drawers that ran down either side. There was an extensive collection of paper clips, rubber bands, and brass colored brads in a long drawer in the middle. Her bed stood in the left corner. The head of the bed was against the left wall. The bed was still made from that morning. A yellow and black, plaid comforter lay across the mattress. A pillow with a black pillowcase rested at the head of the bed with a red velvet pillow on either side. Sitting in the middle of her bed was a stuffed, calico kitten. Her father had given it her when she was three. It was the only material thing Hailey had to remember him by. At the head of the bed stood a wooden night table. A CD player alarm clock sat on top. The stain of the table matched that of the desk across the room.

Between the desk and the bed was a large, perfectly square window. It was near the ceiling. It had a wooden grid over it made of four vertical lengths of wood and four horizontal. It pushed out on a hinge to open. Wooden veneer ran up and down the lower half of the walls around the room, stained to match the window. The top halves of the walls were sheet rock, painted white. Hailey had hung a wooden clock with Roman numerals on the left wall above the

bed. Below that was a poster of Einstein, sticking his tongue out. A poster with a mosaic of Hubble snapshots was tacked on the opposite wall. Next to the bed was a closet with no doors. It was lined from top to bottom with the same wooden veneer as the bottom halves of the walls. It was framed with wood around the edges as well. Opposite that on the right wall stood an old, wooden bookcase. It was stained the same color as Hailey's desk. It was full of books. Hailey had everything from Dante to Alfred Hitchcock, from Edgar Allen Poe to Mark Twain. She also had a collection of advanced mathematics books as well as books on grammar, science fiction, and many other fascinating subjects.

Hailey closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath through her nose. She inhaled a light, floral scent. It wafted from an electrical air freshener plugged into the wall beside the door. She opened her eyes and walked to her desk. She dropped her backpack on the left side of the desk. She removed a set of keys from the front pocket of her khakis and set them at the left edge of the desk. Then, she snatched up her stuffed kitten and sat at the end of the bed. She turned her head to the left and looked out the window. She laid her kitty in her lap and slid her fingers through its soft, synthetic fur. She watched the sun slowly disappear behind a worn out picket fence in the backyard. The sun peaked through the fence where some of the rotting grey pickets were crooked due to missing nails. She looked to the right. There was an old swing set she and her mother had put up several years ago. The paint was peeling off, a chain was broken on one of the seats, and the chains were rusted from years of conflicting weather conditions. Hailey stared at flakes of rust in a daze. Her thoughts turned to Larry.

Hailey met Larry when she was nine. He was rather large and rough looking, so she had been wary of him from the start. The fact that he was incredibly wasted at the time didn't help matters. Actually, Hailey couldn't recollect a time when Larry had *not* been blindly

intoxicated. During their first encounter, Hailey was sitting at a table in the tiny dining room. The dining room and kitchen were the same room. The entire area began where the tan carpet stopped in the living room and became white tile. The dining area was understood to be at the front of the house and the kitchen at the rear. Hailey wore a little white sweater and a pair of dark wash blue jeans that were a little big on her. She stared through a giant pair of round lenses. Her jade green eyes pored over a page she was filling with long division. The microwave dinged behind her. She hopped off her chair and headed for the microwave. Her little feet smacked the white tile floor as she walked. She stood on her tip toes and reached across the top of the refrigerator. She retrieved a microwave pizza she'd chunked in the microwave a couple of minutes earlier. It sat on a paper plate. The tiny pizza was very large compared to her. She held the small pizza in one hand and smacked the door shut with the other. Then, she snagged a can of cola from the refrigerator and returned to her seat.

She slid her math out of the way and set the pizza in its place. Then, she cracked open the cola and had a tiny sip. She set her drink next to the pizza. The front door flew open, and her mother stumbled in after it. She wasn't as skinny back then, but she had always been rail thin. Her ribs poked through a tight, red halter top she wore beneath a black, leather jacket. She staggered forward, slammed into the wall in the hallway, and fell on her butt. She turned to her daughter with a cackle. Her wide mouthed smile turned into a closed mouthed one. She stumbled to her feet and swept her long brown hair out of her face. She reached into her coat pocket, retrieved a pack of smokes, and flipped a cigarette into her mouth. She handed another to someone concealed by the open door. She produced a white lighter from the same pocket, lit the cigarette hanging from her mouth, and turned to light the cigarette of the other person. The smell of charred tobacco crept across the living room and crawled up Hailey's nostrils. She

squinted.

“I’ve just gotta go get something...” her mother told the person behind the door. “I’ve got to...GET SOMETHING.” She pointed down the hall and staggered in that direction. “I’ll be– I’ll be...” she stuttered. She blinked her eyes. Then, she shook her head and stood up straight. “I’ll be right back. You can just hang out here...for just a second. WITH MY KID...over there.” She pointed towards Hailey then disappeared down the hallway. Larry stepped from behind the door and eased it shut. Even back then, he had that same Hitler mustache and horseshoe shaped bald spot at the front of his head. A gathering of short, black hair stuck out at either side. He looked across the living room and stared at Hailey through a pair of dark, widened eyes. A cold chill slithered down her spine. It was like a nightmare. She felt like jumping up and running away, but she was too petrified to move. Larry’s wide eyed stare never faltered. He took a quick sip from a bottle of whiskey then added a toothy smile to the mix. The gesture only added to Hailey’s terror. Larry was missing a few teeth. In a way, he began to resemble a Jack-o-lantern.

“Heya, small fry,” he remarked. Hailey sat there and stared. Her mouth hung open. Her eyes slowly widened. Larry narrowed his dark eyes. Somehow they still seemed as though they were bulging out of his skull. “I said, ‘Heya’.”

“Hi,” Hailey timidly returned. Larry took a drag of his smoke and puffed out a couple of smoke rings. Hailey smiled a little, beginning to calm down.

“Like that?” he asked. “You think you can do that?” Larry crept towards her, and her smile faded. She felt like dashing through the back door. But, she couldn’t move. It was something about those eyes of his. She could *feel* his gaze. It was as though he was gazing upon her soul. He had a seat across from her at the dining table. He had another drag of his stogie,

flicked some ash from the end, and offered it to her. Hailey turned from Larry's piercing eyes to the smoking cigarette in his outstretched hand. "Go on," he continued. "You can do it, right?" Hailey looked into his menacing eyes. She tried as hard as she could to shake her head. Larry withdrew his hand and stuck the cigarette between his lips to let it hang there. Then, he snagged a hold of her arm. Hailey stared at her arm, helplessly. It began to shake nervously in his giant, catcher mitt hand. With his other hand, he slid back the sleeve of her white sweater. Then, he snatched the cigarette from his mouth. He exhaled a huge puff of nauseating smoke in her face. He began to inch the cigarette towards her arm. Hailey squirmed in her chair. The fiery hot cherry of Larry's stogie crept closer and closer to her flesh. Larry's face became consumed with a skin creasing, toothy grin. Hailey began to feel the heat of the cigarette. Then, her mother's voice erupted from across the room.

"Let's go!" she hollered. Larry jerked the cigarette away and let go of Hailey's arm. He turned in his seat and hopped up. He glared into Hailey's eyes then turned and flew across the living room. He wrapped a pair of grisly bear arms around her mother and threw her over his shoulder. Then, he turned and hurled the front door open. "LARRY!" Hailey's mother screeched through a barrage of erratic laughter. Larry turned to Hailey with one last frosty gaze. Hailey cringed. She shrugged her shoulders and turned away. Larry laughed like a psycho. Then, he leapt through the front entrance and slammed the door behind him. The door whirled shut with a loud crack that shook the walls. Hailey tore off her glasses and dropped them on the table. She folded her arms in front of her and buried her face in them with a sob.

Hailey hoped she would never see Larry again. Instead, he became a regular part of her life over the next couple of years, except for the times when he and her mother were fighting. What's worse, her mother began to show signs of abuse such as unexplained bruises and the

occasional black eye. Hailey suspected Larry was hurting her from the start. But, any time she asked about it, her mother denied it. Hailey woke up in the middle of the night several times to the sound of them screaming at each other. She never actually saw the abuse until one day when she was 11. She had come home from school a little later than usual. She and her friend Wednesday had just completed an intense study session. A sudden breeze blew past her as she walked. Her red, silk shirt and black, corduroy slacks flapped in front of her. She hooked her thumbs underneath the straps of her black backpack. She looked at the sky. It was dreary and filled with black clouds. A cargo net of lightning bolts burst from a point in the dark sky and blew apart. It filled the air with a crackle.

That's not what alarmed her. She could hear screaming. She looked up. Her house was a block away. The screaming consisted of her mother crying out in pain and Larry crying out in anger. Hailey slowed her pace. She debated whether or not to go home. Her eyebrows fell in the middle, her hands balled into fists, and she began to sprint. She reached the storm door and threw it open. Back then, it still had a decent screen. Her mother lay on the tan carpet in the living room. She was sprawled atop a pile of broken glass and twisted metal that had once been a coffee table. Blood gushed down her sliced up face and arms. It dripped onto the carpet. She had a bloody nose and a swollen left eye. Hailey turned to Larry. He returned the favor. She threw her backpack to the floor and charged at him in a frantic rage. In her fury, all Hailey could think to do was grab the bottom of Larry's t-shirt and punch at him. Larry loomed over her with a pair of raised eyebrows. He snagged a handful of her fire orange hair.

"You want some too, you little bitch?!" he screamed. Hailey looked up. She glared at him through a pair of wide eyes behind the lenses of her glasses.

"Fuck you!" she screeched through a set of clenched teeth. Larry jerked her off the

ground by her hair and glared into her eyes.

“No, Larry!” Hailey’s mother begged from the floor. She squirmed, trying to stand up.
“Don’t!”

“Fuck *me*?” Larry repeated. He turned and tossed Hailey through a glass patio door at the other side of the living room. “Fuck YOU!” Hailey ended up in the backyard. She slammed to the ground and rolled through the grass. Larry began to stalk across the living room towards her.

“What did you do?” her mother demanded. She crawled through broken glass and blood soaked carpet. “WHAT DID YOU DO?!”

“Shut-up, Helen!” Larry shouted back. He stepped through the patio doorway and into the backyard.

Hailey lay on the grass, eyes pinched shut. She moaned at two different types of pain. There was a sharp pain in her hip and shoulder from slamming into the ground. And, there was a stinging pain in her arms and face, where shards of glass had imbedded into her flesh. She felt a heavy shadow cast upon her, and her eyes popped open. She turned and snagged her glasses off the ground. Then, she threw them on and looked up. She peered into Larry’s intense, dark eyes. “*Oh, God...*” she groaned. Lightning crawled across the dark sky above Larry’s head. He reached down and grabbed her by her hair. He dragged her by her orange locks through shards of glass and blades of grass and returned to the house. Hailey shrieked the whole way. She fidgeted with Larry’s fingers, attempting to pry them loose. When he reached the doorway, Larry lifted her off the ground and tossed her through the air. She plopped down next to her mother. Her head bounced off the floor. “Bah– Shit!” she screeched. Hailey clutched her aching skull. Her mother reached across the floor and took in her skinny, bloody arms. She

looked up and shot Larry a look of desperation. He shrugged.

“Bitch wanted to fight,” he remarked. He retrieved a butterfly knife from the front pocket of his jeans. He flipped it open and held it to Hailey’s throat. Her mother tightened her grip and widened her pale, blue eyes. Hailey looked at the knife through a pair of angry eyes. With her eyes, she followed Larry’s arm to his intimidating face. Larry knelt in front of her and got right in her bloodied face. “If you ever do anything like that again,” he told her, “I’ll cut your little titties off.” He leaned forward and spit in her face. Then, he hopped up and disappeared through the front door.

Hailey fidgeted on the end of her bed. She tore her eyes from the setting sun and looked at her lap. She stared at her stuffed, calico kitten. She looked into its big blue eyes. She became increasingly agitated with her painful memories. She ran her hands over the stuffed kitten’s imitation fur. She recalled an incident with Larry from a few months back when she was 14. She had been lying on her bed. She was painting her toenails different colors. She shuttered as the rainbow colored imagery flooded her thoughts. The memory carried on, regardless. Hailey had just filled in the last one. Then, she noticed someone standing in her doorway. She jerked her head to the right. It was Larry. He grinned from ear to ear. His Jack-o-lantern face filled her bedroom with an ambiance of dread. Hailey let out a long, uneasy sigh. She dropped the tiny brush from her nail polish in its bottle on her bedside table and screwed on the cap.

“Larry, please get out of my room,” Hailey pleaded. She hadn’t even known he was in the house. Her level of comfort dropped from 100 percent to zero in a matter of seconds. She began to feel very vulnerable lying on her bed in her girly, pink pajama pants with little white hearts and a pink tank top. “Larry,” she gasped, “please?” Larry stepped into the bedroom, turned, and slid the door closed. His whacky grin didn’t waver. He crept across Hailey’s

checkered, tile floor and up to her bed. Hailey's jade eyes sprang open. She stared at the freakish figure looming over her. Her breathing intensified through a set of clenched teeth. She could hear her heart beating in her ears. Hailey was glued to her bed. The moment seemed eerily similar to her and Larry's first meeting. At either side, she clenched her plaid comforter in her fists. Just when she thought the situation couldn't get any worse, Larry plopped his giant hand on the back of her head. Then, he leaned over, and pressed his lips against hers. "Mm..." Hailey whimpered. She tried to tear her face away. Larry tightened his hold on the back of her head and forced her lips against his. Hailey shut her eyes tightly and cringed. He tilted her head back and forced her to lie down. Then, he slithered onto her bed.

"Larry?!" Hailey's mother screamed from the doorway. Larry spun around like a top. He dropped Hailey on her bed and hopped to his feet. "Oh, my God! You *perv!*"

Larry threw his hands out at his sides. "She came on to me," he replied with a sly smirk. Hailey sat up and stared at the wall. She wiped a tear from her cheek.

"He's lying," she told her. She cleared her throat. Hailey's mother pointed down the hallway.

"Get out!" Larry dropped his giant hands in his pockets with an arrogant smile. He looked up and down the wall on the other side of the room.

"Helen..."

"OUT!" she shouted. He shot her that cold stare of his.

"No," he replied. He crossed his arms over his chest. Hailey's mother looked slowly from Larry to her daughter. Then, she dashed towards her bedroom. It was at the back of the house. Larry turned to Hailey. She timidly returned his gaze. He stuck his tongue out and flicked it like a snake. She shuttered, turning away. Goosebumps twisted across her flesh.

“See?” he remarked. “I can do whatever I want.” He sat on the end of Hailey’s bed. She scooted as far towards the other end as possible. Larry let out a dark, sinister cackle. Then, he stopped abruptly. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a miniaturized, two shot pistol. Helen was aiming it at him from the doorway. Hailey’s mother narrowed her eyes and skidded across the room. She pressed the barrel of the gun against Larry’s temple and thumbed back the hammer. “Buh...” he stuttered.

“Good-bye, Larry,” Helen told him. “We’re through.” Larry stared at her intensely. He staggered to his feet and eased his way across the bedroom. Hailey’s mother fired a 9mm warning shot right past his face. It smashed into the wall behind him in the hallway. “Get lost, Larry!” she screeched. “And don’t you EVER come back.” Larry disappeared down the hallway. A few seconds later, the front door slammed shut. Helen turned to her daughter. Hailey let out a couple of sharp breaths. Her face was lit up with sheer terror.

“Where did you get a gun?”

Her mother dropped the pistol in the front pocket of her jeans. “It was your father’s,” she told her. “I don’t need this shit anymore.” Hailey remembered looking down at her mother’s shaking hand for the longest time. After standing there for a long, drawn out moment, she calmly walked out of Hailey’s bedroom. She closed and locked the door behind her.

That was when she was 14. Her mother had told him never to come back. Now, she was 15, and here he was in her living room. There was a sudden roar of laughter in the living room. Hailey shivered. She looked out her bedroom window. The sun was just about down. She figured she had put off studying long enough. She set her kitty on the bed, wandered to her bookshelf, and retrieved her Algebra II book. She dropped the book on top of her desk. Then, she opened the top drawer on the right side of the desk and got out a few sheets of blank

notebook paper. She snagged a wooden pencil from the pencil cup, flicked on the black desk lamp, and had a seat. Hailey held the paper in her hands and stacked it against the desktop. She placed the paper next to the pencil and flipped through her book. Another sickening roar of laughter screamed at her from the living room. She froze in deep thought. She unzipped a compartment on the side of her backpack and snagged the CD Wednesday had given her earlier. She smiled, looking over her friend's handwriting on the disc. It read, "Blades – Winter's Queen."

Hailey scooted her chair out. She walked across the giant chessboard floor and stopped at the nightstand beside her bed. Another rush of laughter erupted from the living room. She reached down, popped her little CD player open, and dropped the disc inside. She pushed the door shut and sat on the bed. She reached down and untied her white, canvas shoes. She flipped them off, slid to the closet, and arranged them neatly next to her other shoes. Then, she returned to the CD player and pressed the play button. Eerie music wafted through the air, and Hailey headed for her desk. A growl from her stomach stopped her in her tracks. She patted her flat belly. "Oh, yeah," she muttered. She'd completely forgotten about dinner. She opened a drawer on the side of the nightstand. It was filled with snacks, sponge cakes with cream filling, bags of chips, candy bars, warm sodas, bottled water, and then some. Hailey chose a package of peanut butter crackers and a bottle of water. Then, she returned to her desk and let the studying commence.

Chapter 3: “Aphasia”

Of all the disciplines, mathematics was Hailey’s favorite. She enjoyed all things. But, she especially loved math, whether it was for school or something she was messing around with in her spare time. She had numerous books on the subject. She had studied various fields, including algebra, geometry, trigonometry, statistics, physics, limits, differentiation and integration, chaos math, group theory, sets, Boolean systems, analysis, series, and summations. When it came to math, Hailey had seen and done it all at the age of 15. Yet, when it came to a simple Algebra II test, she took plenty of time to prepare herself. She rotated between three books, solving different problems. They were quandaries similar to the ones that would be on the test in Ms. Gord’s class in a couple of days.

The studying had gone well. Hailey was confident she was ahead of the game. Now, she sat in bed, painting her nails pink. It was past ten o’clock. She wore a blue pair of pajama pants with white stripes and a white tank. She had painted her fingernails and the nails on her left foot. She was on the right, big toe. She was in the zone. A sudden noise from the living room disrupted her train of thought. She glanced around the room. *Winter’s Queen* had run through for the second time and stopped playing. Hailey decided to give it another go. She reached to her right and smacked the play button on her CD player. She wasn’t sure if she liked this Blades of Sloth group yet. But, listening to the album Wednesday had given her was certainly more pleasing than the barbaric roars of obnoxious drunks in her living room. She was using a white, plastic cap from a glass bottle of pink nail polish. A tiny brush stuck out of the cap. She dipped the brush into more polish and moved to the second toe. “The one that stayed home,” she said with a smile. With three steady strokes, she finished the nail off. She dropped the brush in the bottle and moved to the third. She quickly polished it off then toes four and five. She returned

the brush to its bottle. Then, she let her tootsies rest on the end of the bed so the polish could dry.

Hailey laid back and rested her head on the pillow with the black case. She stared into space and twirled her fingers while weaving her arms through one another. The first track of *Winter's Queen* faded in. She closed her eyes and smiled. It was an intro song, consisting of a ghostly ambiance of wind sound effects, a slow electric keyboard solo, and sudden fits of bass for dramatic effect. Hailey's smile faded. A sense of peace washed over her. But then, an argument ensued in the living room. It originated as a calm disagreement then transformed into a furious howl. Hailey popped up. She sat in bed with a pair of wide eyes. The walls shook with Larry's ferocious voice. He rattled off a few obscenities at the other guy, Dan. Dan fired back with a few harsh words of his own. It was getting ugly in there. Hailey debated whether to walk into her family room and try to calm everyone down. "Yeah, right," she muttered. She spun around and increased the volume on her CD player. "Maybe I'll just throw that three hundred pound bastard out on his ass while I'm at it." She interlocked her fingers behind her head and lay down with a satisfied grin. She tried to concentrate on the music in her bedroom and not the ruckus down the hall. She must have done something right. She heard the front door slam shut, and all was quiet. Things stayed that way for a few minutes. Hailey's mouth stretched open, and she filled the air with a nice, relaxing yawn. She killed the tunes and set her alarm for 5:30. She walked across the room and flicked off the lights. Then, she skated across the checkered, tile floor and slid underneath her yellow and black, plaid comforter. She tossed her glasses on the night table and laid her head on the black pillow.

Things were not as tranquil as Hailey hoped. On the opposite end of the house, Larry stood facing the front door. The living room was filled with an eerie silence. Larry spun around

and faced Hailey's mother. She lay on the couch, passed out drunk from half an hour earlier. She had crashed a short while before Dan had skidded away in his rust bucket of a pickup. Larry's face lit up with a wicked smirk. His eager eyes crawled across her frail, scrawny body. She looked so helpless lying there, vulnerable. It fueled his poisonous mind. He gazed upon her as a hyena gazes upon a nest of slumbering blue jays. But, his thoughts turned to a more unrequited urge. He glanced down the hallway, his eyes snapped shut, and he inhaled slowly through his nostrils. His hideous grin lengthened. The light scent of innocence hung in the air. It always did when Hailey Holloway was around. Larry imagined her lying in her bedroom, relaxed, sheltered, and secure. He fantasized about twisting his fat fingers through her orange-red hair. He would feel her silky strands sliding across his dry fingertips before clamping them tight. He'd snap her head back and inhale her young, feminine scent. He imagined gliding his tongue across her pale flesh and the salty taste that went with it. He felt the sensation of her tiny bones cracking beneath his vulgar biceps. His jaw lowered. His tongue twisted across his bottom lip. He whispered her name: "*Hailey...*"

Larry crept down the hallway towards her bedroom. He snuck along as brisk and as ginger as he possibly could. It was a sight to behold. His long, fluid steps quietly propelled him inch by painstaking inch. His eyes were like saucers. They glared into mind shattering darkness. He let the tips of his chubby fingers lead him along. He cunningly felt his way down the textured, nicotine stained hallway, creeping closer and closer. He slowly slithered along. Grains of rock hard paint casually brushed through the grooves of his fingertips. He lashed through the last few critical steps and found the door frame of her bedroom. It jutted suddenly from the wall, meeting the ends of his fingers with a satisfying stick of flesh. Larry squeezed his eyes shut. His face lit up with a toothy smile. His broken, yellow chompers glowed in the pitch blackness

surrounding him. He held out his palm and let it hover in front of her bedroom door. He could feel her pulse thumping through. Larry's stomach leapt into his throat, and he chanced a gaze from his ear. He planted his left ear against the door. He could hear the tiny hum of her melodic breathing. His eyes widened.

Larry pictured her tucked in her bed, her little head resting atop her pillow, a pair of tiny hands laid beneath her soft face. His patience began to slip. Anxiety built with every passing second. He felt trapped in this infernal hallway of darkness. He had waited long enough. He reached for the doorknob. Then, he leisurely curled his fat fingers around the golden orb and clamped on. There was a slight problem. "*Only a minor setback,*" he thought, twisting the knob from side to side. It was locked. The damn doorknob was locked! "*Clever girl,*" he whispered. Her cleverness only enticed him. He snuck his hand into the front pocket of his jeans and found his butterfly knife. He had a few clever tricks of his own. Larry was going to get into that girl's room come Hell or high water. He stared into darkness and carefully flipped the knife open. He slithered his fingers down two opposing handles and found a little clasp at the bottom. He flipped the clasp out of the way, grabbed the bottom of each handle with the tips of his fingers, and separated them. Then, he reunited them at the opposite end of the blade and reset the clasp.

Larry's impatience compelled him to move even slower and more cautiously. It was a synergistic combination which had served him well over the years. Dozens of recollections from his misspent youth flooded his thoughts. He boasted a sly sneer. The memories filled his intoxicated brain with an endorphin rush. His consciousness came alive with visions of houses broken into, vehicles stolen, and victims slain. Some were from long ago, but some were more recent. He flipped the knife right side up and switched it to his left hand. Then, he eased the tip of the blade between the door and the frame beside the knob. Incredibly, he slowed his pace

even more. He worked the knife back and forth, nimbly inching it further and further into the crevasse. With a bit of tinkering, the door gave way and swung forward. Larry brimmed with satisfaction. He eased the door open and crept inside. As quiet as Larry had been, no time was more important for silence than now. This was the moment of truth, the moment which makes or breaks a successful felony.

Larry unlocked the doorknob and rolled it to one side. He tediously inched the door closed and unrolled the knob, setting the door in its frame. Then, he slid the knife closed and dropped it in the front pocket of his jeans. He set his sights on his target. It was easier to see in Hailey's bedroom. It was dimly lit from the moon and stars. They shone through the large window on the wall above her bed. His plan was simple. It would be a quick fuck and a clean getaway. It seemed he was going to get exactly what he wanted, too. He made the journey across Hailey's checkered, tile floor. He slid quietly along, arriving suddenly at the side of her bed. Larry leaned over her and listened. His ears were battered with the gentle melody of her steady breaths. He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent through his crooked nostrils. It was a luscious fragrance, a hint of perfume, a touch of nail polish, a light breeze of pheromones, and a roaring torrent of intellect. He inhaled her soul. He crouched over her in the dim light of the moon and stars, Hailey none the wiser. Larry reached down, slowly. His sausage sized fingers spread out like giant spider legs, black in the dim light of Hailey's bedroom. He gazed at her warm, heart shaped face. Her eyelids were gently closed. Her lashes fluttered from dreams he could not fathom. His giant, jagged mitts inched nearer and nearer. Shadows began to twist across her face, long, fat, and quivering. Larry's hands drifted closer and closer.

With one last motion, he clamped his right palm over Hailey's soft lips. He quickly curled his fingers around her squishy cheeks. Then, he slid his left fingers through her fire

orange hair and grabbed a handful. “Mmph,” Hailey groaned. Her eyes blinked open. She stared into Larry’s Jack-o-lantern face and shuttered. Larry didn’t hesitate. He flipped her over, so she was facing the wall. Holding her face and her hair, he hopped into bed behind her. He yanked off her blue pajama pants, slid down her pink panties, and slipped it in. Aside from a couple of small whimpers, Hailey hardly muttered a sound beneath Larry’s large hands. She just laid there and took it. All finished up, growing more panicked by the second, Larry hastily zipped up his jeans and rolled out of Hailey’s bed. Then, he flew through the door and skidded down the hallway. He slammed the front door behind him. Hailey winced and pinched her eyes shut. She heard Larry fire up his old T-Bird and peel away.

Hailey lay on her side, facing the wall. She stared into space, trying to make sense of what just happened. She went over the incident again and again in her mind. She grew more agitated each time. She closed her eyes, and tears dripped out. They rolled down her cheeks and pooled on the pillow at the side of her face. She felt helpless. Her bedroom, her sanctuary, had been violated. What surprised her more than anything was how much it *hurt*. Her eyes crinkled at the pain. She curled up her legs and sandwiched her fists between her knees. She pictured it: her tiny little cooch wrapped around his big fat dick. “Gaaaaaah!” she screeched. Her face lit up with anger. Her cheeks felt flush. She began smashing her fist into the wood veneer laid across the wall beside her. Hailey rolled onto her back and sobbed. She covered her face with her hands. Warm blood leaked from her right knuckles, down her arm. She felt like dying. She felt like wrapping her lips around the barrel of a shotgun and pulling the trigger. She felt like filling the bathtub with ice cold water, hopping in, and holding her head under. More importantly, she felt like throwing up.

Hailey’s thoughts began to race. She threw her yellow and black, plaid comforter to the

checkered floor. She hopped to her feet, skidded out of her bedroom, and slipped into the hall bathroom. There, she flipped on the lights and shut the door. She locked it behind her then rested with her back against it. She closed her eyes and gasped for air. Then, she dashed across the bathroom, knelt in front of the pot, and greeted it with a pale orange spew. She turned and sat with her back against the bathtub. She held herself in her arms. She relaxed and let her stomach slowly unwind. She rubbed her bare arms, shivering at a slight chill in the air. “Buh...” she gasped through a set of chattering teeth. She rubbed her hands together then reached up and flushed the toilet. That’s when Hailey noticed a stream of blood pouring down her arm from her hand. She dragged herself to her feet, walked to the sink, and rinsed the blood from her knuckles. She patted her hand and arm dry with a towel hung above the potty. Then, she flicked off the bathroom light and scurried back to her bedroom. She hugged herself all the way to her bed. She lay down and wrapped her comforter around her. She lay there and shivered. She stared at her little kitty stuffed animal on the floor. It stared back through a pair of big, blue eyes. Hailey stared for a while then snatched her kitty up. She hugged the squishy stuffed animal tightly against her chest. The heat slowly returned to her body.

Hailey stopped shivering after half an hour, and her jade green eyes popped open. Her frantic thoughts subsided. She snatched her glasses off the table beside her bed and dropped them on her face. Then, she glanced at the clock with a sigh. It was a few minutes after midnight. What tiny piece of sleepiness she’d had was long gone. She was *wide* awake. Hailey figured it was as convenient a time as any to decide what to do about this Larry situation. She cringed at the sound of his name. It crept through the shadows of her thoughts. She wiped a tear from her cheek in disgust. She pressed the tips of her fingers together in front of her face. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She wanted to kill him. She wanted to slice him open from top to

bottom, pull out his entrails, and bathe herself in his blood. She thought about it. She could probably go over to his trashy, trailer house right now, find him passed out drunk, and show *him* what was what.

Hailey brought her stuffed, calico kitten to her face and looked it in the eyes. *"I wish my father was still alive,"* she whispered. *"HE'D take care of that piece of shit."* Hailey cuddled her kitty in her arms, rolled onto her back, and stared at the ceiling. *"My dad would KILL that cocksucker."* She grinned. Then, she frowned, rolling her eyes. *"If my father were still alive, my mother would've never met that damn Larry. Probably wouldn't be passed out on the couch in the living room, either."* Hailey laid her kitty next to her on her pillow and interlocked her fingers behind her head. *"Probably a lot of other stuff, too."*

She couldn't stop thinking about Larry. A piece of her wanted to call the police, but she kept shaking the idea from her head. The truth of it was she felt embarrassed, embarrassed and violated. Why should *she* have to explain what happened to a room full of cops, all leaning in and staring her down with condescending scrutiny? Why should *she* have to sit in front of a jury of her supposed peers and a bunch of lawyers, a teletype recording her every shaking word? Her mortification was more painful than some creep's sexual assault. That's the way Hailey rationalized it, anyway. It was just the way the unstable gears inside her head turned. Every feeling and emotion, even the critical ones were governed by logic. It was simpler that way, rationalizing and attacking rather than trembling with fear. She didn't feel it was anyone's business but her own. As scary as Larry was, he wasn't around now. She could always deal with him when the time came. She may have lost the battle, but she began to plan for an all out war.

Hailey lay in bed. Violent images began to roll through her mind, vivid and unweilding.

She imagined stabbing him in the genitals with a large kitchen knife. She envisioned blood splashing her in the face then cackling with frigid hysteria. She imagined hacking Larry to pieces with a hatchet, stacking them neatly, and running up and hopping in like he was a pile of leaves in the fall. She wanted to smell his fear. She wanted to taste his blood. She wanted to look down upon him. She imagined her shadow cast across his Jack-o-lantern face, long and demonic, sucking the life out of him. Hailey pinched her eyes closed in disgust. Then, she flipped them open and stared at the ceiling. She knew she would never do any of those things. She would go to school tomorrow, chit-chat with Wednesday about the CD she'd given her, and go home to do homework like she always did. Nothing would ever change. She knew that. It wasn't because she was helpless. It wasn't because she was some kind of tortured genius who could do anything in the world except protect herself. *"It's because I'm afraid,"* she whispered. That's why Larry did what he did. He knew he could get away with it. He figured there would be no repercussions, and he was right. He preyed on people like Hailey. He depended on them. That was where he drew his strength.

Hailey buried her face in her hands with a sob. She winced at a sharp pain. It shot from her privates and twisted across her body. Yeah, it still hurt. It probably would for a couple of days. "Ass-hole!" she barked through a scowl. "He at least could've *eased* it in." Hailey held her right hand in front of her face and stared at it. It continued to bleed. She sighed, shaking her head in frustration. She jerked the glasses off her face and tossed them on the table next to her. She reached underneath her bed and snatched up a roll of duct tape. She rolled a few silver strands around her bleeding hand. Then, she chunked the roll of tape underneath the bed. She took her kitty in her arms and rolled onto her side, facing the door. "God damn bastard!" she shrieked into the silence. She shook with rage then clamped her angry eyes shut.

Chapter 4: “Thursday”

Hailey awoke Thursday morning to the crackle of thunder. It roared across the ceiling of her bedroom and rattled the walls. She snatched her glasses off the nightstand and threw them on her face. Then, she glanced at the clock. It was 5:13. She looked out the window to find a sea of dark clouds swarming across the sky. The sun wasn't up, but the street lights reflecting off the clouds made for a kind of eerie daylight. Hailey unwound the duct tape from her right hand and looked at her knuckles. They had finally stopped bleeding. She wadded the hunk of tape into a ball and tossed it into a black, mesh trashcan next to her desk. She skidded across the room and flipped the lights on. Then, she returned to her bed. She pulled the comforter off and dropped it on the floor. She smoothed some wrinkles out of a black sheet that covered the mattress. She fluffed her three pillows, arranged them neatly at the head of the bed, and set her kitty on the one in the middle with the black case. She picked up her comforter and carefully laid it across the bed. She smoothed it out and evened its distribution. Then, she moseyed to the closet and picked out some clothes for the day. Another burst of thunder rumbled through the air. She grabbed a few things then arranged them from left to right on her bed. Today's outfit consisted of a pink blouse, a pair of dark wash blue jeans, an old pair of black, canvas shoes, her rainbow colored, toe socks, a hooded jacket with horizontal black and white stripes, and her unmentionables, of course.

Hailey liked what she was seeing, so she grabbed up the clothes and headed for the restroom down the hall. She flicked off her bedroom light on the way out. She stopped to grab a fresh towel from the hall closet. Then, she dashed into the bathroom and locked the door behind her. She flicked on the lights and faced herself in the mirror. It was a large mirror that stood above the sink. The sink was on the right hand wall. It lay inside a long countertop, covered

with a grid of light blue tiles. Hailey folded the clothes she had picked out earlier and stacked them neatly to the right of the sink. She turned to the towel rod. It was mounted on the wall above the toilet to the left of the sink. Hailey's bath towel from yesterday morning still clung to it. It was the same one she had dried her bloody knuckles with the night prior. She jerked the old towel off, folded it neatly next to her fresh clothes, and hung the towel she had snagged from the hall closet in its place.

Below the blue tiles was the body of the counter. It was made of wood, painted white. There were three long drawers below the countertop. Below those were two doors. They swung open to reveal a storage space below the sink. Hailey rolled the middle drawer open. From the drawer, she produced a tube of toothpaste and a red toothbrush. She ran hot water over the bristles of her toothbrush from the faucet. She looked around the bathroom as she did so. As usual, empty beer bottles were scattered throughout the room. Her eyes ran across the wall to the left of the sink. All of the walls in the bathroom were painted white on top. They were tiled with the same blue tile as the sink counter on the bottom. Her eyes stopped at the sight of a nearly empty bottle of vodka sitting on top of the toilet. It had been sitting there for a long time. Hailey hadn't even noticed it lately. For whatever reason, she noticed it this morning. She reached across the sink and turned the hot water handle towards the wall. Then, she laid a line of toothpaste across the bristles of her toothbrush.

Hailey looked at the floor and began to brush her teeth. She straitened out a blue rug that lay on the white tile floor with her feet. It was typically wadded against the base of the counter. About the time she had finished smoothing the rug out, she turned and spit into the sink. Then, she rinsed her toothbrush and sipped a little water from the faucet. She swished the water in her mouth and spit everything down the drain. She used the towel from yesterday to pat her mouth

dry. She looked around and shrugged. She gathered the beer bottles that were scattered across the top of the counter. Then, she wandered around the bathroom and collected the ones along the floor. She set them beside the sink, sorting them by brand. Then, she dumped their remaining contents down the drain. She turned from time to time and wrinkled her nose at the stench of stale beer wafting from the sink. As she emptied each bottle, she turned and tossed them into a small trash can between the toilet and sink. Each one cut loose with a glassy shriek as it collided with the others. She left the vodka on top of the toilet tank. Her mother was probably still drinking out of it. Hailey would never hear the end of it if she threw it out. She removed the liner from the trashcan, tied the top, and placed it beside the door. She decided to chunk it in the dumpster on her way to school. She opened the cupboard beneath the sink, tore off a liner from a roll she kept there, and flung it through the air to pop it open. Then, she dropped it into the empty trashcan.

Hailey turned to the shower. She looked at the bathtub. The long, white tub stretched across the floor from the left wall, curving back a few feet short of the right wall. It was one of those tubs that have the little feet on the bottom. Their shiny, metallic embrace held the tub at a peaceful stillness above the white tile floor. The little feet were made of brass, matching the faucets and handles throughout the bathroom. Draped from the ceiling was a blue shower curtain, decorated with yellow flowers. It ran around the tub from the left wall. Hailey shook the images from her slightly groggy brain. She walked to the tub, threw the curtain open, and turned the water on. The faucet was controlled by a single, long handle. It was brass to match the other fixtures. She pulled a little button on the end of the faucet. The water switched from the bathtub faucet to a shower faucet near the ceiling.

Hailey began to undress. No sooner had she gotten the bottom of her tank top above her

bellybutton, she jerked it down in hesitation. Her eyes darted around the room. A chill washed over her. She felt as though she was being watched. For a moment, she imagined that all the little blue tiles that surrounded her were pairs of square shaped eyeballs. They appeared cold and other worldly, gawking at her without emotion. Hailey closed her eyes and shook the feeling away. She glanced at the knob on the bathroom door. It was still locked from when she had first walked in. "Not that it makes any difference," she muttered. Shaking with apprehension, she slowly removed her clothes. She tossed them and her towel from yesterday into a wicker clothes hamper that stood to the left of the toilet. She slipped off her glasses and folded them on top of her clean clothes by the sink. Then, she stepped into the shower and slid the flowery curtain closed around her. She smiled as warm water washed over her, soothing and comfortable. Yesterday's filth began to roll off: dirt blown through her hair, cold sweat, Larry's giant hands on her tiny breasts. Hailey pinched her eyes closed and gritted her teeth. She sucked in air as she rubbed sticky duct tape residue off her throbbing knuckles.

She ran her hands through her orange hair and drenched it with hot water. She snatched a bottle of shampoo off a shelf that jutted from the wall above the bathtub faucet. Hailey dropped a squirt of shampoo in her hand and returned the bottle to the shelf. She rubbed the shampoo in her hands then slid it through her hair in a fury. She could still feel his fingers there, twisting through her fiery locks and jerking her head back. She ran her own fingers through, scrubbing in a mad frenzy. A coating of reassuring suds began to puff up her hair. Then, she rinsed it all away. As she did, she felt a little piece of her humanity return. Or was that sanity she felt? Whatever it was, it felt nice. She wiped water from her eyes then snagged a bottle of body wash from the same shelf. It was a luscious soap, soft and squishy, peach scented, a hint of moisturizer. It felt rejuvenating. Hailey rubbed it into suds across her body then rinsed it away.

She finished her shower, punched the button on the faucet, and whipped the lever around to turn the water off. She whisked her hair out of her face and wiped water from her eyes. Then, she snagged a hold of the end of the shower curtain. She stopped in hesitation. She was absolutely convinced that some creep was waiting for her on the other side of the curtain. She closed her eyes and shook the feeling away. She took a breath and threw the curtain open. She couldn't *see* anyone standing there. Then again, she didn't see so well without her glasses. Hailey slid the shower curtain to the other side of the tub. She reached out and snagged the towel she had hung above the pot. She patted herself dry then wrapped her hair in the towel. She walked to the sink and threw her undergarments on. Then, it was the dark wash blue jeans. She promptly rolled them up at the bottoms. They were a little too long for her. She whisked the towel off her head and flipped it through the rod above the toilet to dry. She threw on the pink blouse she had picked out earlier then sat on the toilet lid with her rainbow striped socks. They had little toes sewn into them, each one a different color. They were her favorite socks. She threw those on then walked to the sink. There, she picked up her glasses and threw them on.

She opened the middle drawer and continued with a couple of strokes of deodorant followed by a dash of perfume. Then, she withdrew a hairdryer, a red hairbrush, and a makeup case. Hailey plugged the hairdryer into a socket next to the light switch beside the door. She quickly blew her hair dry and returned it to the drawer. She ran the red brush through her hair and returned it to the drawer as well. From her makeup case, she dabbed on a bit of foundation then brushed on powder and blush. She followed that up with a little eye shadow and light pink lip gloss. She tossed her makeup case into the drawer and rolled it shut. Then, she threw on her black and white, striped jacket followed by her black, canvas shoes. She snatched the trash sack from earlier off the floor. She emerged from the bathroom with a downward flick of the light

switch.

Hailey returned to her bedroom and set the trash sack of beer bottles beside the door. She flipped on the lights and walked to her bookshelf. She gathered the four books she would need for her classes today, Psychology, Economics, Chemistry, and Government. She carried the four books to her desk and dropped them on top. She retrieved her backpack from the side of the desk and dropped it next to them. She retrieved four books from the backpack and tossed the four for today in their place. She returned the four from the backpack to her bookshelf. Then, she zipped her backpack closed, snatched her keys off the end of the desk, and glanced at the clock. It was 5:51.

Hailey made her way across the black and white tile floor and through the door. She snatched up the sack of bottles and turned the lights off as she walked by. She walked down the hall and stopped next to the front door. Larry hadn't even bothered to lock it behind him. Hailey swallowed hard. She locked the knob and deadbolt. Then, she turned and headed through the living room towards the back door. She shot a glance at her mother. She was passed out drunk on the couch. The television was on as usual. Hailey looked around for the remote. She spotted it on top of a table at the end of the couch. She picked it up and flicked off the TV. Then, she quietly set it down and slipped through the back door. She locked the knob and closed the door behind her. She whipped out her keys, and locked the deadbolt. Then, she fought her way through the overgrown backyard. She walked past the rusty swing set and through a gate in the old, decrepit fence. On her way down the alley, she tossed the beer bottles in a dumpster as she passed. As she reached the end of the alley, lightning twisted across the sky behind her. It leapt over the top of her head and dashed in front of her followed by crackling thunder. Hailey threw the hood of her black and white, striped jacket over her head. She could feel tiny droplets of rain

dancing across her face.

Most cities are fast and furious during the daytime, loud and obnoxious during the late hours of the night, and eerily quiet first thing in the morning. Malley was that way. Hailey's footsteps echoed off silent houses as she emerged from the alley. She headed right then made the next left, hopping onto the sidewalk, headed north. She was one block from the Patrick Peterson freeway. However, at this time of day, the freeway was still and desolate. She didn't dread crossing the Patrick Peterson in the morning. It was crossing after school during rush hour that was so tough. At this time of day, Hailey could dance ballet in the middle of the 14 lane monstrosity. She felt totally alone and isolated from society. It was as though some catastrophic event had wiped out the human race, and she was a lone survivor. A smirk crossed her face as she imagined it. It wasn't loneliness and disparity she felt but freedom and security, feelings that can only truly be realized in a world of isolation. She looked around at sets of black windows. They were black because no one had turned their lights on yet. Maybe everyone *had* been wiped out in the night, she imagined. Maybe she was all...alone.

Her thoughts were rudely interrupted. A car turned onto the street behind her and crept towards her. Hailey whirled around and glared at the car. It turned right a block before it got to her. She shrugged, whipping back around. "Eh," she muttered, "it was fun while it lasted." She reached the Patrick Peterson freeway after another half a block. She strolled across and hopped over the concrete divider at the other side. She was now in a field of grass. After wading through, she found herself on the curvy part of Dora Lane. She rolled on for a ways on the right hand sidewalk. After half a block, she looked to her left and spotted the red brick fence she always passed. It ran across the end of a yard. The bricks were each spaced half a brick apart, creating a checkerboard pattern of tiny windows in the waist high wall. Another block into the

curve, Hailey spotted the pink flamingo lawn ornament. Its rainbow colored windmill was spinning pretty good this morning. The flamingo danced from side to side. She winced at an intimidating growl of thunder. Another torrent of lightning bolts wound across the sky.

Hailey spread her arms apart. She reached out with her hands to feel how the rain was progressing. It was coming down a little harder, but it was still more of a mist than a rain. She dropped her hands at her sides and continued to walk. At the end of the block, the road straightened out. That meant there were six blocks left to go. Hailey looked ahead. She could already see the two twisting trees. They were her favorite sight along the peculiar journey to and from school. She hooked her thumbs underneath the straps of her backpack and skidded across the road. She half-skipped, half-jogged to the left hand sidewalk and stopped in front of them. She felt oddly compelled to stop and gaze at the trees on this particular morning. After a moment to gawk, she crept into the yard. She stood between them and had a better look.

Hailey wiped tiny droplets of water from the lenses of her glasses. She stared up through the dark, twisting branches of oak. It was an awe inspiring site. The early morning dimness cast a murky gloom over the twisting giants. Her eyes rolled across hundreds of twists up the opposing trunks. Bark and branches had been wrapped around. Then, they had been held in place somehow as the trees had grown up. Her eyes ran up the trunks to the lower branches. Some of them were hundreds of feet in length, an accomplishment in and of itself. Over fifty years or more, the branches had been meticulously woven together. There would be a weave here and a weave there. Then, a branch might suddenly jump to a higher branch or fall to a lower one and twist together with it. Even some of the smaller limbs that were coming out of the branches were twisted and woven together with other smaller branches. They looked like long braids of hair. As her eyes climbed higher up the trees, the branches became shorter with fewer

small branches. In the higher levels, there was less twisting and less weaving. The effect gradually diminished into untwisted branches at the top. Hailey peered towards the outside of the oak trees. There were little to no branches out there. They had mostly been gathered and pulled towards the middle, creating a look as if the trees were converging as they went up. They actually bent towards one another, bowing from the bottoms of the trunks to the tips of the branches.

Hailey dropped her hands in her pockets. She looked around at the amazing, twisting monstrosity. The trees reached over twenty feet into the air. They were twenty feet of winding, twirling coils of oak wood and soft, jade green leaves. Hailey slipped the glasses off her face and peered through thousands of interweaving branches. Her eyes gleamed in the dark morning like two emeralds. She rubbed the lenses of her spectacles with the sleeve of her black and white, striped jacket. Then, she laid her glasses over her eyes and followed more dark brown twists and turns. Each branch was like a little road going all over the tree. Hailey's head jerked to the left at a sudden crackle half way up. Her eyes lit up, and a smile crossed her face. Two small squirrels scampered up a cargo net of branches. Their big, bushy tails bobbed around as they hopped along. They stopped at a certain spot a little higher up. It was kind of like a little, squirrel hammock. Each squirrel began nibbling on a nut they held in front of them with their little hands.

Hailey dropped her head. She put her hands over her mouth and snickered. There was another noise. Hailey whirled around to face the front of the house. A man emerged and closed the door behind him. He was in his forties, she guessed. The corners of his eyes were all crinkled up. His hair was grey down the sides, yet black down the middle. He walked a couple of feet into the yard then stopped and crossed his arms over his chest. He narrowed his eyes and

stared at her. Hailey grabbed a hold of a thick branch that hung down. She swung out and greeted him with a smile. “Hello,” she remarked with a nervous wave of her hand. He waved back without uncrossing his arms. Hailey moseyed from behind the twisted trees. “I’m sorry,” she continued. “Am I bothering you? Do you...want me to leave?” He smiled. He dropped his arms and walked across the lawn to greet her.

“No,” he replied. “I’ve...seen you around.”

Hailey offered her hand. “My name’s Hailey,” she told him.

He slowly shook her hand. “Martin Turner,” he replied. “You like what you’re seeing?”

Hailey turned around and faced the twisted trees. “Well, yeah. These are really cool.” She turned and looked up at Martin. “How did you do that?”

“It’s kind of a family tradition,” Martin returned. “My great-great-grandfather started that in the early 1900s.”

“That’s neat,” Hailey said.

Martin shrugged. “You go to school around here?”

“The old Glory High,” Hailey told him, pointing down the road.

“Ah. My daughter goes there. You know her?”

“What’s her name?”

“Vicky,” Martin replied. “Brown eyes...long, brown hair...” He put his hand to the back of his head and slid it down his back as if to illustrate.

“She’s in my English class,” Hailey told him. “Is she here?”

Martin smiled down at her. “Nah, she didn’t stay here last night. I don’t know where she’s at.”

“Oh,” Hailey said, staring at the grass. “Sorry.”

Martin snickered. “Well, Hailey,” he told her, placing his hand on her shoulder. “It was nice talking to you.”

Hailey looked at him. “You too, Mr. Turner.”

“Martin,” he corrected. He headed back to the house. “Everyone calls me Martin.”

Hailey waved good-bye. “Good-bye, Martin,” she called out. She resumed her little venture to the schoolhouse. Glory High School was four blocks away. Hailey could already see the parking lot coming into view. She could just make out a tiny figure sitting at the edge of the sidewalk. A puff of white smoke arose every so often from a cigarette. “That would be my friend, Wednesday,” Hailey muttered with a smirk. She hooked her thumbs underneath the straps of her red backpack and picked up the pace. The rain was getting thicker, but it was still more of a mist than a rainstorm. Hailey trudged along the sidewalk, hopping over an occasional puddle. Light smacks from the soles of her canvas shoes echoed across the quiet neighborhood. When she was a block away, her friend Wednesday looked at her. She had on her usual black, leather jacket and ruby red lipstick. An eruption of black, chin length hair framed her heart shaped face, flattened at the top by a row of bangs. Today, she wore a red and black, plaid skirt that came to her knees and a pair of black, leather boots that went halfway up her calves.

“‘tis my little Scottish *friend*, it ‘tis,” Hailey remarked. She sat next to Wednesday on the sidewalk. Wednesday looked at her clothes. She realized she was wearing her plaid skirt, and she turned to Hailey with an open mouth.

“Hey, man,” she replied with a light shove. “That’s not very nice.” Wednesday took a drag of her stogie and looked her friend over. She played on the eccentric colors of Hailey’s wardrobe, mainly her black and white, striped jacket. “And, you,” she shot back, “you look like you just returned from the set of a Tim Burton film.”

Hailey smacked her lips through a smile. “‘Tim Burton?’ Hey, I have to dress around this red hair of mine. It’s not as easy as it looks, you know.”

“If you call that *red*,” Wednesday replied.

“It’s red,” Hailey assured her. “My father’s hair looked the same way.” Wednesday plopped her cigarette between her lips. Then, she reached across and lowered the hood of Hailey’s jacket. She slid her fingers through her buddy’s fire orange hair. She moved some one way and some another.

“It’s nice,” she told her. “You ever think about going darker with it?” Hailey began to feel uneasy. She took her friend’s curious hands in hers. Then, she gently tugged them out of her hair and dropped them at her sides. “Hailey?” Wednesday inquired. “What’s the matter?” Hailey turned to her friend. She slowly shook her head. Wednesday squinted. “Hey, we’re friends, right? We tell each other everything.” Hailey faced forward and nodded.

“Did you rent that movie last night?” Hailey asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah, man,” Wednesday replied. She took a drag of her cigarette. “It was good. Makes a lot more sense when you can actually see it.”

“Told you.” Hailey squirmed out of her backpack and set it beside her. “I think people could learn Shakespeare better if they showed them a movie first then had them read the play.”

“Agreed,” Wednesday added. She took one last drag of her cigarette. She dropped it in a small puddle on the road beside her feet. “So, how did the studying go? Algebra Two, was it?” Hailey smiled. She threw her hood back over her head.

“Good,” she replied. “I’ll hit it hard again tonight. Then, I’ll kick that test’s ass tomorrow.”

“Hey, what’re you doing in Algebra *Two* anyway?” Wednesday asked. “You’re just a

sophomore.”

Hailey shrugged. “Got ahead.”

Wednesday gave her friend a light shove. “Well, you little smart-ass! Why didn’t you tell me you were such a damn smart-ass?”

“Well, I figured you knew that.”

“No, I did *not* know that,” Wednesday returned. “So what college are you going to?”

“Oh, come on, Wednesday.”

“Don’t ‘come on’ with me, Hailey. What’re you thinking...Harvard?”

“Probably the University of Bob, the way my luck’s going,” Hailey replied.

“Nah, man. You’re going to get a scholarship or something,” Wednesday assured her.

“Whatever.”

“And the CD?” Wednesday asked.

“Blades of Bullshit?”

“Hey!” Wednesday snapped. “Watch it, sister!”

Hailey turned and snickered. “It didn’t suck, okay?”

Paul’s house stood at the northeast corner of Mark Anthony Road and Limburger Drive. It was a few blocks northeast of Martin Turner’s house. It was medium sized, with a garage and a driveway out front. The house was made of dark red bricks, but there was a brown brick thrown in here and there. The roof was covered in black shingles. Wooden trim along the points of the roof was painted brown to match the garage door. A fence jutted from the side of the house. It emerged behind a large air conditioning unit and ran around the backyard. It was comprised of fresh, pine pickets. The front lawn glowed like a field of emeralds. Its flat blades of grass were well groomed and neatly trimmed. A large pecan tree stood near the edge of the

front lawn. The grass around it was littered with pecans. Vicky's Station Cruiser was parked in front of the garage door. Vicky stood in the dim, morning shade of the pecan tree, toking up.

In contrast to the t-shirt and bell bottoms she wore the day before, Vicky was wearing her "schoolgirl outfit." That's what her and her friends had nicknamed it. It consisted of a black vest over a white, button-up shirt with long sleeves, a blue skirt that draped to her knees, white tube socks, and a pair of brown Mary Janes. She looked around. The coast was clear. She took a hit from her shiny, red and chrome pipe and sucked it in. Paul approached her from behind. "Puff, puff, pass!" he shouted.

Vicky nearly jumped into the street. "*Goddamn, Paul,*" she whispered back. She handed him the pipe and a plastic lighter. Then, she pointed behind them with her thumb. "*I don't think they heard you down on the freeway over there.*" Paul stared back. The blue lenses of his sunshades gleamed like sapphires above a toothy grin. He put the pipe to his lips and took a toke. He inhaled and handed the pipe and lighter to Vicky.

"*Galm down,*" he squeezed through a lung full of smoke. As Vicky lit up, he blew his hit out.

"Dayum!" Joe blared, walking up behind them. "You two are smokin' up awl the dayum bud, aren't you?"

"*Dabbit, Joe!*" Vicky squeaked back through a hit. "*Will you guys keeb your dab mouths shut?*"

"Give me some of that kill, dawg!" Joe shouted back. "*Then, I'll shut-up!*" He slid his fingers through his black hair. It was not yet puffed into a Mohawk since they were about to go to school. Vicky handed him the pipe and lighter. As Joe lit up, Tommy joined them as well. His short, spiked, blue hair wiggled in the wind.

“Smoking the Mary Jane, huh?!” he shouted. Vicky turned to him and threw her hands out at her sides. Tommy looked at her shoes. “In your Mary Janes?” He looked up with a broken toothed grin. “I just love it when you wear the schoolgirl getup, Vick. That’s the coolest shit *ever!*” He turned to Paul, pointing at her. “Ain’t that the coolest shit ever, Paul?”

“Shut-up, Tommy,” Paul calmly replied.

Joe handed Tommy the pipe and lighter. “Here, mayun,” he told him. “Smoke the rest of this. Please!”

“Yeah,” Vicky added. “Yeah, that might calm him down for a few minutes, anyway.”

“I *do* like it when you wear the schoolgirl getup though,” Paul admitted. “It’s very...” He held up his hands and made a woman’s hourglass shape in front of him.

“Hot!” Joe shouted.

“Thanks, Joe,” Paul replied, turning to him with a point of his finger. “Nah, you look good in that, though.” Vicky smiled and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Calm down, boys,” she told them. Tommy exhaled a puff of smoke like a chimney. He handed the pipe and lighter to Joe. Then, he wrapped his arms around Vicky’s waist and threw her over his shoulder. “Tommy put me down, you douche!” she shrieked. She started slapping him on the back. Tommy turned around and began walking towards the house with her over his shoulder. Paul threw his hands out at his sides, squinting.

“Tommy?” he requisitioned. “Tommy!” Paul jogged up to him and grabbed him by his free arm. “Tommy, put Vicky down, and come back over here and finish this bud.” Tommy tore away and continued walking towards the house.

“Tommy!” Vicky screamed. She looked at Paul in despair. “Paul, do something! Make him leave me alone!” Paul looked at Joe. Joe pocketed the pipe and lighter with a sly nod.

They ran across the yard and tackled Tommy from behind. The four of them crashed to the ground.

“Aye!” Tommy yelled. “You two fags get your *own* damn girl!” Vicky landed on her stomach. Tommy laid over her back and stretched out his arms.

“Tommy!” Paul shouted, grabbing him in a chokehold. “Quit screwing around!” He tried to pry Tommy off. Joe tried to squeeze in between them.

“Vicky, roll away or something!” Joe shouted. She was laughing too hard to do anything. Tommy slapped Paul’s arm away from his throat.

“Bah! No!” Tommy screamed. He reached behind him and shoved Joe out of the way. Then, he snagged Vicky in his arms and flipped her onto her back.

“Tommy!” Vicky yelled. “Man, you guys are going to mess up the schoolgirl outfit, and I’m not going to be able to wear it anymore!”

Tommy turned and made a disgusted face. “Oooooo,” he moaned. “That would suck, huh?” Joe ran up behind Tommy, grabbed him around the waist, and dragged him away. Paul seized that moment to bend over and help Vicky to her feet. Vicky slithered behind him, hiding from Tommy. Joe let Tommy go and turned to face him. Tommy scrambled to his feet. Joe shook his head.

“God dayum, you goofy little prick!”

Tommy pointed at Paul with a pair of wide eyes. “She’s mine!”

Vicky peeked over Paul’s broad shoulder. “Uh-uh, Tommy,” she replied. She wrapped her arms around Paul’s waist. “*This* is MY man.” She stood on her tip-toes and kissed him on the cheek. Paul turned and made an “o” with his mouth. Tommy smacked himself in the forehead.

“Awe, snap,” he groaned. He pretended to faint. He fell to the grass and laid there. The air filled with the roar of a loud engine. The ground thumped with the rumble of rock music.

Paul turned to Vicky.

“Gee, must be Travis,” he remarked. Joe faced Mark Anthony Road. Tommy stumbled to his feet and did the same. Travis peeled around the corner and screeched to a stop at the edge of Paul’s yard. He killed the engine and his tunes. Jennifer sat beside him in the passenger seat. Her brown hair blew in the wind of an approaching storm. Gary and Tate were in the back. Tate hopped out the window on the far side of the truck. Her long, blood red braids swirled around her all the way to the ground. She ran across Mark Anthony Road and wrapped her arms around her good buddy, Vicky. Vicky returned the favor. Paul walked to Travis’ door. He peered in at him through a pair of shiny, blue lenses.

“Uh-uh, Paul!” Travis shouted out at him. He pointed a finger in his face. “You are *not* riding with me!” There was a rattle of thunder.

“Oh, come on, Travis,” Paul replied with a grin. He turned to Gary in the back seat. “Gary, scooch over.”

Travis turned to Gary. “Gary, I will kick your ass, if you let him in here!” Gary laughed. Paul looked at Jennifer.

““sup, Jen-Jen?”

“My little Pauley,” she replied. “And, how are *we* this morning?”

“Well, I’m a little stoned,” Paul returned with a goofy smile.

Joe popped up next to him. “Yeah, here you go, mayun,” he remarked. He handed the pipe and lighter to Travis.

“Good man,” Travis replied. He took a toke then handed the pipe to his girlfriend.

“So...it’s almost time, man!” Paul shouted in Travis’ ear.

“I know, douchebag!” Travis replied.

“You want?” Jennifer asked, offering the pipe to Gary.

He waved it off. “Not before school.”

“Time for what?” Joe asked.

“What ‘time for what’?” Paul inquired. “Time for school, Joe. It’s time for school. It’s time for school. Aren’t you excited?”

“Awe, mayun...” Joe moaned, walking away. Jennifer handed Travis the pipe. He took one more hit and handed it to Paul.

“Well,” Travis remarked with a pat on Paul’s shoulder, “I’ll see you there, buddy.”

“Awe, to hell with that. I’m riding with *you*.”

“Dammit, Paul!” Travis looked across the yard. “Tate, let’s go!” He turned to Paul.

“There is no way you’re getting in this truck, Paul.”

“That’s what *you* think.” Paul hopped onto a chrome runner that ran down the side of the pickup and snagged a hold of Travis’ door.

“Dammit, Paul!” Travis shouted. “Tate, let’s go!” Tate hopped back through her window and plopped down next to Gary. “There’s no way, Paul,” Travis assured him. He fired up the engine.

“Travis!” Paul shouted. Then, he did it in a growl, “*Travis!*”

“Later, dingleberry!” Travis shrieked. He threw the truck into drive and flew away from the curb. Paul held on tight. Jennifer cupped her hand over her mouth and snickered.

“Travis!” Paul yelled one more time. He hopped from the side of Travis’ truck. It sped away with a monstrous roar. Paul hopped up and dusted himself off. He turned to Joe, Tommy,

and Vicky and threw his arms out at his sides. “Well? Let’s go!”

Chapter 5: “Psychology”

Wednesday finished a cigarette and dropped it in the puddle at her feet. She had been dropping butts in the puddle since she'd sat down. Now, there was a pile of them. It was still misting. Cars were filling the parking lot behind them. Car doors opened and shut ceaselessly. Students emerged from their vehicles steadily, adding to a growing crowd. The cool air filled exponentially with conversation and laughter. Some students played their radios really loud. Others crouched out of sight beside their cars and trucks. They smoked cigarettes surreptitiously, much like Wednesday was doing at the edge of the sidewalk. Wednesday turned to Hailey. “It’s about that time.” She turned to stand, and Hailey nodded. She threw her backpack over her shoulders and followed her lead. They zigzagged through a labyrinth of students and cars, headed for the front of the campus. They reached the long walkway that extended through the grass from the front doors, turning into sidewalk at the front of the parking area. Wednesday shot Hailey a goofy gaze. She turned and hopped onto the concrete block where Glory High’s flagpole stood. She hung from the pole by one hand. Then, she took a breath through her nose and exhaled with a satisfied grin.

“Wednesday, get down off that flagpole!” Ms. Goodwin shouted from the sidewalk. A look of shame crossed Wednesday’s face. She hopped down next to her friend, Hailey.

“Sorry, Ms. Goodwin,” Wednesday remarked with a wave of her hand.

“Don’t give me that ‘sorry’ stuff!” Ms. Goodwin warned. She pointed a stern finger at her. Her amber colored, beehive hairdo bobbed with each word as she spoke. “I told you. I’m watching you.” She turned to Hailey. “Both of you!” Hailey waved at her with a bow of her head. Ms. Goodwin walked away to pester someone else. Wednesday gave her friend a light shove.

“What?!” Hailey shouted through a grin.

“Why didn’t you tell me she was standing right there?” Wednesday demanded.

Hailey threw her hands out at her sides. “I didn’t see her there.” Wednesday threw her hands on her hips. She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “I swear,” Hailey continued, “it’s like she’s wearing stealth or something!” The roar of a loud engine approached, and Hailey and Wednesday turned their attention towards the parking lot. Travis flew across the second row in his black pickup and skidded into a spot. Wednesday patted Hailey in her side. Then, she cupped her hand over her mouth and lowered it to her ear.

“There’s your boyfriend,” she whispered.

Hailey turned to her with an angry grin and a smack of her glossy, pink lips. “Shut-up, Wednesday.” They watched as he and his friends gathered their books and whatnot.

“Why don’t you go talk to him?” Wednesday inquired.

“Nah,” Hailey replied. *“She’s with him.”* She pointed out Travis’ girlfriend. “You know, that Jennifer girl.”

“Bleh!” Wednesday remarked. She stuck out her tongue and pointed down her throat. “Yeah, she’s a real bitch, Hailey.”

“I know,” Hailey agreed. “I hate that skank.” Ms. Goodwin stomped up to them and threw her hands on her hips. Travis, Jennifer, Gary, and Tate hopped out of the truck. Each one slammed a door behind them. Ms. Goodwin shook her pointer finger in Travis’ face.

“And what have you got to say for yourself, MISTER?!” she demanded.

Travis took a pad of paper and his Psychology book in one hand then placed his free hand over his heart. “Why, Ms. Goodwin,” he slyly remarked, “and how are *we* this fine Thursday morning?”

“Don’t you try and smooth talk *me*, young man!” Ms. Goodwin warned. “After the way you left here yesterday, you’ve got some explaining to do!”

Travis narrowed his eyes and cocked his head to one side. “And this ‘way I left yesterday’,” he replied. “You got that on...tape or something?” Ms. Goodwin crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. Travis smiled back. “Then, I have nothing to explain.” Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy walked up to join them. Travis made his way towards the building. His friends followed suit. The bell rang. Ms. Goodwin turned and cupped her hands over her mouth as they all walked by.

“This is not over, *Travis!*” she shouted. “You hear me?!” Hailey and Wednesday still stood next to the flagpole. Hailey’s eyes sparkled like emeralds as the group of eight approached them.

“Hi, Travis!” she shouted with a nervous wave of her hand. Travis shot her a curious glance as he passed. He shrugged. He pulled the right hand door open and stepped through. The door dropped against Paul’s outstretched hand. The rest followed, and the door slowly crept closed behind them. Wednesday jabbed Hailey in the side with her elbow. “What?” Hailey demanded.

“Hailey, that was dumb. You got a death wish or something?”

Hailey smacked her lips. “Why? Because of that Jennifer chick? Man, I bet I could kick her ass.”

Wednesday pinched the bridge of her nose with a snicker. “Okay, Jackie Chan,” she replied. She pushed her along. “Come on. We’ve got to get to class.” Hailey and Wednesday walked through the door on the right, entered the right hand stairwell, and skipped to the second floor. Students had begun to pile in, but the hallways were still pretty manageable. They walked

down a long hallway, passed two intersecting hallways, and made a left at the end. They followed that hallway to its end. They arrived at their Psychology class with Mr. Tinney. Mr. Tinney stood in his usual spot to the right of the door. His pepper colored hair and square rimmed glasses personified the aura of an educated man. He casually nodded with a slight smile as each student entered the room. Wednesday sat at the back of the classroom at the far left corner. Hailey sat at the desk to her right. Her desk was a couple of desks across from Travis. Travis was already in the room, talking to Gary. Gary sat in his usual seat to the right of Travis. Hailey looked across the row. She dropped her backpack next to her desk and had a seat.

“Hello, again,” she remarked with a smile. Travis turned from his conversation with Gary and glared at her. He regarded her kind, grinning face with a sarcastic, squinty eyed smile.

“Hailey,” he coldly replied. He turned to Gary. Gary threw his hands out at his sides. Travis shrugged then leaned towards him. Gary returned the favor. “*Mr. Tinney put me and her in a group about a week ago,*” he whispered to Gary. “*I think she’s got a little bit of a thing for me now.*” Gary made an “o” with his mouth, and he and Travis sat back in their chairs.

Wednesday leaned towards Hailey.

“*Creep,*” she whispered.

Hailey turned to her with a pair of squinted eyes. “*What?*” she whispered back. Wednesday shook her head and faced forward. The tardy bell rang, and Mr. Tinney stepped into the classroom. He shut the door behind him and walked to the blackboard. He wrote a capital “S” on the board then turned to the class.

“Oh, yeah. Why don’t you guys pass in those questions I told you to answer from last time?” With that request, he returned to what he was writing. Wednesday leaned towards Hailey.

“*Oh, crap!*” she whispered. “*I forgot about that! Did you do YOURS?*” Hailey handed her work to the student in front of her then turned to Wednesday.

“Finished it before we left.” Wednesday ran her fingers through her chin length, black hair in frustration. She jerked her book out of her blue, denim backpack. She flipped through it and retrieved a crinkled up piece of notebook paper. She glanced at it then handed it to the student in front of her.

“I did like...two of them,” she remarked. Hailey reached across the aisle and patted her on the shoulder. Then, she returned her attention to the front of the classroom. Lightning flashed through a row of windows on the left wall of the classroom. It was followed shortly by a crackle of thunder. Hailey read what Mr. Tinney had written on the board, “Sexual Dysfunctions.” Hailey pinched her eyes closed in disgust. Horrifying images from the night before began to flood her thoughts. She tore her glasses off her face, turned, and rubbed her eyes. She flipped them open and looked at Wednesday. She was a blurry blob without her glasses. “You okay, Hailey?” Wednesday asked.

Hailey popped her glasses on her face. “Nah, just...thinking about one of the answers I gave on the homework.”

Wednesday pointed at her with the eraser of a pencil. “Hey, at least you *gave* an answer.” She returned her attention to her desktop. She scratched away at something on a fresh piece of notebook paper.

“What’re you doing?” Hailey asked.

“I’m trying to finish the rest of this before the end of class,” Wednesday hastily explained. She smashed her fist into her book. “How do you spell ‘exasperated’?”

“‘Exasperated’?” Hailey repeated.

“I’m bullshitting here, Hailey. Don’t question me.” Hailey retrieved her three ring binder and a pencil from her backpack. She opened the binder to a section that had clean paper and wrote the word “exasperated.” She popped open the rings, removed the paper, and slapped it down on her buddy’s desk. Wednesday looked up and mouthed the words, “Thank you.” Then, she returned to her work. Hailey flipped to the Psychology section in her binder. She made a new section underneath her last section of notes, entitled “Sexual Dysfunctions.” She glanced at her notes, figured out what chapter they were on last time, and took out her Psychology book. She flipped it to the next chapter. Oddly enough, it was titled “Sexual Dysfunctions.”

“So,” Mr. Tinney said to the class, “is everyone familiar with the term ‘child molester’?” One of the girls in the front row raised her hand, and Mr. Tinney pointed her out. “Yes, Gwen?”

“Isn’t that like...someone that had sex with a minor?” she asked. There was a murmur of laughter throughout the class, except from Wednesday’s corner. Nothing but writing came from there. Mr. Tinney smiled and looked around at his students.

“Does everyone agree with that statement?” Hailey raised her hand, and Mr. Tinney pointed her out. “Hailey?”

“No, that’s wrong,” she corrected. “A child molester is attracted to non pubescent children.” Gwen turned around and shot her an ugly glance. Hailey picked up her book to show her. She tapped at one of the pages with the eraser of her pencil.

“Yes, Hailey’s right,” Mr. Tinney remarked. He turned around and wrote the definition for child molester underneath the title on the board. Even though she already knew it, Hailey wrote the definition in her notes, anyway. She glanced at her friend, Wednesday. She was copying furiously from her book, attempting to answer question four from their homework.

Hailey remembered that question. She realized Wednesday was copying from the wrong page. She reached across, flipped a couple of pages over in her friend's book, and pointed out the correct answer out with a tap of her finger. Wednesday threw her hands up at her sides and began to read. She smacked herself in the forehead. She rubbed out what she had written with the eraser of her pencil in a mad frenzy. "And, what do we *call* a person, who has had sex with a minor as Gwen said...not a child but a minor?" Mr. Tinney asked.

Hailey looked up from her notes. "A rapist," she replied.

"Even if it's consensual?" Mr. Tinney inquired. Hailey quickly nodded. "And, what should a person do in this situation, Hailey? The minor I mean."

Hailey tilted her head to the side then back again. "Report them to the police."

Mr. Tinney threw his hands up at his sides. "Sounds simple," he remarked.

"Doesn't it?" Hailey snapped. Mr. Tinney turned around and wrote some more notes on the blackboard.

"Does anyone know how a child molester is created?" Mr. Tinney proposed to the class. The class fell silent. "Well, don't all raise your hands at once, guys." Hailey shook her head and copied Mr. Tinney's notes from the board. She knew what caused a person to become a child molester as well. She just didn't like being the only person in class to shout out the answers. It tended to make people jealous. "*A person's pathology*," she mumbled under her breath. She finished writing, dropped her pencil on her desk, and folded her fingers together. She rested her chin on top in a state of deep thought. She began to contemplate Larry's pathology, as sick and twisted as it was to imagine. He wasn't a child molester necessarily, but he *was* a rapist. He was a statutory rapist and an opportunist. He made her sick. She wanted to throw up. Hailey leaned back in her chair. She took a deep breath and shuttered. A twisted image of his Jack-o-lantern

smirk teased her thoughts.

“Anyone at all?” Mr. Tinney asked.

Hailey let out a deep sigh. “Their personality pathology,” she answered.

“Thank you, Hailey,” Mr. Tinney replied. He wrote the word “pathology” on the board.

“And, what is that exactly?” Hailey looked around the classroom. All eyes were on her.

“A person’s past experiences and the responses they’ve had to them,” she told him.

“Precisely,” Mr. Tinney replied, turning to add more notes to the board.

“I mean that’s the current theory behind why *everyone* is the way they are, according to the most recent version of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual,” she continued. “For example, most child molesters were once molested themselves as children. Their only way of coping with this is to later become the molester, thus transferring some sense of control back into their lives. Unless of course they do what they’re supposed to do afterwards, which is to report the molester. In that case, they would learn that *this* behavior is the better way of coping with the situation. Non abused children by contrast learn to deal with the world in a less sinister way, thus growing up to be more productive members of society and having an inner feeling of peace about the way they think about and live their life in general.”

“Hailey...” Mr. Tinney interrupted.

“Serial killers and psychopaths learn early on to deal with their problems by committing violent crimes, while those that are schizotypal learn the virtue of apathy. Their parents probably babied them. Women are taught to cope with the world by using their sexuality, unless they’re fat and ugly, in which case they deal with it by utilizing their personality.”

“Hailey!” Mr. Tinney shouted.

“I’m sorry, is this boring you?” Hailey demanded.

Mr. Tinney bowed his head and raised his hand. “That’ll do.” Hailey stared at him. She looked at the rest of the class. All eyes were still on her, even Wednesday’s. “Mr. Tinney,” she asked, “would you mind if I went to the restroom real quick. I seem to be on the...lower level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.” Mr. Tinney snickered. He turned and scratched a couple more notes on the board.

“Sure, Hailey,” he replied. “And, I think we’ll be answering the next chapter’s questions when you get back, okay?”

“Bah!” Wednesday spat, smacking her desk with both fists. Hailey smiled. She hopped up and headed for the door. Gwen glared at her from the front row on her way past. She watched Hailey. Hailey watched back. Hailey made antlers at either side of her head with her hands. She stuck out her tongue as the door closed behind her. She felt agitated and nauseous. Maybe she just needed something in her stomach. She hadn’t had breakfast after all.

“Most important meal of the day,” Hailey muttered. She stopped at a water fountain and filled her belly with water. Then, she wandered to the girl’s room. She walked to a sink and faced herself in the mirror. She thought about Larry. She couldn’t shake him from her thoughts. It made her sick and dizzy. Hailey clutched her stomach in pain and let out a deep breath. She pinched her eyes shut. Then, she leaned forward and threw up the water she had just drunk into the sink. She hurled it out in one, awful retch. She leaned over the tall faucet and caught her breath. *“Could that be morning sickness?”* she thought. She laughed. “It’s nerves. Morning sickness occurs after the first month of conception.”

Hailey ran the faucet. She took a few small sips of water then jerked a paper towel from the dispenser. She dampened it and dabbed it across her face. She looked at herself in the mirror. She looked a little pale, but she felt better. She looked at her hands. They were shaking.

She closed her fingers and opened them a few times. Then, she tossed the wet paper towel into the trash. She left the restroom as calmly as possible. Hailey felt her legs wobbling as she hobbled along. Her thoughts turned to and from Larry. He was like a strobe light of insanity blinding her rationality. “*PTSD*,” she whispered. She backed against a set of lockers and tried to calm down. She hugged herself. “*What’s the treatment for that?*” she thought. “It’s important to stop and feel the feelings you’re supposed to feel,” she remarked with a snicker. “Like, who has *time* for that?” She took a minute to focus her thoughts and maybe let some unresolved feelings loose. She went back to the night before in her mind, trying to let it all flood back. She tried to remember it as best as she could, one giant hand over her mouth, a set of snaky fingers tangled in the strands of her hair, pulling her head back as she squirmed. She tried to remember how it all felt. She imagined him sliding her blue and white striped pajama pants down, then her panties...

Hailey’s eyes popped open, wide and angry. She gritted her teeth. She had fallen to the floor. She was hugging her knees, rocking back and forth. She turned around and punched one of the lockers. The locker shrieked with a hard, ringing smash. The metallic crunch echoed down the hallway. She shook her head and blinked. Then, she stumbled to her feet. Dizziness washed over her. “*Well*,” she whispered, “*THAT was a productive session.*” She turned and quickly walked back to Mr. Tinney’s class. She tried to remain calm. She jerked the doorknob to the left, flung the door open, and stepped through. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed her hostility. Everyone was staring at their desks, answering questions from today’s assignment. Hailey took a deep breath then turned around eased the door shut. She crept to her seat and fumbled through her book. She tried to gather her focus and do her assignment, whatever that was. “*What am I doing again?*” she thought.

Wednesday stopped writing and looked at her. *“Hailey, what the hell happened to your hand?”* she whispered. Hailey looked at her right hand. Warm blood dripped from her knuckles. It fell and splattered across her notes.

“Jacked it up last night,” she quietly replied. She looked down the aisle. Fortunately, there were only a couple of drops on the floor. That was a pretty good indicator there wasn’t a trail of blood all the way from the locker to her desk. She laid her bleeding hand on the top, right corner of her desk, knuckles up. Then, she ripped her backpack open with her free hand and retrieved an old bandana.

“Are you okay?” Wednesday asked. She held out her hands. *“Let me see.”* Hailey dropped her bloodied hand into Wednesday’s hands. She leaned over and dabbed a few drops of blood off the floor. *“Here, give me that,”* Wednesday instructed. Hailey came up from the floor and handed the bandana to her. Wednesday wrapped the bandana around her hand and tied it in a knot over the wound. *“There, hold pressure on that,”* she told her. *“And quit punching the walls, you crazy little bitch!”*

“Dammit, Wednesday,” Hailey whispered back, *“what makes you think I punched a wall?”*

“I heard that out there,” Wednesday told her. *“You punched a locker in the hallway.”* She patted her friend’s bloody hand. *“Now, stop it!”* Wednesday held her hands in front of her. They were covered in her friend’s blood. She shook her head at her. Hailey shrugged. Wednesday hopped to her feet and walked to the front of the room. Mr. Tinney sat at his desk. He finished grading a paper then looked up.

“What can I help you with, Wednesday?”

She smiled. *“I too am on the lower level of uh...”* She snapped her fingers at her side.

“Maslow, was it?”

“You may be excused, Wednesday,” Mr. Tinney replied with a kind smile.

“Thank you,” Wednesday replied. She turned and raced to the restroom to wash Hailey’s sticky blood off her hands.

Chapter 6: “Kind Words”

Hailey walked down the hall with her friend, Wednesday. They were headed for their next classes. Hailey had Economics, and Wednesday had Algebra I. It was the last time they would see each other until after school. “I can’t believe you finished all of those questions,” Hailey remarked.

“I can’t believe he let me turn it in,” Wednesday replied. “Now I just have to remember to finish these *other* questions before next time.” Hailey cocked her head to the side. “You already finished them, didn’t you?” Hailey smiled. She turned to her with a nod. “You’re a piece of shit, Hailey.”

“I’m sorry, Wednesday,” Hailey replied. “And, I’m sorry for bleeding all over you, too.”

“That’s alright,” Wednesday assured her. “What the hell are you out here punching the lockers for, anyway?” Hailey patted her on the shoulder with her good hand. Then, she crossed the hallway in front of her and left her behind. “Hey!” Wednesday called after her. “Where are you going?”

“Restroom!” Hailey shouted back.

“Uh...see you after school!” Wednesday yelled over the hallway noise. Hailey’s hand waved at her over the crowd of students. Wednesday could barely make it out. Hailey pushed through the door to the girl’s room and stood there. It swung closed behind her. She hovered for a moment, staring at the tiny white tiles that littered the floor. She looked across the walls. They were covered with larger, pink tiles all the way around. The details of the bathroom had completely escaped her moments earlier. It’s funny how different the world seems depending on the situation. She walked past a row of light green stalls and arrived at the same sink as before. She dropped the bloody bandana in a trashcan that stood beside the sink. Then, she turned the

hot and cold knobs in opposite directions then dropped her hand underneath. Her knuckles were greeted with a stream of warm, soothing water. It stung a little. She added a dash of pink, liquid soap from a chrome dispenser on the wall. Water alone was nothing by comparison. Her raw flesh burned with fiery ferocity. She winced, stacking a mountain of bloody soap suds. She scrubbed her knuckles clean then she rinsed it all away. She lifted her hand and looked it over. The wound was clean, and it had almost stopped bleeding. Hailey gathered a wad of paper towels from another chrome dispenser, soaked them down, and flicked off the faucet. She squashed them over her knuckles. She stood against the wall and held pressure for a couple of minutes. Then, she lifted the paper towels to have a look. Satisfied that the bleeding had stopped, Hailey chucked the wad of towels into the trash and slipped out of the bathroom.

The halls were almost empty. She glanced at a clock that jutted from one of the white, brick walls. A row of red, digital numbers read “9:44.” That gave her one minute to get to class. She wasn’t worried. Her class was just a couple of doors down. She looked around the corner, down the hallway she and Wednesday had just come from. Travis was standing there. His hands were in his pockets, his back against the wall. His head jerked towards her. He gazed at her through a pair of squinted eyes. He had an intimidating stare.

“Hailey,” he remarked. He cocked his head to one side and stroked his chin as if in deep thought. “You look lonely.” He placed his knuckles against his chin and twisted his head the other direction. Hailey heard his neck crack. “Or, lost.”

Hailey hooked her thumbs under the red straps of her backpack. “A little of each,” she replied.

Travis ran his fingers through his jet black hair. “You know what *you* need?” he asked. He dropped his hand into the pocket of his black jeans. Hailey slowly shook her head. “A man.

You could use yourself a good man.” Hailey began to feel a little nervous. Her mind quickly fumbled through hundreds of words as they flew through. She took a couple of timid steps towards him.

“I-I could really use a friend right now.”

“Yeah,” Travis agreed with a nod of his head. “Yeah, you really need...someone. Like, someone big and strong to take care of you.” Hailey took a couple more steps forward. The tardy bell rang. The last few students disappeared from the hallway, and the two of them were alone.

“I think you’re right, Travis,” she remarked. They were within arm’s length. She reached out with her good hand. Travis smirked, slyly taking her hand in his. “Look, something happened...” She turned and shook Travis’ hand away. Jennifer was walking towards them. Hailey hadn’t even seen her coming.

“Move over, skank!” Jennifer spat through a twisted grin. She shoved Hailey aside. Hailey stared at them through a pair of blank eyes. Travis unrolled his tongue and flicked it like a snake. Jennifer wrapped her arms around his waist and stood on her tip-toes. She slowly slid his velvety tongue into her mouth. Hailey narrowed her eyes and wrinkled up her nose as she watched. It made her sick. Jennifer gave her boyfriend a good, wet one then turned to her.

“Trying to steal my man?”

Travis turned to his girlfriend with a grin. “Jennifer! I *totally* had her going!” Jennifer stomped her foot as she cackled. “You screwed it up, man!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, baby,” Jennifer replied. She reached back and smacked him on the ass to make up. Travis turned to her with an angry smirk.

“Why, you little cunt!” He reeled back and smacked *hers* even harder. Jennifer

narrowed her eyes and sucked air through her teeth. Hailey was not amused. She had enough roadrunners zipping through her head this morning. She didn't need this, too. She took a couple of steps towards them. Her jade green eyes widened.

“Whoa, back up, honey!” Jennifer snapped. She stepped up and shoved Hailey away. Hailey flew across the hall and crashed into a set of lockers. She landed on her butt halfway across the floor. The back of her head smashed into one of the locker handles. Hailey squinted her eyes and gritted her teeth. Pain danced across the back of her skull. She reached behind her head and felt the wound. Her shaking fingers were greeted with a dribble of warm blood. Her eyes popped open, angry, green, and full of fury. She tossed her red backpack aside and hopped to her feet. Irritation, jealousy, loneliness, chaos, rage, and hatred flowed through her veins in a river of annihilation. She didn't lunge at her. That would have been foolish. Rather, she balled her little hands into fists and approached her in a brimming, confident stature. Then, she began pummeling her squishy, little face. The first hit was a right fist across the teeth. The soggy, bare flesh of her knuckles slid across Jennifer's sparkly, blush-powdered cheek. Jennifer's head swung to the left, and Hailey smashed her in the nose with her left fist. The back of Jennifer's head smashed into the white, brick wall behind her.

Jennifer slithered to the floor, and Hailey continued to strike. She landed four more fists in her face before she hit the floor. Then, she started kicking her in the chest. Her black, canvas shoes bounced off her supple breasts like basketballs. Jennifer threw her arms over her face and filled the hallway with cries. Hailey uttered a single word with each kick. “Stupid...! Bitch...! Like...! That...?! Little...! Miss...! Priss...!” Travis was beside himself. He sprang to life. He grabbed a hold of Hailey's bleeding, orange hair and jerked her to the ground. Then, he dropped on top of her and got right in her face. “You little SLUT!” he barked. “I'll slice your

fuckin' throat!" He spit in her face. Then, he jabbed her in the jugular with the tips of his fingers. Hailey rolled onto her side. She clutched her throat with both hands, gasping for air. She began to cough. She noticed that a crowd had begun to fill the hallway. She also noticed a group of security guards marching up to them. Three of them reached down and scraped her off the floor. She squirmed then went limp in their arms. The trip down the hall was a bit of a blur. Some time later, she popped out of her little daze to the shrill shrieking of her friend, Wednesday.

Hailey looked up from a red velvet couch. She knew she was in the nurse's office, but she had no memory of how she had gotten there. She turned to an open doorway at the end of a floor of white tiles. She squinted, trying to get a handle on things. Her hand felt numb. She wriggled her fingers. She realized she was holding a bag of ice to the back of her head. It was dripping cold water down the back of her jacket, incessantly. She shivered. It was freezing. Hailey dropped the bag of ice on the white, tile floor at her feet and stared at the door. She was all alone in the room. The nurse and a guard were busy trying to keep Wednesday out. Hailey slowly opened her mouth to speak. "*Nah...let her in,*" she moaned. The nurse turned to her. The guard held her friend back.

"You know this girl?" the nurse asked.

"Yes," Hailey told her. "That's my friend, Wednesday."

The nurse turned to the guard. "That's her friend, Don. Let her in."

"Alright, fine!" Don shouted. He let go of Wednesday's arm, and she stormed into the nurse's office.

"Yeah, fine!" Wednesday screamed back. She walked through the door, flipping him off. "FUCK you!"

“Hey, watch your mouth, young lady!” Don screamed back. The nurse walked in after Wednesday and shut the door. Wednesday zipped across the room, hopped onto the couch, and wrapped Hailey in her arms.

“Jesus, Hailey,” she gasped. Hailey slowly hugged her back. “Are you alright?”

“*I’m...fine*,” Hailey groaned. “You should see Jennifer.”

Wednesday tore away. “Did you jack her up?!”

“Damn right I did, the little bitch!” Hailey shouted with excitement.

“Girls!” the nurse yelled. She took a seat on a barstool across from them. “Language!”

Hailey cleared her throat. “Right, I’m sorry. Miss...”

“Johnson,” the nurse told her. “Ms. Johnson. I’ve told you five times, already. You don’t remember?”

“Hm,” Hailey muttered. “So...how long?”

“How long, what?”

“How long am I suspended for?” Ms. Johnson adjusted her nametag. Then, she crossed her right leg over her left. She wore white stockings and a pair of white sneakers.

“Since it was a retaliation, and since you’ve never been in trouble before, they decided to go easy on you.”

Hailey threw her arms out at her sides. “How long?”

“Rest of today. And, tomorrow.” Hailey tilted her head to the side then back.

“No,” Wednesday interrupted. “Nuh-uh. You’ve got that *test* tomorrow.” She turned to Ms. Johnson. “Ma’am, she’s got a test tomorrow in Algebra Two.”

“Gonna hafta make that up,” Ms. Johnson replied. “Sorry.”

“It’ll be alright, Wednesday,” Hailey assured her. “Ms. Gord will let me take a makeup

test.”

“Mm...” Wednesday moaned. “I don’t like this. I mean she’s not a bad student, ma’am.”

“Tell that to the other girl,” Ms. Johnson replied. “She’s got a swollen black eye, busted nose, bruises on her breasts...and you knocked out her *tooth!*” Wednesday curled into a ball and cackled on the end of the red, velvet couch.

“Which one?” Hailey asked.

“Both of ‘em, darlin’,” Ms. Johnson replied.

Hailey narrowed her eyes. “No, which *tooth*, Ms. Johnson?”

“Oh!” Ms. Johnson began, smiling. “It’s a molar, dear. Nothin’ in the front.”

“Damn, Hailey,” Wednesday remarked. “Next time aim for the front ones!”

“Language, dear,” Ms. Johnson replied with a point of her finger. “Now, are you all better there, Hailey?” Hailey rubbed the back of her head. She found the gash from the locker handle. It was swollen, but the bleeding had stopped.

“Yes, ma’am,” she told her.

“Then, I got to release you, girl,” Ms. Johnson informed her. “Which means you’ve got to leave. You ain’t gotta go home, but you’ve got to get out of *here*.” Hailey swallowed hard then slowly stood. Wednesday hopped up with her.

“I’m going, too.” She turned to Ms. Johnson. “Ma’m, let me out of here, too.”

“Oh, no,” Ms. Johnson informed her, “I can’t let *you* go. Just her.”

“Bullshit!” Wednesday shouted.

“Watch your mouth, honey. I can only let students go that are sick or suspended.”

“Fine then, I’m sick,” Wednesday replied. She threw a fist in front of her ruby lips,

turned, and coughed a few times. “There, see?” She grabbed a hold of Hailey’s hand. “Let’s go, Hailey.” Ms. Johnson snagged a small, wooden stick and tore the wrapper off. She got it from a cup on a steel cart beside her.

“Open your mouth, dear. Say ‘ah’.” Wednesday cocked her head to the side with a disgusted look on her face. She reluctantly opened her mouth. Ms. Johnson plopped the stick down on her tongue.

“Ah!” Wednesday screamed.

“Sorry, Wednesday,” she told her. “You ain’t sick, girl. I have to send you back to class.”

Wednesday turned to Hailey. “You *have* to let me go, Miss!” she begged. “They’ll...do something to her. They’ll hurt her!”

“Who?” Ms. Johnson demanded, throwing her hands on her hips. “Who’s gonna hurt her?”

“Jennifer’s little twisted, psycho friends she’s got out there,” Wednesday explained. “They’ll probably– They’re probably outside right now, waiting for her.”

“Go back to class, Wednesday,” Ms. Johnson instructed.

Wednesday turned to Hailey. “It’ll be okay, Wednesday,” Hailey assured her. “I’ll be fine.” Wednesday groaned. She wrapped her arms around her one more time. Don, the guard stepped inside.

“Wednesday,” he informed her, “Ms. Gord just called down to the office. She says you went to the restroom a while ago and never came back.”

Wednesday sighed. “I guess I better go.” She squeezed Hailey as hard as she could.

“Go, Wednesday,” Hailey told her. “Get back to class before *you* get in trouble.”

“Alright,” she replied. She wiped a tear from her eye. Then, she slowly slid away and stormed to the end of the nurse’s office. She turned back and pointed at Hailey from the doorway. “Go straight home, Hailey. Okay?”

Hailey waved at her. “Go!” Wednesday shook her head. Then, she left and shut the door behind her.

“Now, Hailey,” Ms. Johnson began. Hailey turned to her. “We called your mother five times, dear, and she has not answered the phone. Is there some other number we could reach her at?”

Hailey smiled with a nervous, scrunched up face. “Nah, she’d be at home.”

“She’s not at work, is she?” Hailey spotted her red backpack at the end of the couch. She retrieved it and threw it over her shoulders.

“My mother is currently between jobs as they say.” She noticed the ice bag on the floor. She bent over and picked it up.

“Oh, just leave it, honey,” Ms. Johnson told her. “So, how can I get a hold of her? I have to let her know you’ve been suspended.”

Hailey dropped the bag of ice next to the cup of sticks on the steel cart. “Just...keep trying. She’ll answer sooner or later.”

Ms Johnson shrugged. “Whatever you say, dear.”

Hailey nodded. “Alright, I’m out of here then.” She turned and walked to the end of the office.

“Go with Don,” Ms. Johnson told her. “He has to escort you to the end of the property.”

“Alright,” Hailey responded with a wave of her hand.

“And, Hailey,” Ms. Johnson called after her, “go home and lay down, honey. Nothin’

strenuous for the rest of the day.” Hailey nodded. She closed the door to the office behind her. Don awaited her on the other side with a pair of tree trunk arms crossed over his chest.

“Let’s go, Don,” she instructed. He stepped away from the wall, and they made their way towards the exit. The nurse’s office was on the first floor. It was down the hall from the double doors at the front of the building. There was an eerie silence in the air. Hailey was used to the hallway being filled with students.

“So, are we going to your car, or what?” Don asked.

“Nah, I walk.”

“Walk? Walk where?” Hailey looked up at him then faced forward. “They told me you live across the freeway.” Hailey nodded. “You walk here from across the freeway...every day?”

Hailey smiled, shaking her head. “Yes, Don.” They stepped through the front double doors. “It’s only ten blocks.”

“Wow,” Don said. “My kid...I can’t even make her walk to the car some mornings.”

“You have a daughter?”

“Yeah,” Don replied. They walked to the edge of the concrete walkway and stepped into the parking lot. Hailey looked down the sidewalk and spotted Ms. Goodwin. She looked down her nose at her and nodded with a smirk. She was very pleased by the sight of Hailey Holloway being escorted from the campus. “*Old bitty*,” Don whispered.

Hailey smiled. “She go to school here?”

“My kid? She’s the one you just beat the crap out of.” Hailey looked up with an open mouth. “I’m kidding,” he told her with a snicker. “She’s in junior high, still. Don’t worry. You won’t be beating her up until next year.” They weaved through the maze of cars in the parking

lot and wound up at the outer sidewalk. Don walked with Hailey all the way to the northeast corner. It was the same place she had sat with Wednesday that morning. “Okay, Hailey,” Don said with a sigh, “I don’t want to see you back here until Monday.”

“Sure, Don,” she replied. She hopped off the edge of the sidewalk and crossed the street. She made it to the sidewalk at the other side then turned around. “Hey, Don!” she shouted. He turned around. “Do you know what time it is?!”

He smiled with a shake of his head. “It’s ten after eleven, Hailey!” he shouted back. She waved then turned around and resumed her walk home. She stopped about halfway down the block. She didn’t want to go home just yet. She stood, rubbing the gash on the back of her head. She turned to her left and looked across Dora Lane. There was a park a couple of blocks north of the school. It was right by Wednesday’s house. Since she had the rest of the day and tomorrow off, she decided to hang out there the rest of the day. She could stay the night at Wednesday’s. It sounded a lot better than going home, anyway. Hailey dropped her backpack on the sidewalk, ripped it open, and rummaged around. She was in luck. She had two packages of peanut butter crackers and a bottle of water inside. So, it was settled. She would spend her lunch at the park. Hailey returned her backpack to her shoulders with a smile. She hopped across Dora Lane and glanced at the high school. Don the guard was long gone. She walked down Dora Lane, headed west. Then, she made a right at the end of the block and headed for the park. She looked up. Lightning tore across the sky in little zigzags, followed by a roar of thunder.

Chapter 7: “Ice Cold”

It was a tad chilly. Hailey sat in a picnic area underneath an awning at Linda Park. She was across the street from her friend Wednesday’s house. She sat atop a steel table, staring through quilts of rain. Her feet were propped on a steel bench running across the side. She rubbed her arms between bites of peanut butter crackers and sips of lukewarm water. Who was she kidding? It was freezing out. Hailey yanked her glasses off her face and wiped fog off the lenses. She returned them to her face and stared across the park. Rain fell by the bucketful. She scanned the same imagery time and time again. There was a swing set with four swings, a spiral slide, decorated with brown and yellow bands along the outside, and Wednesday’s house across the street.

Wednesday’s home was a small, red brick house with no garage. The front door was made of wood. The door glimmered with a shiny polish. It was decorated across the front with tall, white numbers. The door was trapped behind a glass, storm door. Hailey read the numbers again and again, searching for some hidden meaning, perhaps. “6456,” she whispered in her mind, repeating the digits into an oblivion. The roof slanted to Hailey’s left and right. The peak of the roof was centered directly above the door. There were square windows on either side of the door. They were trimmed with matching wood, two strips running across each pane of glass like plus signs.

It was too dark to be noon. It looked like late evening. But, it *was* about noon. Hailey shook suddenly, and her head turned to the right. A grid of lightning bolts twisted across the blackening sky. She was terrified. Then again, she had a lot on her mind. She had brazenly beaten Travis’ skank girlfriend to the floor. She had dotted her eye, bloodied her nose, knocked her tooth out, and bruised her up and down her body. Now, she was trapped underneath an

awning, surrounded by torrents of rain. Her current circumstance was nightmarish. In her mind, she kept replaying what Wednesday had said half an hour earlier in the nurse's office. She had said Travis and his psycho friends would be coming to get her. She was afraid they might try to retaliate. So, Hailey had promised she would go straight home. Yet, here she sat, staring through sheets of rain, shivering in the cold, surrounded by aluminum park tables. She was a sitting duck. She tore off her shoes and dropped them beside her on the table. They were soaked. Her wet rainbow socks felt cold against her skin in the wind.

Several blocks away, Travis and Gary were walking into the Bull's Eye department store. They were in need of some good tools. They dashed through a duo of automatic doors which courteously whisked out of their way. Gary shook rain from his shirt. Travis slung his jet black hair through his fingers. Gary selected a cart from a row of blue, plastic shopping carts. "Boy, it's really coming down out there."

"Shut-up, and follow me," Travis replied in haste. Travis took off at a lively pace. Gary tried to keep up as best he could. 10 to 20 yards in, Gary realized he had picked a shopping cart that pulled to the right. He glanced at the front, right wheel. It was clogged with a giant wad of hair.

"Dammit, Travis. We need a different cart."

"It's fine," Travis replied. "We don't have time for this crap, Gary."

"I'm sorry, man."

"It's cool. Just follow me." Travis led him to the sporting goods section. "How many you think we should get?"

Gary stared at him through a pair of narrow eyes. "How many what?" Travis grabbed the other end of the shopping cart. He pulled it around the corner of a shelf filled with tennis

equipment, dragging Gary along. Travis stopped pulling and walked to a shelf filled with aluminum baseball bats.

“I’m thinking we’ll go ahead and get eight,” Travis remarked. He plucked a bat from the shelf. He took a batting stance, bat across his shoulder, behind his head. “One for everybody.” He swayed his hips and smirked. He waved the tip of the bat back and forth behind his head then lowered it. He held the tail end in his hand, letting the tip rest against the ground. It looked like he was using a cane. He turned to Gary, inquisitively. “Your dad’s paying for it, right?”

“I don’t know, Travis,” Gary replied. “I mean I have his debit card...”

“Eight,” Travis interrupted with a confident smile. He tossed the bat into the cart. Then, he picked out a few more and tossed them in. Gary stumbled around the cart and to the shelf. Travis picked up a pink, girl’s softball bat and held it up to show him. “Perfect!” he remarked, tossing it in. “One for my girl...” He grabbed another and tossed it in. “...and one for yours.”

“What about Vicky?” Gary inquired.

“Vicky? Yeah, she’s a chick, I guess.” He tossed another pink bat into the cart. “Close enough, anyway.” He left the sporting goods section and returned to the main aisle.

“Hey, at least she’s got all her teeth,” Gary remarked.

“Yeah that’s real funny, Gary,” Travis replied. “I want you to be sure and remind me of that later...” He turned and smashed into Gary’s cart. Gary stopped abruptly. “...when I’m smashing your BRAINS out!” He let out a sigh, and some old guy walked by. Travis glared at him. The elder man returned Travis’ gaze with a pair of narrow eyes. Travis lunged at him, stopping short. The older man jumped back in a brief moment of terror then quickly walked away.

“Travis, calm down,” Gary remarked. They continued to the hardware department.

“We’ll get that little *Hailey* chick, man. We’ll make her pay.”

“Hey!” Travis shouted. He slowed his pace, walking side by side with Gary. “*They’ve got cameras in here, dumbass,*” he whispered. “*Watch what you say up in here.*” Gary raised his hand with a bow of his head. Travis reclaimed his position in front of the shopping cart. He led Gary to the hardware section. They walked up and down a couple of aisles of tools. They arrived at a shelf filled with rope, and Travis had Gary stop again. Travis fumbled through some different types of twine.

“So, did she say anything?” Gary asked. Travis examined a long roll of thick rope then turned to him.

“Who, Hailey?” Gary nodded. “Not much,” he told him. He returned the roll of rope to the shelf and sifted through some others. “I think she talked a little shit while she was beating the crap out of her.” He picked up another roll of rope, looking it over. “Hey, there we go. This is pretty good. Not too thick, not too thin...” He tossed the rope to Gary, and Gary checked it out.

“It’s fine, man,” he agreed, tossing it into the cart. Travis turned around and looked at the aisle behind him. He scanned it from left to right. He spotted some boxes of fluorescent light tubes.

“Alright!” Travis shouted, drawing his fist towards himself. He loaded four boxes of 24 lights into the cart as well.

“What else?” Gary inquired.

“Uh...” Travis trailed off, looking around. “Where’s the duct tape around here?” Gary pointed around the end of the aisle. Travis led him around then stopped to have a look. He picked up a couple of rolls of duct tape and held them up for Gary to see. Gary nodded, and

Travis tossed them into the shopping cart. Then, he led Gary to the home and garden section to pick out some shovels. “Eight shovels, too?” Travis asked. Gary looked into their shopping cart. He fought to keep it straight as they walked.

“Might as well. We’ve bought everything else up in here.” They reached the shovels, and Travis picked one up to show to his buddy. It was the kind with the pointed tip.

“All spades?” he asked.

Gary nodded. “That’ll be your best bet. We’re going to have to do some serious digging.” He joined Travis, and the two of them loaded the cart up with eight spade tipped shovels. Then, Gary walked to the rear of the cart to push again. “That it?”

“I think so,” Travis replied.

“You sure? We can always go get another cart.”

“God damn, we might have to,” Travis responded with a grin. He turned and looked around. He spotted something else after all. He took off, and Gary followed. “That’s that baling wire stuff, right?”

“Yeah,” Gary replied. Travis stroked his chin. He looked around the shelf then snagged a 100 foot roll of baling wire. He tossed that and a pair of snips into the cart.

“Alright, we better call it quits,” Travis remarked. “We’re on a bit of a time limit here, and it’s already...” He looked at a clock on the wall in the electronics department. “Damn, it’s eleven fifty-three already?”

“We’re going to have to skip third period, Travis. There’s just no other way.”

Travis shrugged. “Oh well. Won’t be the first time.” He grabbed the front of the shopping cart. He tugged it towards the front of the store to find an open register, and Gary pushed. The cart was pretty heavy, now. It took a fair amount of effort for the two of them to

wheel it across the store. Gary stared at the contents of their shopping cart and shook his head.

“My dad’s going to kill me.”

“Come on, G-Spot,” Travis replied. “He don’t care! Your old man’s cool.” They arrived at an empty counter. They tossed the duct tape, rope, baling wire, and snips onto the conveyer belt for the checker girl to scan.

“Oh, sure,” Gary remarked. “So, you won’t mind explaining to him exactly what it was we *needed* all this junk for.” Gary wheeled the cart to the register. Their checker scanned all the small items and dropped them into a plastic sack. Then, she came around the register with a scanner gun. Gary held up each larger item for her, and she zapped all the barcodes. She typed in the quantities of bulk items on her keyboard. Then, she rang it all up.

“Five fifty-two ninety-five,” she proudly reported.

“My God, Travis!” Gary shrieked.

“Hope he doesn’t have a limit on that thing,” Travis returned with a smirk. He turned to Gary. Gary just stood there, staring at the card keypad. Travis pushed his mouth to one side of his face then shrugged. He snatched the debit card from him and slid it through.

“Ge-buh...” Gary protested. He threw his arms out at his sides.

“Pin number,” Travis demanded. Gary looked up. “Pin number!” Gary sighed. He reluctantly typed in his father’s four digit pin on the little keypad. Their receipt printed out. Then, the cashier tore it from the printer and handed it to Gary.

“Yeah, that’s a pretty good shopping list you two have there,” she remarked. “What’re you guys doing exactly?”

“Uh...” Gary moaned.

“School project,” Travis replied. He tossed the sack of small items into their cart and

pushed it towards the door. Gary joined him, pulling on the other side to help things along. “I see the rain hasn’t let up,” Travis remarked.

Gary glanced through the double glass doors at the entrance. “Damn, Travis. It’s coming down in sheets.” They parked their shopping cart beside the door and took a moment to think things through. “Tell you what, Travis. You got a tarp?”

“Got one in the toolbox in the back,” Travis replied.

“Well, why don’t you back up to the door, and me and you can tie that tarp down over the bed while the girls watch our stuff.” Travis nodded. “Then, we can load all this stuff up in the bed of the truck.”

Travis plucked his keys from his pocket. “I’ll be right back.” He stepped through the automatic doors and jogged through the torrential rainstorm to his truck. The older man that Travis had lunged at earlier walked to the doors to leave. He held a bag of potting soil under his arm. He stopped at the entrance, staring at the rain outside. Then, he turned to Gary. He looked at the contents of Gary’s cart. He looked up with an inquisitive stare, and Gary smiled.

“How’s it going?” he inquired. The man shook his head. He flipped open a rainbow colored umbrella, breezed through the automatic doors, and disappeared into the storm. Gary spotted Travis’ truck, and he returned his attention to the front of the store. Travis backed into position a few feet from the entrance. Jennifer and Tate hopped out of the two doors on the right side of the truck and scurried inside. Tate shook rain from her long, braided red hair. Gary turned to Jennifer with a grin. Her right eye was black and swollen shut. Her nose was puffed up and red. Jennifer glared at him.

“Something funny, Gary?”

Gary shook his head and plowed through the doors. “Nothin’, Rudolf!” he shouted back.

Travis had already retrieved the tarp from his toolbox. He was battling the wind, attempting to lay it across the bed of the pickup. Gary dropped the tailgate, hopped into the bed, and grabbed the other end. The two of them managed to lay it over the top of the bed. The tarp had a rope running across each end. All the boys had to do was tie each side through four eyebolts sticking up at the four corners of the bed. With the tarp tied off, Gary and Travis dashed into the store. Gary shook rain from his shirt. Travis slung his jet black hair through his fingers.

“Yeah, it’s coming down pretty good,” Travis agreed. He, Gary, Jennifer, and Tate slid everything into the bed of the pickup. Travis slammed the tailgate shut, and the quartet raced into the rain. They flew through their respective doors and plopped down in their usual seats. Like clockwork, Vicky pulled up in her Station Cruiser with Paul, Joe, and Tommy. She drove to the front of the Bull’s Eye department store and swerved in front of Travis’ truck. She parked facing the store so that her driver’s side door faced Travis’. She and Travis rolled their windows down.

“Linda Park!” Vicky reported. Travis replied with an evil grin. Tommy sat directly behind Vicky. He rolled *his* window down as well.

“You got the stuff, man?” His eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark shades.

“Yes, Tommy,” Travis replied with an annoyed smile.

Joe leaned over Tommy’s lap to talk to Travis. “Mayun, let’s get that bitch!”

Paul leaned across Vicky’s lap. “Let me ride with *you!*” Travis glared at him. He stared him directly in his blue shades. Then, he quickly rolled his window up and peeled away. Vicky turned around in her seat and faced Tommy. She rolled her window up. It was one of those hand crank windows.

“Roll your window up, Tommy,” she instructed.

Tommy grinned. “What? You don’t like the rain?”

Vicky pointed her finger in his face. “Tommy, if you don’t roll that damn window back up then, after we’re done with this Hailey bitch, I’m taking *you* out next! Got it?” Tommy’s smile faded, and he quietly cranked his window up. Vicky backed away from the department store and tore out after Travis and the others.

Hailey peered from beneath the awning. The rain was letting up, but it hadn’t stopped. She finished off her bottle of water with a sigh. She rolled up the sleeve of her black and white, striped jacket. Then, she held the empty bottle in the rain to let it fill up. She hated this place. It was making her stir crazy. “*Maybe I’ll go walk around in the rain for a minute,*” she thought. “Be better than sitting here all day,” she said. She retrieved a half full water bottle and had a sip. She rested her back against a support post at a corner of the shelter and faced the picnic tables. She had lost track of the time. She guessed it was a little after twelve. “Four hours,” she remarked. “Four more hours until she comes home. Dammit!” She picked up an old bottle cap off the concrete floor and tossed it into the rain.

A black crow suddenly flew in. It landed on a bench next to her. Hailey turned and watched it. It shook off a bit of rain then looked around. It whirled its head about in frenzy. Hailey smiled. “Hey, man. Some weather, huh?” The mysterious bird took one look at her then flew across the picnic area and back into the storm. The frown returned to Hailey’s face. Her eyes narrowed in frustration. “Shit-head!” she called after it. There was a sudden squeal, and Hailey turned around. It was the sound of brakes on wet rotors. Her bright, green eyes popped open. She peered through the foggy lenses of her glasses and stacks of raindrops. She spotted a black pickup. A pair of orange flames painted down the sides glowed in the darkness. She shuttered as the door crept open. Travis slid over the edge of his seat and plopped down in a

muddy rain puddle in the park grass. He slammed the door behind him. A grin shot across his twisted face, and he waved hello. Gary, Jennifer, and Tate hopped out to join him. It was a ghastly sight.

Hailey quickly screwed the cap on her water bottle, tossed it in her backpack, and threw her backpack over her shoulders. She darted across the picnic area and out the other side. Rain smothered her, slick and frigid. Her feet didn't feel right at all. She looked down as she sprinted across the park. She rolled her eyes at the sight of her rainbow colored, toe socks. "Damn!" she shouted. Her shoes were sitting on a picnic table under the awning. She quickly reached the street. She looked up just in time to spot Vicky's Station Cruiser barreling towards her. "Bah!" Hailey shrieked. Her hip met Vicky's grill. Then, she rolled across the hood and smashed into the windshield. She dropped back first on the pavement. Her red backpack slid across the road. Hailey pinched her eyes shut. She winced and sucked air through her teeth.

"Gotcha!" Tommy screamed. Suddenly there were hands all over her body. Hailey's eyes popped open. She was flipped onto her stomach, and someone tore off her jacket. A pair of hands clamped down on her arms. Another pair of hands crossed her wrists behind her back. Someone snagged a hold of her slick, fiery locks and pressed her face against the sticky pavement. She stared at the grimy undercarriage of Vicky's car. She gasped for air and struggled to free herself.

"Come on, douchebags," she heard Travis say. "We've got to finish this before someone sees us." Hailey moaned at the sound of duct tape. She felt it being wound around her wrists, growing thicker and thicker. It felt wet, sticky, and unsatisfying against her squishy flesh. Then, she felt her ankles being crossed. Vicky held Hailey's legs in place. She stared at her rainbow colored socks then looked at Travis.

“I don’t know if I can do this, man.”

“It’s done,” he coldly replied. He wound half a dozen strands of tape around Hailey’s ankles, and Vicky let go. “Alright,” he remarked, “stand her up.” Joe, Tommy, Vicky, and Paul grabbed her by the arms and stood her up. They held her up and forced her to face Travis. Hailey looked away. She looked down and to the side. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Travis slid her glasses off her face. “Hai-ley,” he sneered. She let out a terrified whimper followed by a sob. Travis cocked his head to the side. Then, he reeled back and smacked her across her teary face. “*Hailey!*” She looked up. He had her attention now.

“*Travis...*” Hailey moaned. “Travis, come on, man. I-I’m sorry.” Jennifer popped up beside him. She stared at her through a black eye. She wriggled her swollen nose. Hailey turned away.

“Hey!” Jennifer shrieked. “Look at me, bitch!” She kicked Hailey in the stomach. Hailey turned back to her with a frustrated cry. “Look at what you did!”

“*You shoved me FIRST,*” Hailey gasped. Travis slapped a piece of duct tape across her lips.

“Let’s take her to church, guys,” Gary remarked. Tommy’s head popped up on Hailey’s shoulder. She cringed.

“Come on!” he screamed in her ear. “You’re riding with us!” Tommy threw her over his shoulder and hauled her to the back of the Station Cruiser. Vicky threw the back door open, and Tommy dropped her in. She collapsed on the crusty, carpeted floor. It stank of stale cigarettes and beer. Joe popped up and tossed in her backpack, jacket, and shoes. Then, Vicky slammed the door. Hailey pinched her eyes closed and tried to think happy thoughts. She drew a blank.

“Anyone see us, Gary?” Travis requisitioned.

Gary shook his head, looking around. "There's no one around here. And, it's so dark."

Travis patted him on the shoulder. He, Jennifer, Gary, and Tate scurried to the truck. Rain poured on them the whole way. Vicky peeled away in her Station Cruiser. Travis followed in his pickup. Church was an old, abandoned warehouse across town. They called it "church" because it had a large, stained glass window across one of the walls for some odd reason. It was their hangout. Sometimes, they would throw wild parties there and whatnot. Vicky slid onto the Patrick Peterson, headed west. Tommy turned around in his seat to play with his new toy. Out of curiosity, Joe turned around to watch.

Tommy reached back and slapped Hailey on the butt. "So...how's it going there, Hailey?" There was something about the way she whimpered that struck him as odd. He flipped her onto her back. The duct tape had nearly peeled off her lips. "Ah, shit!" Tommy shrieked. "Someone give me some more tape." He threw his hand behind his back, flicking his fingers for more.

"Did she get *loose*?!" Vicky demanded from the driver's seat.

Tommy peeled the tape off Hailey's lips. "Just on her mouth." Hailey cleared her nervous throat. She avoided contact with Tommy's eyes.

"Duct tape doesn't...stick to lips very well," she informed him. "You have to..." She stopped and swallowed, uneasily. "You'll probably have to wrap it all the way around my head a few times." She dared a glance into Tommy's eyes. He was dumbfounded. Paul dropped a roll of duct tape into Tommy's outstretched hand from the front seat. Tommy stared at her, speechless. Joe looked Tommy over with a pair of squinted eyes. He jerked the tape out of his buddy's hand and reached over the back of the seat. He wrapped it around Hailey's lips and head a few times as she had instructed. Then, he plopped down in his seat and stared at his

friend.

“Turn around, dumb-ayuss!” He snagged a hold of Tommy’s arm and turned him around to face forward.

Gary was rolling a joint inside the warm walls of Travis’ pickup. He licked it closed and twisted the ends. Then, he reached up from the back seat and placed it between Travis’ lips.

Travis plucked the doobie from his mouth. He looked it over with a pair of narrow eyes.

Jennifer punched in a cigarette lighter underneath the CD player. “Damn, Gary,” Travis remarked. “That’s a *pretty* joint. I almost don’t want to smoke it...all-most.”

Gary flicked his wrist at him. “Oh, come on, man.”

“No, I’m serious,” Travis continued. He examined his friend’s handiwork. “I mean, that’s a nice looking *toke tube*!” He held it up to show to his girlfriend. “Baby, *look* at that.” Jennifer snatched it from his fingertips. She popped it in her mouth and sparked it up with the cigarette lighter she’d punched in earlier. She took a puff then passed it to Travis. Travis followed suit. The smoke was harsh and rubbery like car exhaust, yet sticky and humid. The flavor was like a combination of bratwurst, burning clothes, and black pepper. Travis could tell it was the good stuff. He inhaled deeply then held the joint up for Gary. Gary jerked it from his hand, took a couple of hits, and handed it to his girlfriend. Tate leaned forward. She plopped her chin on the back of Jennifer’s seat, resting her head next to hers.

“Hey, Jennifer,” she asked, “how’s your eye, man?” Jennifer turned and glared at her. “And your nose?”

Jennifer smirked. “They hurt, Tatum.” Tate smiled back. She took a couple of hits and handed the joint to her.

“Well, you look good, man,” she told her, folding her arms underneath her chin.

“Right, thanks,” Jennifer replied. She took a couple of puffs then handed the doobie to Travis. “Yes, thank you for that compliment.” Tate leaned forward even more. She stood on the floorboard behind Jennifer’s seat. She slithered around the back of Jennifer’s seat and wrapped her arms around her good buddy. “Tate!” Jennifer shrieked. “Are you CRAZY?! Sit back down!” Gary bellowed with laughter. He took the joint from Travis and had a couple more puffs. “Okay, Tatum!” Jennifer squealed through laughter. She turned and hugged her back. “Get back in that seat, you little freak!”

“I love you, man!” Tate screamed. She planted a pile of kisses on top of Jennifer’s head then plopped down in her seat. She snatched the joint from Gary, took a couple of hits, and handed it to Jennifer. Jennifer smiled and shook her head. She slouched into her seat and had another hit. Vicky and Travis turned off the Patrick Peterson at Refugee Drive and drove for a while. It was a lonely road. It felt isolated from the rest of the world. There was nothing around for miles. There was just...the church. The old, abandoned warehouse stood about 50 yards from the east side of Refugee Drive. It was in the middle of a field of grass. The land at the side of the road sloped from the street so far at that particular spot that if someone was driving by, they wouldn’t even know it was there. The Church was trimmed around the outside with old, rusty panes of white tin. There were few windows, all of which were intact. The building was dotted here and there with old, rusty swamp coolers. They were painted the same color as the tin on the building. And, along one of the walls that faced the road, there was a huge pane of stained glass. It didn’t have any religious symbols laid into it or anything like that. But, it resembled a church window enough that the name “church” just stuck.

Vicky skidded off the main road. Lightning struck and thunder growled. She slid across a patchy field, followed closely by Travis. They pulled up to the church and parked in front of

an overhead door. It stood next to the stained glass window. Rain poured from the sky. Paul hopped out of Vicky's Station Cruiser and headed for the front door. He unlocked the knob with a key and dashed inside. Lights began to flicker on. They shined through the windows as Paul hurried through the shop from front to rear. After the stained glass window lit up, the overhead door unlatched and began to roll up. Paul slowly became visible from behind the door. He was pulling down on a chain. It looped from the floor to the ceiling, turning a gear at the top. Vicky and Travis drove their vehicles inside, and Paul quickly closed the door behind them. Travis and Vicky killed their engines, and everyone piled out. They headed for the rear of Vicky's Station Cruiser. Vicky threw the hatch open. Travis, Gary, and Paul yanked Hailey out and slammed the door. Travis immediately unraveled the duct tape from her lips.

"Hello, Hailey," he remarked. "Did you miss me?" He reached across and lifted her chin ever so gently. She jerked away. "You can scream all you want here. No one will ever know." Hailey didn't scream. Rather, she began to look around at this "church." Gary and Paul held her upright. Things were a little blurry without her spectacles. She managed to make out an overhead hoist, a few sets of pallet racks, a forklift, and a large, stained glass window. It refracted freaky bursts of multi colored light across the warehouse. Travis looked down at her. "Nothing to say?"

Hailey looked up at him. "You guys are going to kill me, aren't you?" Everyone laughed but her. It gave her the cold shivers. Travis took out a pocket knife. He cut the duct tape loose from Hailey's wrists and ankles then headed for the bed of his pickup. Gary and Paul let her loose. Hailey backed away. She was filled with panicked anticipation. She watched Travis remove a long, cardboard box from his tarp covered pickup bed. He laid it on the floor. Then, he knelt down, removed a long, white tube from the box, and held it up for her to see.

Hailey squinted. “I can’t even tell what that *is*,” she told him. Travis walked up to her and smashed the tube over her head. Hailey got it, now. It was a light bulb. She fell on her butt on the cold, concrete floor. She could hear giggles all around. She squinted to see. The rest of Travis’ friends reached into the box and retrieved light tubes of their own. It was a terrifying, blurry sight without her glasses. They crept towards her, lights in hand. Hailey watched them carefully. Her eyes crinkled up. Her brows fell to outside. Warm blood trickled down her face. Gary lifted his light tube over his head. Hailey threw her hands in front of her face.

“No...guys,” she pleaded. “Pl-Please don’t...” Seven more light tubes crashed down on her head. She winced, curling into a ball. Her eyes popped open. She stared at her bloody, glass covered hands. They shook in front of her face. She could feel blood dripping from her chin and cheeks. It felt warm and wet against her soft flesh. It fell in cupfuls and splattered the concrete floor. She trembled with fear. Hailey leaned forward. She flicked her fingers through her hair, shaking out glass shards and white powder. She watched her blood leak onto the floor. It made her sick to her stomach. She took a breath and looked up. Everyone was approaching her again. This time, they each had *two* light tubes. She buried her face between her knees and threw her hands over the top of her skull. Then, sixteen more bulbs crashed over her head.

Hailey popped out of her shell and looked around. The first thing she caught sight of was a pair of blood drenched arms. Every single inch of her exposed flesh was covered in wet crimson. She felt like throwing up. She looked down. Her pink blouse was covered with blood and grains of shattered fluorescent lights. Someone snagged a fistful of her shirt. She looked up to find Travis looming over her. He rolled her shirt over her head and ripped it off.

“Take it off, baby!” he screamed. Hailey cringed. Blood began to roll down her shoulders and chest. It pooled at the rim of her black bra. It was funny, really. Of all the things

to feel, it was embarrassment she felt more than anything. She wasn't one to show a lot of skin. She looked up. Travis was right in her face. "You like that, you little slut?"

Hailey spit blood in his face. "Shut-up, ass-hole!" she screamed back. Travis smacked her across the face. He reached down, grabbed a hold of her wrists, and crossed them behind her back. He motioned for Gary with a bob of his head. Gary shuffled through the items they had purchased at the Bull's Eye earlier. He found the rope and jogged over to join him. Travis held Hailey's wrists in the air, and Gary wound them together. Hailey narrowed her eyes and sucked air through her teeth.

"Nice and tight, now," Travis told him. He released his grip and backed away. "None of that sissy stuff." Gary cackled. He laced the rope around her bleeding wrists and forearms. Then, he weaved it all together like a wicker basket. Apparently, he had a knack for such things. He summed things up with one finalizing knot. It was nice and tight, just as Travis had prescribed. Gary moved to her feet, next. He reached down and grabbed Hailey's ankles. He jerked her towards him. Hailey fell on her back, and pain shot through her arms. She kicked at him.

"Oh, are you gonna kick me now, you little shit?" Gary asked. He crossed her ankles and bound them together.

"Seems familiar, guys," Hailey told them. "You uh...just going to keep tying me up all afternoon?"

"Well," Travis explained, "that duct tape was just temporary. Once it gets wet, it all goes to shit. You keep putting your arms in the way, though. So, now we're going to tie you back up again." Gary dropped Hailey's feet on the floor. She looked up. He dropped the remainder of the rope on the floor. The other six had gathered around, now. Each one had three light tubes a

piece this time.

“Oh, God...” Hailey moaned. She began to twitch. She rolled from side to side on the hard, concrete floor in a puddle of her own blood. Gary and Travis walked to the box of light bulbs. Then, they returned with three light bulbs a piece. Hailey pinched her eyes shut, and the octet battered her with 24 lights. It was an entire box all at once. They crashed across Hailey’s bare flesh. Hailey felt tiny, jagged shards slicing her face, her stomach, and the tops of her breasts. She didn’t dare open her eyes. Her upper body was wrapped in a blanket of hot wetness. She knew she was bleeding very badly. Hailey turned and spit a mouthful of blood and shattered glass onto the floor. She writhed in agony. Travis nudged Hailey with his foot. She rolled over, coming to rest atop a mountain of broken glass. The heap of jagged shards embedded themselves into her wet, squishy flesh. Hailey groaned. Everyone gathered around her again. Hailey dared a glance at them. She slowly looked up as their footsteps surrounded her. She looked at each of them, silently pleading with their demented faces. It did her no good. They dropped another 24 glass tubes across her bare arms and back. Hailey let out a terrified shriek. More of her blood spilled onto the dusty, glass covered floor.

“Come on, *Hailey*,” she heard Travis say. “It’s not that bad.” He kicked her in the ribs, rolling her onto her back again. Shards of glass and dust poked into Hailey’s arms and back. She moaned. “We haven’t even gotten started yet.” Hailey lifted her head off the floor and looked herself over. She was bloody...really bloody. Glints of light appeared here and there where little pieces of broken glass were stuck to her wet skin. She looked up. Travis was looming over her with a baseball bat slung over his shoulder. A grin crept across his face. Hailey began to panic. Her breaths came out short and heavy. Her heart pounded in her ears. Travis stared at Hailey’s bloody chest as she heaved. Her breasts rose and fell in quick bursts.

“That turn you on, Travis?” Hailey gasped. “Huh? Staring at my...bloody tits! That make you feel like a big man?” Jennifer popped up next to him with a pink bat slung over her shoulder. She turned and looked him over.

“Yeah, Travis,” she asked. “That turn you *on*?” Travis turned to her with a smile. They leaned towards each other and pressed their tongues together. They began making out, right there in the middle of it all. It made Hailey cringe. They pried their lips apart then walked over to Hailey’s legs. Travis stood on one side, and Jennifer stood on the other. Hailey curled her legs away from them. Travis looked at his girlfriend then down again. He reeled back and cracked his bat across Hailey’s left shin.

“Buh! God!” Hailey shouted. Travis filled the church with laughter. Jennifer reeled back with her little pink bat and smashed it across Hailey’s right shin. Her shouting became steady and panicked. She struggled to rip her hands out from under her. She couldn’t shake some primitive need to clamp down on her throbbing shins with her hands. The other six joined them. They each had a baseball bat of their own. “Ah! Come on, guys!” Hailey pleaded. She stared into their twisted faces. “Please stop!” Travis, Jennifer, Gary, Tate, Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy began to pound her body with their bats. Hailey filled the warehouse with breathless cries. She panted with terror and trembled with pain. They bashed her up and down her body for three straight minutes. By then, her shrieks were more like whimpers. They stopped battering her one at a time. Then, everyone stood and stared at her. She slowly wriggled across sharp pieces of broken glass. She writhed in pain in a fury of discomfort. Hailey moaned. Her lips quivered. Tears rolled down her face. They washed away blood, leaving streaks of pale skin behind.

“Untie her,” Travis ordered. Everyone dropped their bats, and Gary knelt down to untie

her. He plucked a knot loose from her ankles. Then, he jerked a long strand of rope loose in one, swift pull. He flipped her onto her stomach and did the same with her arms. Hailey laid her palms against the floor. Her arms began to quiver. She tried to push herself to her feet, but it was no use. Her entire body was lit up with pain. She felt like she had been run over by a semi-trailer truck. Travis and Gary each snatched up one of her wrists then dragged her towards the pallet racks. “Paul,” Travis remarked, pointing towards the bed of his pickup. “Get that roll of baling wire out of there.”

Paul retrieved a pack of smokes from the pocket of his jeans and offered one to Vicky. She took one, and Paul took one of his own. He produced a lighter from the opposite pocket. He lit his cigarette then turned to light Vicky’s. He shook his head and returned the lighter to his pocket. Then, he walked to the pickup. He retrieved the roll of wire and the cutters from the back. He tucked the wire under his arm, and clutched the cutters in his hand. He made his way across the church and met up with Gary and Travis. He glanced at Vicky as he passed. She shook her head back. Paul took a drag from his cigarette and plucked it from his lips with his free hand. A cloud of smoke followed him to his two buddies.

“Here, Travis,” he remarked. He held up the roll of wire.

“Oh, great,” Travis replied. He held up Hailey’s left hand and Gary held up her right. “Yeah, just wrap some of that shit around her wrists, here. We’re going to tie her to this rack, alright?” Paul dropped his smoke between his lips and set the roll of baling wire on the floor. He shook off a feeling of reluctance. He rolled out a few feet and clipped it off with the wire cutters. He wound it around Hailey’s left wrist and twisted it off. Then, he ran the rest around a slat, higher up. He watched Hailey’s face as he pulled it tight. She could feel the wire pulling her arm. It lifted her off her feet. “*That’s it...*” Travis whispered with a grin. Hailey winced.

“Now, tie it off.” Paul exhaled smoke through his nostrils. He twisted off the top part of the wire. Then, he knelt down and cut off another piece.

“We could just end this, now,” Paul remarked.

“We’re not finished yet,” Travis replied. He turned to help Gary with Hailey’s other wrist. Paul ran out the next few feet of wire, snipped it off, and tied Hailey’s other wrist in the same manner. Travis and Gary let go and let her hang. Travis crossed his arms over his chest, watching coldly. Hailey began to pant like a dog. He waited for panic to wash over her then turned to Paul with a couple of snaps of his fingers. He pointed at her rainbow covered feet.

“Travis...” Paul calmly replied through a puff of cigarette smoke. “That’s enough, man. Let’s just finish this.” Travis snagged a hold of Paul’s black t-shirt and reeled him in.

“Paul, get down there and tie her up before I stomp a mud-hole in your ass!” Paul jerked Travis’ hand loose from his shirt. He knelt down and clipped off another ten feet of wire. He wrapped one end of the wire around Hailey’s ankles then ran the rest around a slat below her feet. He tugged the wire towards him, slowly pulling Hailey’s legs tight. She moaned. Her body was being pulled in three different directions. It felt like she was on some kind of ancient torture device. Paul tied *that* wire off as well. Then, he backed away and joined Travis and Gary. They were gazing at her in amazement. Paul took a drag of his cigarette. He had a good, long look at his handiwork. Travis patted him on the shoulder. “Nice work, buddy,” he told him. “Now, get up there and tell little Hailey-poo what you think about her.”

Paul walked up to Hailey and got right in her face. She whimpered. She turned her head away, fluttering her eyelids. Paul took a drag of his cigarette, flicked off some ash, and returned it to his lips. He reached up and snagged a fistful of her blood drenched hair. He twirled her head around to face him. Hailey narrowed her eyes and tried to look away.

“*Dweeb...*” Paul grumbled. He reached up with his free hand and smacked her across the face.

“Bah!” Hailey shrieked.

“You make me sick, you little blood splattered...piece of shit!” He took a big drag of his cigarette and blew it in her face. “Just die already.” Paul let go of her fire orange hair and walked to the other side of the room. He needed to be alone for a minute. Everyone else had joined Travis and Gary. Paul opened the front, passenger door of Vicky’s Station Cruiser and had a seat. He crossed his arms over his chest and took a minute to think things through. He hadn’t liked this idea from the start. He hadn’t wanted any part of it. However, Travis had talked him into it. He had laid a guilt trip on him about how he owed him for this and that. He had talked about how fun it would be and whatnot. Now, Paul just wished for this to be over with. From what he could tell, Hailey wasn’t such a bad person. She had just done the wrong thing to the wrong guy.

Paul wanted to kill her already and get it over with. There was no sense in prolonging it. Paul finished his cigarette and flicked it away. He looked at Hailey across the warehouse. His friends continued their assault. Joe and Gary smashed the rest of the light tubes over her head then screamed some obscenities at her. Tate, Vicky, and Jennifer followed up with more strikes from their pink softball bats. Jennifer beat her out of revenge. Tate and Vicky beat her out of frustration. They were hoping she would go ahead and kick off just like Paul was. Then, it was Tommy’s turn. He stepped up and stared at her, silently. Hailey peered back through a pair of hazy eyes. Paul could make out a slight movement from her lips. He couldn’t tell if she was pleading, or if it was some primitive signal from her exhausted brain. Paul figured Tommy was probably wondering the same thing. His friend continued to stand there, staring.

“Dammit, Tommy!” Travis yelled. “You gonna hit her or what?”

Tommy looked back. “Let’s finish this,” he calmly replied. He looked at Hailey one last time then walked away to join the others. Paul nodded with a slight smirk. He emerged from Vicky’s car and smacked the door closed. He wandered across the warehouse to see if he could help move things along.

Travis turned to him as he approached. “Paul, cut that bitch down.” Paul retrieved the wire trimmers from the floor below Hailey’s feet. Travis and Gary grabbed a hold of her, and he clipped her loose. She went limp in their arms. They carried her across the warehouse to a heavy duty hook that hung from the overhead hoist. Gary took the controller for the hook in one hand and laid Hailey over Travis’ shoulder with the other. He lifted the hook as high as it would go. Then, he knelt down and scraped up what was left of the rope. He tossed the end through the hook. Gary handed one end to Paul and looped the other end into a noose. Everyone walked up to join them. Gary braided the top of the noose with thirteen knots like it was supposed to be done. “You’re pretty good with that rope,” Travis remarked.

Gary turned to him with a sly smirk then tossed him the noose. Travis and Gary held Hailey up. Travis slid the noose around her neck and pulled it tight. Then, they turned to Paul. Paul pulled his end of the rope until it was tight. Hailey stood on her little rainbow colored tip-toes with a terrified whimper. Travis got in her face one last time. “Well, Hailey, I hope you’re in a lot of pain. I hope it was worth it, messing with me and beating the shit out of my girl. You’re like some kind of...crazy little stalker chick or whatever. I don’t know.” Hailey slowly opened her eyes. She peered out in a daze. Her body felt heavy and dingy, filthy from caked on, dried blood. She was in agonizing pain. She wished they would just go ahead and kill her already. She was waiting for death more than anyone else in the room. The corners of her

mouth curled into a strained smile.

“I...” she squeaked. “*I hope YOU’RE happy.*” She spoke slowly and unsteady. “*That’s all I ever would’ve wanted...to make you happy.*” Travis walked away. He turned to Paul and pointed towards the ceiling. He stopped next to his girlfriend to watch.

“Bitch is crazy!” he remarked. Jennifer patted him on the arm. Paul began to reel in the rope. He pulled it towards himself hand over hand until Hailey’s head was an inch from the hoist hook. Gary walked up to help, but Paul waved him off.

“I got this,” he told him. Paul wasn’t being noble. He didn’t *need* any help. The poor girl weighed less than eighty pounds. She began to jerk. She reached up and fought with the noose a few times. Some instinctual impulse guided her skinny, little fingers. After a minute, she stopped moving. Paul held her up for another minute then lowered her to the cold, concrete floor. He let the rope go slack and turned to Travis and Gary. “You guys bought shovels, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, man,” Travis replied. “Let’s get some floor dry and a couple of brooms from the closet up front and clean this mess up real quick.”

Chapter 8: “Grounded”

When it comes to the filthy business of murder, there are two things to keep in mind. Those two things are alibi and placement, placement as in placement at the scene. Anything else is circumstantial and speculative. This includes motive. Travis, Jennifer, Gary, Tate, Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy’s alibis were all shot once they had chosen to skip their third period classes. As for placement, it wouldn’t take long for the police to figure out where the crime had taken place. They would just need to interview a few of Glory High’s students. After all, the church had been the sight of many keggers. Most of them were legendary within the walls of Glory High. There would be more than enough evidence to place the group of eight at the church during Hailey Holloway’s murder. However, there is a way to beat alibi and placement when faced with such a dilemma. The solution is to get rid of the body. With no body, it’s very difficult to prove that a murder took place, even if traces of the victim’s blood are found at the alleged crime scene. Travis and the gang had just the place, too. It wasn’t anywhere near the church of course. That would be stupid.

The problem with Malley is that it was littered with vacant lots on the outskirts of town. It was kind of like Las Vegas and the Mojave Desert. Old vacant lots, some with old buildings like the church, were kind of like the Mojave of Malley. And, just like the church, those lots of land lay lower than the desolated roads that ran by. This made it difficult to tell what was going on from the road in a lot of places. Someone could be burying a body at the side of the road as a car passed, and no one in the car would be the wiser. So, it was a matter of finding a lot, digging a hole, and burying poor, unfortunate Hailey. This was still something of a task, committing the murder, finding the lot, digging the hole, and burying the body. In fact, it would even be a good idea to have the hole already dug before showing up with a body. With eight people however,

digging a three or four foot hole, burying a body, and getting back to class lickety-split was no problem. The key to pulling it off was providing enough shovels for everybody. That is precisely what Travis and Gary did. The eight of them even had the foresight to gather all of Hailey's belongings such as her shoes and whatnot to bury with her. That left only a circumstantial trace of her last couple of hours. They had deniability on their side.

"Hell with it," Travis remarked. He skidded off a wet back road and down to a vacant lot. They had gone down the Patrick Peterson a few miles to the west. "This is as good a place as any." It was a grassy lot, so they wouldn't have to worry about leaving tire tracks. However, there were patches of dirt scattered here and there. That meant they could perform the burial without leaving any obvious trace of the fresh hole. The rain would take care of the rest. Travis watched Vicky in his rearview mirror. She drove down from the road and parked her olive green Station Cruiser behind him. Then, everyone piled out and met at Vicky's rear door. A group of lightning bolts tore across the sky followed by a loud crack of thunder. The rain had let up for the moment. But, masses of tyrannical black clouds in the sky suggested the peace wouldn't last long. They would have to be quick. They needed to be quick anyway, or else they ran the risk of missing yet another class. Gary glanced at his pocket watch then showed it to Travis. It was 1:17. Travis patted Gary on the back, and Gary put his watch away. "*Plenty of time...*" he muttered under his breath.

Vicky popped the rear door of her Station Cruiser open, and everyone got to work. They took everything out. There were trash bags filled with shattered light tubes and blood soaked floor dry, two trash bags filled with bloody baseball bats, a trash bag filled with bloody chunks of rope and duct tape, a mound of bloody baling wire, and one fresh corpse. They had laid a few trash bags on the floor of Vicky's car before placing Hailey on top. Now, they simply grabbed a

hold of the trash bags and lifted the body out of the car. Hailey was passed along until everyone had a handful of black plastic. She was still shirtless. Her black bra, upper body, and face were soaked in semi wet, semi dried blood.

Vicky shook her head as she took a hold of her piece of trash bag. She stared at Hailey's rainbow striped toe socks. Travis returned to Vicky's Station Cruiser and grabbed the remainder of Hailey's belongings. This consisted of her black and white, striped jacket, pink blouse, black, canvas shoes, and spectacles. He tossed everything into her red backpack and slung her backpack over his shoulder. Then, he slammed Vicky's door and walked to his tarp covered pickup bed. He was joined halfway by Gary. The two of them gathered up the eight shovels they had purchased earlier at the Bull's Eye department store. Afterwards, they joined the other members of the group. Travis dropped Hailey's backpack on top of everything else. He and Gary scattered the shovels around the dirt patch. "Alright," Travis declared. He clapped his hands to shut everybody up. "We've got forty minutes to dig this hole, chunk everything in it, and bury this wee little problem. So, don't mess around!"

"Someone got a cigarette?" Tate asked.

"See, this is exactly what I'm talking about," Travis remarked. Paul offered her one of his stogies. "We don't have time for this. Let's move it, people!" Travis clapped his hands together, twice. Paul reached across the dirt patch and lit Tate's cigarette for her. Then, everyone began to dig like crazy. They stabbed wet earth with their shovels, reeled back, and slopped it out of the way. Then, they dove in for more. They weren't bad for a bunch of stoners. Travis stomped inch after inch of dirt out of the way. He watched everyone like a hawk. When the hole looked deep enough, he stabbed the blade of his shovel into a patch of mud, leaving the handle sticking out of the ground. He rolled his tongue back, closed his lips around his pinkies,

and whistled. Everyone stopped digging and looked up. Travis pointed at Gary, who was on the other side of the hole. “Time?” he demanded.

Gary pulled out his pocket watch and flipped it open. “One thirty-two,” he proudly reported.

“Nice,” Travis remarked. “Let’s bury her.” Everyone stabbed their shovels into the mud and gathered around Hailey’s body. They each snagged a piece of trash bag. “One, two, three...” Travis called out. Everyone lifted her body and hurried it to the hole. Joe, Paul, and Tommy had the unfortunate duty of stepping over the hole. They managed to do so without incident. Then, everyone lowered Hailey into the ground as gingerly as possible. It was a simple matter of tossing everything else on top after that. Once Hailey and her belongings were in the ground, everyone returned to their shovels. “Time?” Travis demanded.

“One thirty-seven,” Gary replied.

“Far out,” Travis remarked. “Hell, we might finish early!” Jennifer and Tate started laughing. Travis and the others quickly shoveled dirt on top. “No laughing,” Travis playfully warned them. “Just burying.” The girls managed to calm down then joined everyone else. The group shoveled in a mad frenzy. By 1:50, Hailey and any evidence that might connect them to her had disappeared. Everyone returned their shovels to the bed of Travis’ pickup, and Travis slammed his tailgate. He turned to face his friends. “Good job, guys,” he told them. He looked around. “Let’s drop these shovels off at the church real quick, and then we can...”

Vicky shoved Travis into his tailgate. “We killed that poor girl, Travis!”

He threw his hands up at his sides. “Yeah? That *was* the general idea, wasn’t it?”

“Well, I don’t care!” she shouted back. “We could’ve just beat her up or something. We could’ve just scared her. You saw how scared she was of us! She wouldn’t have said anything

to anyone!” Paul placed his hands on Vicky’s shoulders. Vicky pointed an angry finger at Travis. “She never would’ve messed with your little Jenny-poo again. We didn’t have to kill her!”

Travis stared back through a condescending smile. “Well, first of all, *we* didn’t kill her. *He* did.” Travis turned and pointed at Paul. “And, as for my little ‘Jenny-poo’...” He turned and lifted her blue sweater and white undershirt. He did it gingerly. “...perhaps you’d like to have a look at Exhibit A.” Vicky looked her friend’s torso over. Her pale skin was littered with shoe sized spots of black, purple, and red.

“Bruises fade,” Vicky replied. Paul patted her on the shoulder. He stood at her side, now. Travis’ condescending smile faded. He dropped his girlfriend’s shirt and sweater and stared Vicky down. Then, he reeled back and popped her right in the nose. Vicky fell on her back on the drying grass. Paul watched her all the way to the ground. Joe and Tommy knelt down to help her. Paul took a breath through his nose then turned to Travis. He plucked his blue shades from his eyes and stared into Travis’ grinning face. He folded his shades neatly and placed them in the front pocket of his red, plaid jacket.

“What?” Travis asked with a shrug. Paul snagged a hold of Travis’ testicles with one hand and grasped him around the throat with the other. Travis’ expression of confidence was replaced with a look of panic. Paul lifted him off the ground and shoved him against the tailgate of his truck. Gary grabbed a hold of Paul’s arm.

“Whoa, Paul! Calm down, man!” Paul jerked towards him. He smashed him in the nose with the side of his head. A sharp, tingling pain shot across Gary’s face, and he released his grip. Travis gazed into his buddy’s eyes. Paul covered them for a reason. He had *heterochromia iridis*. His left eye was a dark shade of brown, but his right eye was a pale shade of teal. His

stare was hideous and intimidating.

“You listening?” Paul asked in a calm, piercing timbre. Travis grabbed a hold of Paul’s wrist and stared back. Paul’s multi colored gaze intensified. He tightened his grip on Travis’ testicles. Travis squealed and released Paul’s wrist. His arm dropped lazily at his side. Gary’s nose was gushing blood.

“God dab, Paul!” he shrieked. He pinched his nose shut. Tate placed her hand on his back and looked him over with concern.

“Listen to me, *fucker!*” Paul growled.

“Alright!” Travis cried. Paul looked down at Vicky. She was sitting up. Blood leaked from her nostrils like a faucet. Tommy sat at her right, patting her on the shoulder. Joe sat at her left, trying to calm her down. Paul turned his freakish glare back to Travis.

“If I ever see you hit her again,” he assured him, “I’ll rip your little, teeny, tiny balls off.” Paul tightened his vise like grip on his testicles a bit more. Then, he lifted him a little higher. Travis pinched his eyes shut. A look of agony danced across his face. He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Jennifer threw her fists down at her sides.

“Paul, stop it!” She shoved him in the ribs. “You put my boyfriend down, NOW!” Paul turned to her then slowly set Travis down. He relinquished his hellish hold on his testicles. A look of intense gratitude washed over Travis’ face. Paul retrieved his blue shades from his pocket and tossed them on his face. Then, he walked over to Vicky and knelt in front of her. Blood fell from her nostrils. Tears fell from her eyes. She looked into the blue lenses of his shades. Paul’s jacket was open. He reached inside and ripped off a piece of his worn out, punk rock t-shirt. Afterwards, he tilted Vicky’s head back and held the chunk of black shirt to her nose. Vicky closed her eyes and placed a shaking hand on top of his. Paul wiped tears from her

eyes with a curled index finger then returned it to the back of her head. Joe grinned and slugged Paul in the shoulder. Then, he and Tommy stood and backed away. Vicky wiggled her little fingers around Paul's. She took the piece of shirt from him and held it herself. Paul smiled, sweeping his hand away. He gently brushed away strands of her brown, shoulder length hair. They wafted across her face in a slight wind that rolled across the vacant lot.

"Give me your keys, school girl," Paul whispered. *"I'll drive us back."* Vicky opened her eyes and gazed at him. She turned her head and looked away. Then, she reached down the front of her shirt and black vest. She retrieved the keys from her brazier and held them up for him. "Oooo!" Paul barked through a grin. He snagged the keys from her then slithered to his feet. He offered Vicky his hand. She took it, holding the piece of shirt to her nose, and pulled herself to her feet. Joe and Tommy took their usual seats in the back of Vicky's Station Cruiser. Vicky hopped into the front, passenger seat. Paul turned to Travis, Jennifer, Gary, and Tate. Travis held his nuts with one hand and Jennifer's hand with the other. Gary flipped his head up at him. Tate wiped blood from his nose with a tissue. "Alright guys," Paul told them, "let's go get these shovels put up. Then, we can head back to class." He slid into Vicky's driver's seat, fired up the engine, and cranked down the window. He retrieved his smokes from his pocket, plucked one out, and handed it to Vicky. He also popped one in his mouth. Then, he turned and lit Vicky's cigarette. He watched Travis and the others as he lit his own. They were in Travis' truck now. The back two doors were shutting, and Travis was starting the pickup. He threw it into drive and skidded up to the road. Paul followed suit.

"You're right, you know?" Paul remarked. He and Travis merged onto the Patrick Peterson, headed east. Vicky flipped her sun visor down and looked at herself in the tiny mirror. She wiped all the blood from her face with the piece of Paul's t-shirt then wiggled her nose. She

flipped the visor up.

“Right about what?” she asked.

Paul shook his head, staring at the road. “Just doesn’t make any sense, killing that poor girl...”

“Yeah.” Vicky sniffed a little blood up her nostrils. “Yeah, that’s all I was trying to say.” Joe leaned forward from the rear, right seat. His head popped up between them.

“Travis sayud she was some kind of styalker or some shit.”

Paul turned to him with a nod. “Yeah, I heard him say that. I wonder what she did to him, like...exactly.” Joe folded his fingers together below his chin. An inquisitive look crossed his face. He turned to Paul.

“You think she tried to kidnyap him or something like that?”

Paul smiled and shook his head. “Man, that...” He turned to Vicky, pointing his thumb. “Hailey, right?” Vicky nodded. He glanced at the road then turned to Joe. “Man she wasn’t kidnapping nobody. She wouldn’t have kidnapped someone’s dog.”

“I think you’re right there Paul, mayun,” Joe agreed. He nodded then eased into his seat. He interlocked his fingers behind his head, leaned back, and stretched his arms out. Paul adjusted the rearview mirror. He stared at his buddy, Tommy. He was at the other side of the back seat.

“You alright back there, Tommy?” he asked. “You haven’t said a word since...” Paul thought for a moment. He turned around and looked at him. “Damn, dude! What’s wrong with *you*?”

Joe turned to him. “Yeah, mayun. You alright over they-uh, buddy?” Tommy crossed his arms over his chest. He turned and gazed through his window. “Tommy?!”

Tommy stared into space. “*She ain’t no STALKER*,” he mumbled under his breath.

“What?” Paul asked from the driver’s seat.

Tommy faced forward and leaned back in his seat. “Let’s get this finished up.”

Joe shook his head, staring at his friend in bewilderment. “I’ve seen you do a lot of things, Tommy. I’ve *never* seen you not talk before.”

“Yeah, man,” Paul added. “Finally got you to shut the hell up. All it took was killing somebody.”

Chapter 9: “A Comet”

Comets are giant balls of ice, dust, and rock that drift through space. Some have regular orbits around the sun and are visible from Earth. Comets are distinct from meteors because of two features, a coma and a tail. A coma is a temporary atmosphere that appears when a comet is close to a vast heat source, such as the sun. A tail sometimes accompanies a coma. This phenomenon is attributed to solar winds and intense heat that can only reach the comet when it is very close to a star. Basically, the main body of the comet, known as the nucleus, begins to break up and fly off. The high speed at which comets travel and their fragile composition results in a tail, which is sometimes miles long. The majority of the comets that can be viewed from Earth were formed during the formation of the solar system. However, some comets come from billions of billions of miles away. They originate in deep space, in cold, dark, unimaginable forests of vast dust fields and clusters of ice. They soar across the universe at mind bending speeds. Their trajectories are impossible to fathom. Their journeys are long and unyielding.

Such a comet whizzed by the planet at 8:30 the night Travis and his friends put poor, little Hailey Holloway in the ground. It had come from the very edge of the universe. It had traveled beyond the reaches of known reality and then some. Its journey was in just such a way at just such a speed that it passed by at *that* very moment on *that* particular night. It was a giant ball of ice with a tail thirty miles long. That enormous sheet of rainbow colored, other worldly debris passed within 500,000 miles of the planet. That’s about twice the distance from the earth to the moon. Such a spectacle would have been marvelous, a once in a millennium sight. Unfortunately, no one even knew it happened. Due to the comet’s oddly shaped trajectory, the only place to view it from would have been the city of Malley or somewhere close. The entire area was covered with thick, dark clouds at the time. Also, all the scientists supposedly watching

for such things with fancy gadgets and computer software, holding their intelligence high above everyone else's, had absolutely no idea the massive object even existed. They never even saw it. It *did* pass by though, odd as the event was.

Perhaps that's why what happened next happened next. Who knows? Maybe Paul didn't strangle her long enough. Maybe she passed out from a shortage of oxygen to her beaten and spiritually exhausted brain, giving her the appearance of being dead. A trapped pocket of air in the dirt that covered her may have provided her with just enough oxygen to get her through the next few hours. Who's to say? Perhaps there *was* no comet in the first place. Think about it. According to the scenario, there's no proof there ever was. No one ever checked for a pulse. Who checks for a pulse on a bloody body dangling from a rope by the neck? The point is, at 8:30 in the *post meridiem*, comet or no comet, air pocket or no air pocket, Hailey began to stir in her shallow grave. She wiggled her fingers and toes. She furrowed her brow. She didn't understand what was going on. There was a huge weight upon her. She felt thin, plastic bags touching her bare flesh on all sides. She felt her backpack lying atop her chest. She had a feeling she knew what was going on. She tried to remain calm. She wriggled as many digits as she could. Before long, she could move her arms from side to side. Then, her legs came leisurely loose. She mustered up as much strength as she could. She pinched her eyes closed and plowed through the pile of mud and loose dirt that covered her.

Hailey found herself sitting in a patch of mud, buried to her breasts. The mud and dirt had piled in behind her as she came up. She was greeted with a torrent of rain. It was freezing cold, but in a way it felt kind of refreshing. She sat there for a minute, holding her red backpack against her chest, buried in muck. She had no idea where she was or how she had gotten there. She squinted and looked down at her black bra. "Um," she muttered, "okay..." She scrambled

out of the mud. Then, she hugged her backpack against her wet skin and scurried to the edge of the road. She looked around. Her surroundings were blurry and unfamiliar without her glasses. There wasn't much to see. A few yellow blobs of light floated above the side of the road behind her. "*Streetlights...*" Hailey muttered under her breath. They were pretty much the only signs of civilization around. "Let's see. What's the last thing I remember?" She leaned against the hill that led to the road, legs stretched in front of her. She caught a blurry glimpse of her rainbow colored socks. Mud was washing away from them. She pinched her eyes shut, with a gasp. Her mind was flooded with imagery. She saw little fragments of Travis and his friends attacking her. She remembered light bulbs smashing across her flesh, baseball bats battering her body, being bound and tortured, terrifying faces tormenting her with scornful remarks...

"AAAAAAA!" Hailey shrieked into the dark, rainy night. She fell across her backpack. She slapped her hands over her eyes and bawled. "*Oh, God!*" she sobbed through her arms. She cried for a couple of minutes. Then, she pulled herself together and leaned against the side of the road. She stared at her backpack. It sat in her lap. She noticed it was fuller than usual. Out of curiosity, she ripped it open and looked inside. She smiled through tears at the sight of her glasses. She eagerly retrieved them and placed them on her face. She also caught sight of her pink blouse. She immediately threw it on as well. She had always been a little bashful. She sat up and looked around for some kind of shelter. Anything would be better than where she was. She slid off her rainbow socks and wrung them out. She continued to gaze at the nothingness around her. She shook her head, rolled her socks into one another, and chucked them into her backpack. She found her black, canvas shoes and took them out. Then, she threw them on her feet and turned to stand.

Pain sprinted across Hailey's body. She winced with a groan. She threw her backpack to

the side, planted her hands on top, and used it to help her up. She squinted, scanning the horizon. She turned around on a pair of throbbing knees and wobbly legs. She spotted the headlights of cars in the distance. She figured that was probably the Patrick Peterson freeway. Hailey bent over and retrieved her black and white, striped jacket from her backpack with an agonizing moan. She threw it over her bloody blouse and tossed the hood over her head. Then, she zipped her backpack closed and tossed it over her aching shoulders. She scrambled to the road. Rain continued to pummel her. She began to think of it as a giant waterfall that decanted across the city of Malley. She looked down. The horrendous rain had already washed the majority of the dirt and blood from her skin and clothes.

Hailey inched towards the freeway. She began to shiver. She narrowed her eyes and stared through cascading sheets of rain. The Patrick Peterson was a good distance away. It was about half a mile, she figured. There was no telling how far she was from home. She didn't even know what time it was. She figured it was probably after eight. Hailey hugged herself and rubbed her arms to stir up what little warmth she could. She stopped rubbing and had a look at her hands. They were all sliced up. She rolled up her sleeves and checked out her arms. They were covered with cuts where tiny particles of smashed light tubes had danced across her flesh. The good news was that none of the cuts were bleeding. And, they were already healing. Hailey noticed rows of red and purple rings up and down her wrists. They were bruises where her wrists had been bound again and again. She stopped walking, tossed her backpack on the ground, and knelt down to unzip a compartment on the side. She produced a small makeup kit. She cupped her hands over it and opened it. She looked at herself in the tiny mirror inside the lid.

Her face had cuts on it as well. They too were already healing. She snapped the makeup

case closed. Then, she tossed it into the side compartment of her rain soaked backpack and slowly stood up. She winced. Aching pain shot through her body. She took a couple of deep breaths. She gently rolled up the bottom of her jacket and lifted her blouse. Her midsection was frightful. It was covered with blue, red, and black welts. They were bruises from baseball bats. The same miniscule cuts from the light bulbs were there as well. Hailey shook her head. She dropped the bottoms of her jacket and shirt and retrieved her backpack. She flung the red bag of books over her shoulders and continued towards the Patrick Peterson. Rain was coming down in sheets. In a way, it was soothing to her battered body, kind of like a massage. But, it hurt at times. Maybe it was more like an oriental massage. Periodically, she reached behind the lenses of her glasses and wiped away fog and water droplets with her pointer fingers. Then, she returned her little hands to their opposing arms, hugging herself and shivering.

Hailey just wanted to get home. She had never wanted to be home so badly in her life. She wanted to be dry and warm again. She wanted to snuggle beneath her yellow and black, plaid comforter with her stuffed, calico kitten squished in her arms. Then again, she had never wanted to *not* be home so badly in her life. She pinched her eyes closed. Larry ran through her thoughts. She shuddered more than she shivered. Lightning and thunder tore across the sky. Hailey crouched down with a whimper. Then, she looked up. She stared at chaotic bolts through a pair of wide, green eyes. The event only lasted a few seconds. Afterwards, little orange squiggles remained in her field of vision. They mimicked the blue ones that had been in the sky prior. “Whoa!” she shrieked. She lost her balance and fell on her butt. The weight of her backpack had gotten the better of her. She reached behind the lenses of her glasses and rubbed the orange flashes from her eyes. Then, she staggered to her feet.

Hailey searched the landscape through buckets of tumbling rain. There wasn’t much to

look at. Flat plains of dirt dotted with patches of long, yellow grass stretched along either side of the road. She squinted, scanning the plains. She was able to make out other lonely roads that lay parallel hers. They were all deserted. The only thing she could make out was an old, decrepit tree on her right. It stood leafless and scraggly against the lights of distance city streets reflecting across the sky. She watched the right hand sky. A fishnet of lightning bolts burst from the horizon and crawled up raging black clouds. She faced forward. She had made some progress, but there was a quarter mile to go before she would reach the freeway.

Hailey was fed up. She hooked her thumbs under the straps of her backpack. She began to jog across the slippery, deserted pavement. Rain battered her in a fury. Its incessant pounding increased slightly in ferocity due to her sudden change in pace. She grimaced. Her battered body wailed under the added strain. She ran faster. She made it halfway across the quarter mile, leaving an eighth. Then, there was a sixteenth, then a thirty-second, a sixty-fourth, a one-twenty-eighth, a two-fifty-sixth, a five-twelfth, a ten-twenty-fourth— Hailey slipped and fell on her stomach. She skidded to a stop a few feet from the edge of the freeway. Her backpack pitched forward and smashed into the back of her head. She groaned, clutching the back of her aching skull. Passing cars roared across the freeway in front of her. The P-series racing through her mind had screwed up her simple jog. “*One foot in front of the other, Hailey,*” she moaned. She planted her hands on the wet pavement and pushed herself to her feet.

The Patrick Peterson was a welcome sight. But, when Hailey looked to her right, she frowned. She could tell that direction led into town because the right hand sky was lit by city lights. She could also tell she was staring down the west side of the freeway because of a sign on her side of the road. It read “Highway 1812, West.” Unfortunately, there was nothing but pavement all the way to the horizon. She was on the outskirts of Malley, maybe ten miles or

more. Her house on Cherry Lane was three miles into town from there. She was so far out, the signs referred to the freeway by its state issued number, 1812. Hailey dropped her head and blew out a hopeless sigh. She yanked her spectacles off her face and rubbed her eyelids in frustration. It was going to be a long walk. In this rain, no one was going to stop and give her a ride. Just opening the door to let her in might ruin their upholstery.

Hailey tossed her glasses back on and headed into town. She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself with a shiver. A couple of people honked their horns as they drove by. Hailey glared as they passed. Their curious faces were lit up with grins of ridicule. "*Jerks*," she muttered under her breath. She stomped across the squishy ground at the edge of the freeway. She hobbled along. Rain dribbled on her hooded head the whole way. She felt lonely. She ached all over from Travis and the others beating the crap out of her. She imagined being at home...at home with her family. Hailey wrinkled her nose in disgust. She imagined being at home, lying in a warm bubble bath. She imagined the heat of the water against her skin. She imagined peering out. The lights were off. The room was dotted with candles.

A car pulled up next to her on the side of the road. Hailey stopped in her tracks and timidly turned her head. It was an older car, an eighties model Cammy with a fading blue paintjob. Hailey was frozen. She stared at it, expecting it to explode or something. She recognized the driver from her psychology class, but she could not recall his name. Hailey stared at him. He gazed back. She reached for the door handle then quickly pulled her hand back in hesitation. The driver threw his hands out at his sides with a smile.

"*What?*" he asked through the window. She didn't waste another second. She threw the door open, hopped inside, and slammed it shut. Hailey let out an exhausted sigh then slowly turned to the driver. Water dripped from her face and the squishy ends of her fiery hair. "The

hell're you doing out in *this* mess?" he asked. Hailey ripped off her backpack and dropped it on the floorboard. She shook her head then turned to him.

"Look, could you just..." she began. She faced forward. "I don't have anything," she explained. "Money, I mean."

The driver faced forward. "Where are you headed?"

"*Home...*" Hailey groaned. She leaned back in her seat with a sigh. The driver threw his stick shifter into first and skidded onto the freeway. He turned to her.

"Where's that?" Hailey leaned forward and hugged herself with a shiver. "Jeez man, you alright?" He flipped on the heater then shifted from second to third. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Your name's Hailey, right?" Hailey met his eyes with a nod. He turned back to the road. "My name's Lloyd."

"Yeah," Hailey remarked, reaching for her safety belt. "Yeah, that's right. You're in my psychology class." She buckled her seatbelt and looked up.

"So, you got ditched out here or what?" Lloyd asked.

Hailey shook her head, facing forward. "I don't wanna– Can you just take me home, please?" She kicked off her wet shoes. She rubbed her hands together in front of the heater vents. Lloyd glanced at her floorboard. She was patting the tops of her shoes with a pair of nervous feet. He met her eyes.

"Sure. Where's that?"

"Cherry Lane."

"You got it. Headed that way anyway." He snatched up a pack of cigarettes from a compartment below the stereo. He flipped the top back and offered her one. "Smoke?"

"Knock yourself out," she replied. She looked at her seat. It was covered with blue

vinyl. It was shredded and decrepit. Water had begun to pool at the sides of her legs. It soaked into tufts of squishy yellow foam that poked out in places. Hailey grinned. “I’m going to ruin your beautiful...” Lloyd turned to her. He plucked a lit cigarette from his lips and let out a drag.

“Huh?”

Hailey smiled back. “Thanks for picking me up, man.”

“Hey, thanks for riding with me,” he replied. He flicked his CD player on. Hailey listened with intent. She recognized the tune.

“Hey, that’s what Travis was...”

Lloyd turned down the volume. “What’s up?”

Hailey pointed at the stereo. “Who is this?”

“YKC,” he replied. “You like?”

Hailey shrugged. “Reminds me of someone.” Lloyd took a drag of his cigarette. He turned and flicked ash through the top of his window. It was down just a crack.

“Damn rain, man. It’s like driving through a swimming pool.” He turned to her. “How far did you walk in this?” Hailey gazed into his brown eyes and let out a short laugh.

“A ways, buddy,” she assured him. “Half a mile, probably.”

Lloyd faced forward, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, man. Who was it...left you out here? You want me to kick their ass for you?” Hailey snickered. She figured by now that it must be too dark for him to see the cuts that littered her face. Either that or he was just being polite.

“Thanks, Lloyd,” Hailey replied. “Maybe some other time.” Fifteen minutes later, Lloyd pulled up to Hailey’s house. He parked next to the sidewalk at the edge of the overgrown front yard. Hailey peered through the slowing rain. She searched for one thing and one thing alone, Larry’s car. It was nowhere in sight. Her mother’s S.U.V. sat alone in the driveway at the left

side of the house. Hailey turned to Lloyd, and Lloyd killed the engine. “Lloyd, you are the man.”

Lloyd smiled, waving her thanks away. “It’s not a problem. I was going this way anyway.”

“Where *are* you going?” she inquired. Lloyd turned away. He scratched the back of his head, scanning Hailey’s unfamiliar neighborhood. “Uh-huh,” she added with a satisfied smirk. Lloyd turned to her. With a nervous breath, he reached in front of her and popped open his glove box.

“Look, Hailey...” he began. He retrieved a little notepad and a pencil from the glove box. “...I was thinking. Maybe you could like...” He looked up then down at his notepad. He began to scratch something down. He stopped writing and looked up, inquisitively. He pointed at her with the eraser of his pencil. “You don’t have a boyfriend, do you?” Hailey giggled from the floorboard. She was slipping her black, canvas shoes on. She turned to him with a grin.

“Nope.”

“Oh,” Lloyd remarked. “Yeah...that’s good.” He tore the page he was writing on from his notepad. “Because I was thinking...” He held out the tiny piece of paper. Hailey popped up from the floor and snatched it from his shaking fingers. “...maybe you could give me a call sometime? We could go catch a flick or something.” Hailey nodded, reading the note he had handed her. He had written his name and number on it. “You know...if this little car ride wasn’t *too* unpleasant for you.” Hailey smiled, meeting his eyes once more. “Or, maybe if you need me to kick those guys’ asses for you after all.”

“Yeah...” Hailey replied through a snicker. She bent down, retrieved her backpack, and tossed Lloyd’s number inside. Then, she threw her backpack over her shoulders. “Yeah, *those*

bastards...” Hailey took Lloyd’s hand. She stared at him above the rims of her glasses. “I think that would be great,” she told him. “I *will* call you.” She turned and popped her door open. It was still pouring down rain. She reluctantly stepped out.

“Wait, which part?” Lloyd asked. Hailey was already shutting the door. She stopped abruptly.

“Huh?”

“Which part would be great? The flick or the ass-kicking?”

“Ha!” Hailey shrieked. She turned and thought about her response. She looked him in the eyes. “I guess you’ll find out when I call you.” She waited for Lloyd’s reaction. It turned out to be a single nod with a pair of squinted eyes. She slammed the door shut. “Thanks, Lloyd!” she shouted through the window. With a friendly smile and a wave good-bye, she turned and jogged to the front door. Lloyd watched her go. Then, he fired up his engine and pulled away from the curb. Hailey opened the floppy screen door and turned to watch *him*. He did a U-turn in the middle of the road and drove back to the freeway. He turned on his left turn signal once he had reached the end of Cherry Lane. She smiled. He was headed back the way they had come. She turned and tried the knob on the front door. Oddly enough, she found it unlocked.

Chapter 10: “Homecoming”

There’s a feeling people get before things go awry. They have no indication that anything is wrong. Yet, they sense it just the same. Hair stands on end. Eyes dart around. People scan their surroundings, suspiciously. Somehow, they sense impending doom even in the absence of physical signs. People aren’t alone in this phenomenon. Dogs have been known to growl before an intruder kicks in a door. Cats have been known to hiss. Perhaps it is a trick of the mind. Maybe a person *thought* they had no indication of danger, but they actually did. Maybe a noise or smell went unnoticed by the conscious mind, yet was somehow picked up by the unconscious mind. Perhaps the subconscious is able to communicate this to the conscious mind in some way. It doesn’t always happen, though.

Maybe some possess the power to perceive approaching danger, and some do not. Maybe Hailey was one of the ones who could not. Maybe there were no cues for her unconscious mind to pick up on, leaving her conscious mind dead in the water. There can’t always be a warning, right? Perhaps she was too worn out. It had been a long day. Whatever the reason, Hailey had no idea of the horror unfolding in her living room until she threw the front door open. There was Larry. There was no warning, no way to know. Larry’s car hadn’t even been out front. Yet, there he was in her living room. The back of his t-shirt glowed in the dimness of the room like a hard rock harbinger of death. Hailey reached behind her back. She snagged a hold of the floppy screen door just before it slammed shut. With her other hand, she grabbed a hold of the knob on the front door. She prevented it from swinging open any further. If it *had* gone any further, the hinges would have begun to squeal.

Hailey eased the screen door forward, allowing it to quietly settle in its frame. Her eyes widened. She gazed upon the macabre scene. Larry held a bloody axe over his head with both

hands. The head of the axe dangled down his spine. With a grunt, he swung the axe at her mother's bloody body. It was sprawled out on the tan carpet. The axe swooshed to the floor, chopping her right arm off at the shoulder. Hailey shuddered. She looked through the gap between Larry's legs. She stared at her mother's twisted, blood spattered face. Her expression reflected agony and strain. Her tongue dangled from her mouth. She had obviously been strangled by a person with rather large, catcher's mitt hands. Now, he was attempting to dismember her and get rid of the evidence. Hailey was at her breaking point. Someone was going to pay...for something.

Hailey pinched her eyes shut. She stopped shuddering. Then, her eyes popped open, angry, green, and penetrating. Without further ado, she quietly slipped her soaking wet backpack off her shoulders and set it on the floor. She slipped off her black, canvas shoes and set them beside her backpack. Then, she crept across the carpeted living room floor towards the kitchen. Larry had no idea she was even there. He didn't notice that the sound of the rain had increased in volume due to the front door being ajar. He wasn't too observant at the moment. He was still grim with Helen's untimely demise. He was stumbling around in a drunken stupor. He was desperate to cover up his little mistake. He lifted the axe high above his head. He had chopped off both of Helen's arms. Now, he was aiming for her right leg. Hailey didn't even flinch at the sound of the axe slicing through the air. It crashed through her mother's hip joint with a bony crack followed by a carpeted thud. Hailey quietly slid across the cold kitchen floor to the counter beside the sink. That's where her mother kept the knives. Five of them stuck out of a wooden holster next to the steel sink. The sink was filled with weeks of dirty dishes. They filled the area around it with a foul odor.

Hailey slipped her bony fingers around the slick, white handle of a butcher's knife. She

slid the blade from its wooden sarcophagus. Then, she turned to face her mother's sadistic sweetheart. She flipped the knife in her hand, so that the blade was facing up. She crept across the kitchen. Lightning burst through the windows. Hailey reached the living room followed by a rumbling thunder. She slithered across the carpet towards her massive prey. Larry chopped off her mother's last limb with a thud. Then, he set his sights upon her neck. With five final steps, Hailey was at Larry's back. She gazed at the band's logo on the back of his t-shirt. She filled with anxious fury. She hated the thought that his t-shirt lay close enough for her to read it. Like Larry or any of his stupid, drunken buddies could even read. It made her sick. *He* made her sick. Her stomach began to churn. Hailey let out a throaty cry. She slid the butcher's knife into Larry's family jewels with a satisfying squish.

"BAAAAAAAAA!" Larry wailed. He dropped the axe on the carpet with a heave. A blinding, slicing pain erupted in his bowels. He writhed in dismay. It was absolutely unbearable. With a twist of the blade, blood began to gush from his genitals. It pooled on the carpet at Hailey's bare feet. "Oooooooo..." Larry squealed from the back of his throat. He bent over with a cringe. Hailey was calm and collected.

"Now you know how *I* feel," she told him. "You stuck yours in mine. Now, I've stuck mine in yours." She twisted the knife the other direction. Larry let out a quick shout.

"Payback's a bitch, ain't it?"

"Oh, God..." Larry moaned. "Hailey, I'm so SORRY!"

"Got that right!" she shouted back. She jerked the knife out of his testicles. Larry fell to his knees, clutching his crotch. Blood gushed through his thick fingers. Hailey snagged a hold of what little hair clung to Larry's balding head and jerked his head back. She plopped her chin on his shoulder, resting her face next to his. "*You sorry mother fucker...*" she whispered. With

her free hand, she sliced Larry's throat with the bloody butcher knife. Blood poured from Larry's neck. He opened his mouth to speak then went limp. He pitched forward in a heap. His terrified face fell right on top of Hailey's mother's breasts with a fleshy smack.

Hailey began to shake. She stared at the bloody stack of death that lay before her. She dropped the knife at her side, taking it all in. Her eyes darted around the room. She looked from the blood soaked crotch of Larry's light wash blue jeans, to the twisted look of terror swirled across her mother's face. She stared at her mother's dismembered right arm. It lay in a pool of blood on the tan carpet. Her fingers were curled up at the ends. Hailey threw her bloody hands over her mouth. Her eyes snapped shut, and she stared at the back of her eyelids. She noticed a cool breeze blowing past her. She whirled her head around and looked behind her. She flew across the living room at the sight of the wide open front door. She smacked it shut with her elbow so as not to get blood on the knob. Then, she turned back to Larry and her mother and gazed at them. She skidded towards the bathroom down the hall. There, she flicked on the lights and darted across the white tile floor. She fell to her knees in front of the toilet and let loose with a few dry heaves. She would've thrown up, but she had hardly eaten all day.

Hailey planted her palms on the floor and sat back on her heels. She stared at the ceiling, shaking her head from side to side. She closed her eyes. She slid her fingers beneath the lenses of her glasses and rubbed her eyes. She felt flush. Hailey tore her jacket off. She tossed it into the clothes hamper to the left of the toilet. Her head turned to the right. She stared at the open doorway at the end of the bathroom. She crossed her arms over one another then slid her skinny fingers up and down her biceps. A snapshot of her mother's dismembered body flashed in front of her eyes. She tore her glasses off her face and held them in her hand by the earpiece. Then, she buried her face in her hands.

Hailey let loose with a couple of quiet sobs. Then, she decided it was time to assess the situation. She was a murderer, now. It was fine time she started acting like one. She put her glasses back on and held her hands in front of her face. They were covered with blood. She sighed. She staggered to her feet and stumbled to the mirror. There were little, bloody handprints smeared all over her face. Her face was decorated with a bouquet of thin lacerations. They were remnants of light tubes being smashed over her head. She tossed her glasses on the countertop, jerked back the faucet handles, and plunged her bloody fingers into a stream of warm water. She rinsed her hands then leaned over and patted some water on her face. She flicked water off her fingers. Then, she walked to the bathtub and snagged a squirt of her peach body wash. She returned to the sink and scrubbed her bloody fingers. She used the remaining suds to scour the blood off her face. She rinsed her hands and face then patted them dry with her bath towel from that morning. Afterwards, she straightened it in the towel rod above the throne. She returned her spectacles to their rightful place and looked in the mirror.

Hailey gingerly slid her fingers across her throat. There were purple and red rings around it. She held her hands in front of her. There were similar rings around her wrists. She stared at them and gently rubbed them with opposing fingers. She looked into the mirror and rolled up the bottom of her pink blouse. She sucked air through her teeth. She slid her fingers across her bruised, battered, sliced up body. It was hideous. Her chest and stomach were painted with an array of red, purple, and black baseball bat bashes. It looked much worse in the light of her bathroom than it had on the side of the road. She closed her eyes in dismay. She dropped her blouse and smoothed it against her body. She wanted to go ahead and take that bubble bath. She wished so badly to relax and wind down for the day. Unfortunately, she had a lot more work to do before the day would end. She walked to the hamper, retrieved her black and white, striped

jacket, and threw it on. “Might as well,” she remarked. She flicked off the bathroom light and strolled into the hallway. “I’m already dirty, anyway.”

Lightning flashed through the windows. It was followed by a rumbling thunder that shook the house. Hailey stood at the front door. She stared at the two bloody bodies in her living room. She looked away from Larry and bits of her mother, poring over the rest of the room. It was in shambles. The main couch stood at the opposite wall. The loveseat stood to the left, perpendicular to it. It was black to match the larger couch. They were both squishy and worn out. Cigarette burns here and there suggested they had needed to be replaced for a good, long while. Hailey turned to a beat up, old, wooden coffee table in the center of the room. Her mother had purchased it at a garage sale four years prior. It had replaced the glass one that Larry had tossed her through. To the left was a stack of twelve pizza boxes. It wasn’t even an organized stack. Each box was turned at a different angle than the one above it. Some of the lids were open; some were closed; and two were ripped off.

To the right of the table, beer bottles were scattered about. Some were empty; some were half full; and some were turned on their sides. On top of the table were a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of vodka, both half gone. There were two glass ashtrays. Both had needed to be emptied for some time. They were filled with cigarette butts. They stuck out of a mountain of ash that was scattered across the table. It had been constructed bit by bit every time anyone had laughed too hard or sneezed. There were more pizza boxes along the floor around the table. There were also a few pieces of pizza. They had been there long enough to grow mold. More beer bottles littered the carpet in that area as well. Some sat on their sides atop dried puddles where beer had poured onto the carpet.

Basically, Hailey looked at everything but the bodies. She snapped out of it and strode

into the kitchen. She hoped to find some trash liners. She was going to need plenty of them to clean up this 350 pound mess. She skidded to the pantry. It was to the left of the sink. She popped the door open. The smell of rotting garbage came roaring out like a kick in the chest. It was beyond putrid. The trashcan was overflowing. The floor of the pantry was basically the trashcan, now. There was so much garbage, it came tumbling out when Hailey opened the door. This was good news, though. It meant the trash hadn't been taken out in a while. The liners would have hardly been used. There should have been plenty of them.

Hailey squinted and backed away. She waved the smell from her face with a gag. She glanced into the pantry and spotted a brand new box of trash liners. They had a big trashcan, so they had big liners. It was a wonderful sight, perhaps the most wonderful sight Hailey had gazed upon all day. She took a deep breath and crept up to the smelly closet. She stood on her tip-toes and snatched the box of liners from the top shelf. She tossed the liners on the floor then closed the pantry. She picked up bits of garbage with the tips of her index finger and thumb. She turned her head to the side and winced. She tossed them on top of the pile inside the closet. Then, she eagerly slammed the door shut. She knelt down and retrieved the liners from the white, tile floor.

Hailey returned to the living room once more. Her feet swept across the cold carpet. She punched open the box of liners. Then, she tore eight liners from the box and laid them flat on the floor. She arranged them two by four then set the box next to them. They were black liners with yellow pull tie loops at either side of the opening. They were perfect for cleaning up a murder scene. Hailey approached Larry and her mother. She bent over and grabbed a hold of Larry's body. She pinched her eyes shut. She shook with hesitation. Her mind screamed at the sensation of Larry's dead, unmoving flesh below her fingertips. It was still warm. She turned

her head to the side and swallowed hard. She threw her hand over her mouth and gagged. She took a deep breath. Then, a look of determination crossed her face. Her eyes popped open, and she turned to Larry. She snagged his hard rock t-shirt in her fingertips and reeled back. She slowly rolled him out of the way of her mother's torso. He was heavy, about 250 pounds Hailey figured. "This is going to be one hell of a night," she remarked. His body tumbled to the floor with a thud. It fell next to what was left of her mother.

Hailey sighed. She stared into her mother's terrified, blood spattered face. It filled her with emotions. "Dammit, Mom. I told you to stay away from that...piece of shit." She turned and flipped Larry off. "I hope you're happy!" she screamed at his body. It lay face down on the floor. She faced her mother. Her torso was completely naked. It bled onto the tan carpet. Hailey rolled her torso across the floor then across the trash liners. She rolled it all the way to the last two of them. Afterwards, she walked around the liners and up to the axe. It lay on the floor next to Larry. She scooped it up and returned to her mother's torso. She stared at her mother's lifeless face through a pair of narrow eyes. She took a breath, reeled back, and chopped off her head with one, swift swoop. It tumbled away from Helen's torso, stopping at the far edge of the upper trash liner.

Hailey breathed heavily. Her heart began to beat faster. She leaned the axe against the wall. Then, she walked over and gathered up the rest of her mother, left arm, right arm, left leg, right leg. She took them one at a time in that order. She lined them up above her mother's headless neck, below her head. Now came the hard part, the really heavy, dead rapist part. Hailey gathered up her nerves. She pulled up as many bad memories of Larry as she could. She rolled them into a wad of willpower and bent over. She rolled his massive body onto the trash liners next to her mother. It took everything she had. Once Hailey wrestled him into position,

she decided to take a short break. She fought to catch her breath. She stepped away and sat with her back against the front door. She breathed heavily, staring at the two of them. The task at hand seemed smaller and smaller the longer she sat. She could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Hailey calmed down then hopped to her feet. She slowly approached Larry's body. She stared at his ugly, Jack-o-lantern face. Even in death, his wide, piercing eyes made her skin crawl. She closed her eyes and shook the feeling away. She untied his sneakers, pulled them from his fat feet, and tossed them next to him on the trash liners. She undid his blood soaked jeans, button and zipper. With a fierce fury of jerks, she pried his britches loose from his limp legs. She wandered over to one of the bigger blood puddles that littered the carpet and dropped them on top. She knelt down and punched Larry's jeans into the blood puddle. Then, she punched them into another puddle. She soaked up as much blood as she could with his jeans and returned to the trash liners. She tossed them on top of his sneakers. She plucked his t-shirt from his floppy torso and used it to soak up more blood. Then, she tossed it next to the jeans.

Hailey looked at the blood on floor. It looked better, but she still had a ways to go. She looked at the loveseat. Larry's brown jacket was slumped over the backrest. "Perfect," she remarked. She walked over, snagged a hold of his corduroy coat, and punched it into as much of the remaining blood as she could. She tossed the jacket on top of Larry's other blood soaked garments then threw her hands on her hips. She stared at the carpet. It was pretty clean, but there were still red stains on the carpet. She would have to get those later with a steam cleaner. It would have to do for the moment. Hailey walked around the liners and retrieved the axe. She stood at Larry's feet and raised the axe high above her head. She dropped the axe into Larry's left shoulder with a shriek. It barely penetrated his fat, hairy flesh. She lifted the axe over her

head and swung it harder. It penetrated the bone, but it still didn't go all the way through.

Hailey let her arms go limp at her sides. She stared at the puny slither and sighed. She gathered up all the strength she could muster. She lifted the axe above her head and smashed it into Larry's shoulder with everything she had. Finally, his left arm jarred loose from its joint. It rolled across the trash liners and rested against his bloody clothes. Hailey was filled with relief.

She set the head of the axe on the floor, leaving the handle sticking up. She reached above her head and stretched her arms. Then, she picked up the axe and took out the next three limbs. She completed the task with two spectacular whacks a piece. With one, final blow, she chopped Larry's head off. Then, she dropped the bloody axe on his fat belly. His stomach bounced a couple of times. Hailey sat on the floor and took another moment to catch her breath. She stared at Larry's tighty-whiteys. They clung to the stumps where his legs had formerly been, soaking up blood. Hailey shook her head. She snagged the box of trash liners and wandered over to finish the job. She wrapped each limb and head in its own bag. Then, she moved to the torsos. Her mother's torso wasn't so bad. However, Larry's was so heavy she had to roll it into its bag. She double-bagged it, figuring she could use the tops of the bags to help her drag it around. She gathered all the liners she had laid on the floor initially and tossed them into the same bag. Then, she tied it shut.

That was that. Hailey took her backpack to her bedroom. It was nearly dry, now. She set it beside her desk and returned to the living room. She glanced at the clock above her bed on the way out. It was 9:47. She returned to the front door, slipped her shoes on, and opened the door a crack. She looked outside. She was thrilled to see it was still pouring out. The massive sheets of rain would give her cover from prying eyes. "*No time like the present,*" she mumbled under her breath. She jogged through the rain to her mother's S.U.V. As usual, the door was

unlocked, and the keys were in the ignition. Her mother had been nothing if not a lazy drunk. Hailey reached across the dash and pressed a square, grey button below the radio. The rear window popped open. She shut the driver's door, skidded to the back of the vehicle, and dropped the tailgate.

She herded limbs to the car, first. She carried them two arms at a time then one leg at a time. She looked around as she worked, trying to seem as inconspicuous as possible. She realized it was the torsos that would bring her the most grief. Her mother's torso wasn't too bad. Hailey hobbled it to the car fairly easily. It was Larry's that was going to make or break her. What's worse, the rain was letting up. Hailey looked around as it slowed. The lighted windows of neighbors were becoming visible. There was no time to waste. Hailey zipped through the front door and snatched up the end of the doubled up trash sack. She slung it over her shoulder and began dragging it to the back of the S.U.V. She worked as quickly as she could, searching the quiet neighborhood with each slow, agonizing step. She brimmed once she'd reached the back of the car. She knelt down and lifted Larry's torso with all her might. Between a grimace and a pair of wobbly knees, Hailey rolled his main body onto the black carpeted floor of the vehicle. She sighed with relief. She slammed the tailgate and rear glass shut. Then, it was a simple matter of locking up the house, returning to her mother's vehicle, and firing up the engine. She had only driven a few times, but with Hailey Holloway, a few times is all it took. She didn't have a driver's license. It was a risk she was going to have to take.

Chapter 11: “A Disappearance”

There are disappearances, and there are disappearances. It should go without saying by now. If Hailey Holloway wanted someone to disappear, she could make them disappear. She could have made the entire city of Malley disappear, but that would be overdoing it. She just needed to get rid of a couple of bodies. One was her mother's, unfortunately. The other was the body of that nefarious nightmare, Larry. Perhaps she could have gone to the police with this little problem before it had gotten so far out of hand. The truth was it was simpler this way. One person killing another then being killed by that person's kid was complicated. It's much simpler for the two of them to run away together. What difference did it make? Hailey's mother was an adopted child with no known relatives. And, anyone who knew Larry knew he had it coming. Hailey figured she was doing the world a favor. It would make her life easier, and it would save the taxpayers money.

So, Hailey took the weight of the world on her shoulders. She opted to take care of that tyrannical terror Larry, and her drunken wreck of a mother. She had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hailey wiped a tear from her eye. She cruised south along Cherry Lane, headed for the neighborhood cemetery. She felt bad for what she was about to do, but it was kind of a two for one special. She had murdered Larry, and her mother was kind of a convenient way to get rid of him. If Hailey made it look as though Larry had killed her mother and run away, the police would be out looking for a dead man. However, if the two of them ran away together and abandoned her, no one would care. It was for the better, she decided.

Cherry Cemetery was always open. At the entrance, two twenty foot gates were drawn to the sides of two main posts. A banner spanned the entrance across the tops of the posts. It was woven of metal in an arc of letters. They spelled out “Cherry Cemetery” in an old style

calligraphy text. A metallic fence bound the remaining perimeter of the gigantic graveyard. It jutted from the opposing posts, crept around the sides, and joined at the back. The fence was made of square shaped bars, spaced one foot apart. The usual, stereotypical trees of a graveyard were scattered throughout Cherry Cemetery. Their bare, twisting limbs reached into the cloudy night. Despite its large size, Cherry Cemetery was nearly full. It was littered with thousands of gravestones of varying shapes, sizes, and colors. The rain was letting up. A slight drizzle was all that fell.

Hailey leaned forward in her seat. She peered above the rims of her glasses at the Cherry Cemetery banner. She crept below it and through the entrance. She continued down a narrow, twisting road that ran throughout the graveyard. She slithered along, scanning rows of tombstones. Every so often, a bolt of lightning appeared in the black clouds then twisted across the sky for several seconds. Each one would disappear into clouds further down, crackling and rumbling along its crooked, winding journey. Hailey drove deeper into Cherry Cemetery. She searched incessantly, compulsively seeking something out. 45 minutes in, she spotted what she was looking for. It lay at the other end of an intersecting road. She turned left and slithered down the intersecting road. She crawled to a stop at a freshly dug gravesite.

She stopped with the tailgate of the vehicle even with the hole and threw the shifter into reverse. She cut the steering wheel to the left and backed up to the hole. There, she threw the shifter into park and turned the ignition switch back. She retrieved the keys and dropped them into her pocket. She patted the rear glass release button and hopped out. She stared at the awaiting hole. She slid the hood of her black and white, striped jacket over her head at the sensation of tiny droplets of rain. She noticed a shovel sticking out of the dirt to the right of the hole. She had everything she needed. How convenient. Hailey didn't waste another moment.

She strolled to the rear of the vehicle, yanked the tailgate open, and got to work.

She made quick work of the process. She hopped into the back of the vehicle. Then, she quickly tossed the limbs and both heads into the rectangular hole. She rolled her mother's torso to the end of the tailgate and shoved it over the edge. It rolled out and fell right into the hole. Then, it kindly rolled towards the middle. Hailey wrestled Larry's torso to the end of the tailgate. She dropped it off in a similar fashion. His torso toppled into the open grave with a series of loud thumps. It also rolled towards the center. Hailey hopped out. She shut the tailgate and window glass then turned around. She looked into the hole and checked it out. Satisfied with how everything was sitting, she walked over and retrieved the shovel. She worked diligently. She shoveled in just enough dirt from a nearby pile to conceal Larry and her mother's body parts.

She stabbed the spade of the shovel into the ground where she had found it and double-checked her work. She grinned at the flat floor of the gravesite. No one would be the wiser. Tomorrow morning, a casket would be lowered on top of them, and they would be gone. That was it. She headed for the S.U.V. She hopped into the driver's seat, and fired up the engine. Then, she turned to the right and headed the way she had come. She glanced at a clock on the radio. It was a quarter past eleven. It didn't really matter. She didn't have to get up and go to school tomorrow, anyway. She had been suspended due to her little scramble with Travis' girlfriend.

Hailey grinned. She crept towards the exit of Cherry Cemetery. She was *going* to school, tomorrow. It's just that no one knew it, yet. No one would ever know. There was a reckoning at hand for Travis and his little friends. She just had to take care of something, first. She reached the entrance of the graveyard and made a left onto Cherry Lane. She retraced her

path, passed her house, and hung a left. She merged onto the Patrick Peterson freeway. A couple of blocks down, the freeway darted at an angle to the left. At the corner of the angle was Queenie Avenue. It was a one way road that stuck out of the Patrick Peterson in line with the outer lane. Hailey merged onto Queenie and drove down a couple of blocks. It dead-ended at the east side of Glory High School. Yeah, it wasn't a very long journey by car. At the dead end, Hailey turned right onto Happy St. She made the first left at Dora Lane then turned into the school parking lot. She drove to the front row and parked in a faculty parking spot facing the front entrance.

When it came to security, Glory High didn't have much. There were ten or more campus cops during the day, but there was no one at night. It was a tomb. As for surveillance, there were black, glass domes along the ceiling at several points throughout every hallway. Cameras within the domes recorded every move of every student. That's why security had responded so quickly when Hailey and Jennifer had been fighting in the hallway earlier that day. However, those went off duty once the school was locked up for the night. Hailey wanted to make sure they stayed that way through tomorrow. She had seen the security system. The problem with Glory High's security cameras was that all the monitors for all the cameras were tied into a single feed. If someone were to cut that one feed, it would be days before security could get the cameras up and running again. They would have to get their tech guys in. When the techs showed up a day or two later, they would likely need to order a bunch of parts. Meanwhile, there would be no security cameras.

That was too bad for Travis, Jennifer, Gary, Tate, Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy. Hailey figured the eight of them were all fair game. She was fed up. They were all going to die. She didn't care what happened after that. She wasn't going to take it anymore. She didn't have to.

She was more intelligent than they were. The only other thing Hailey needed to know is where everyone would be tomorrow and when. She knew all of them from various classes she had. There were Travis Griffin and Gary Dodson from her Psychology class, Vicky Turner, Paul Snyder, and Tommy Keel from her English class with Wednesday, Jennifer Rogers and Tate Hewitt from her Algebra II class, and Joe Eaves from her U.S. History class. It was likely they didn't all know her, but she knew them. She even knew where Vicky lived, now. She lived at the house with the twisted trees. That might be helpful later. She just needed a list of their classes. Then, she could plan her attack.

But first, Hailey had to get into the school. She killed the engine and hopped out. She glanced around. The coast was clear. She jogged to the double doors at the front entrance. The rain had stopped. But, there were still puddles to hop over as she scurried towards the building. She stopped at the doors and jerked on their handles. "*Locked...*" she whispered. She looked around for curious eyes. She dashed through the grass, towards the right of the school. She arrived at another set of double doors. They were also locked. Hailey spun around on her heels. She peered down a thin sidewalk path that led to the doors from the walkway surrounding the campus. She spotted a pair of headlights coming down Dora Lane. She crouched behind a set of bushes beside the double doors. She watched the headlights pass through a hole in the bushes. Her jade green eyes crept from right to left as she gawked.

Hailey arose from her hiding place and flipped her fingers through her fire orange hair. Then, she moseyed to another set of double doors, further down. To her amazement, the right one was unlocked. That sort of thing happened sometimes at Glory High. It happens everywhere. No one is perfect. Hailey pulled the door open a crack. She threw another quick glance around then slipped through the opening. The door swung closed with a clunk. Hailey

was at the converging point of two adjacent hallways. One ran in front of her and one ran to her right. She walked down the one she was facing and made a left at the first hallway she could. That hallway led her to the main hallway. That's where the principal's office was. The camera monitors were in there, in the security department. She needed to be quick. If a cop drove by and spotted her mother's S.U.V., she would be in serious trouble.

Hailey grinned. She stared across the hallway at the office doorknob. It didn't even have a lock on it. There were a couple of large windows at either side of the double doors at the front of the hallway. Hailey spotted her ride through the one on the left. It was still sitting in the parking lot. She narrowed her eyes. She peered across the parking area at Dora Lane. The coast was clear. She skidded across the wide hallway, slid the lockless knob to the right, and slipped into the principal's office. She flicked on the lights and wandered to the security department. It was through a doorway to her left. She flicked on the lights and walked to a wall of monitors. Hailey re-familiarized herself with the equipment. All the monitors were fed from a single cable. It dropped from the ceiling and split into an array of RCA cables. Each of those plugged into a port on the rear of each screen.

Hailey shook her head. All she had to do was cut that one specially made cable, and Glory High School would be without a security system for the next few days. She was amazed at the simplicity of it. Hailey's stomach growled at her. She planted her hand on it. She had put it off for too long. She needed nourishment. "Pizza," she remarked, "in honor of my dearly departed mother." She returned to the office, snagged a pair of scissors from a pencil cup on the corner of the principal's desk, and returned to the security department. She kicked a rolling chair into position below the cable that dangled from the ceiling. She hopped onto the seat and hacked her little security problems out of the way with a few simple snips. Then, she hopped to the floor

and stepped out of the security room. She flicked off the lights on her way out.

She wiped her prints from the scissors with the end of her jacket sleeve. Afterwards, she kindly returned them to the principal's pencil cup. She turned to a set of filing cabinets behind the principal's desk. The cabinet on the far left had four drawers. They were lettered from top to bottom, ranging from A to Z. Hailey slid the second drawer open. It contained the Gs. Within a matter of seconds, she produced Travis Griswold's school schedule. She glanced it over then gathered the other seven. She wiped her prints from the handles of each drawer she had opened and kicked them shut. She thought about making copies of the schedules and returning them to the filing cabinet. But, what was the point really?

Hailey flicked off the office lights and returned to the main hallway. She wiped her prints from either side of the doorknob and kicked the door shut. She glanced down the hallway. Her mother's S.U.V. was still sitting there, waiting for her. She hurried down the hall and pushed through the door on the right. It was locked from the outside, but it could still be opened from the inside. She jogged to her ride. There, she stacked everyone's school schedules together on the hood of the car then scurried inside. She fired up the engine and skidded out of the parking lot. She glanced at the clock. It was 11:42. She merged onto the freeway and headed home.

Chapter 12: "Cleaning House"

With Hailey Holloway, cleanliness was an absolute necessity. She entered her home and flicked on the lights. She stood in the doorway in a state of utter shock. She kicked off her canvas shoes and shut the door. She threw her hands on her hips and looked around the living room. She inhaled the awful stench of it. She felt like gagging. It was time for a change. Her home was going to be cleansed. Her stomach growled, and she gave it a pat. "First thing's first," she remarked. She padded across the tan carpet of the living room. She arrived at the right side of the kitchen counter. There, a cordless phone was tacked to the wall. She flicked on the kitchen lights and rolled out a drawer below the counter.

Hailey took out a phone book, set it on the counter, and rolled the drawer closed. She looked up the number for Jack Colby's. That was her mother's favorite pizza parlor. She jerked the phone from the cradle and dialed the number. Then, she returned the phone book to its drawer. She put the phone to her ear. She walked across the living room, down the hall, and into her mother's bedroom.

"Thank you for calling Jack Colby's," an older man's voice said over the phone. Hailey flicked on the lights. She stood in the doorway, gazing around her mother's room. *"Can I get your phone number, please?"* Hailey bowed her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. It was a horrendous sight. It was going to be a long night. Hailey rattled off her number and walked to her mother's bed. It protruded from the right hand wall. She cradled the phone between her ear and shoulder. She yanked off her mother's bedspread, sheets, and pillows. *"Oh, Ms. Holloway!"* the voice remarked. *"The usual?"* Hailey laughed. She dropped her mother's bedding on the floor.

"Well, actually," she replied, "this is the *other* Ms. Holloway." She stretched a red cover

sheet across the top mattress. She lifted each corner and stuffed it into place. She dropped the mattress in finality. Then, she picked up a matching throw over sheet. She flung it through the air, dropped it on top of the stretchy one, and flattened it out.

“Ah, Hailey, I presume,” the voice replied. *“Yes, Helen mentioned you a time or two.”* Hailey dropped her mother’s pillows at the head of the bed. They were covered with red pillowcases with white polka dots.

“Nothing good, I hope,” Hailey told him with a smile. She retrieved the bedspread from the floor, a red blanket with white polka dots. She flung it though the air, laid it atop everything else, and smoothed it flat. She stepped over a pile of her mother’s dirty clothes. She snagged a small box from the top of a table at the head of the bed. The table was made of finished oak to match the bed. Both were decrepit and fading from lack of care.

“So, what can I get you, Hailey?” Hailey sat at the head of her mother’s bed with the box in her lap. It was a wooden box. It had a lid with a round knob on top. She removed the lid and set it beside her. Her eyes glittered. She stared through the lenses of her spectacles at a pile of cash hiding inside.

“Large, thick crust,” Hailey replied. She dumped the money on the bed. “With lots of meat.” She returned the lid to its rightful place on top of the box. She returned the box to the table at the end of the bed.

“What’s that?” the voice returned. *“What all kinds of meats?”*

“All of them,” Hailey replied. She sorted the money into stacks by value. She turned each bill the same direction as she did so. “If it’s a meat, put it on there.” She finished sorting the cash. She could here him typing away at a keyboard. Her mother had \$737 socked away in that little box. Hailey held her fist in front of her, palm up, and drew it towards herself.

“That’s delivery, right?”

“Damn right, it’s delivery,” Hailey returned. She piled all the cash into one stack. There was more typing over the phone.

“That comes to fourteen ninety-seven. It’ll be about twenty-five minutes.”

Hailey hopped up from her mother’s bed, folded the wad of money in half, and slid it into her pocket. “Thank you,” she returned, and she headed for the kitchen. She snatched up the phone and pressed a button to end the call. There was a beep sound when she pressed the button. “Better get that...cranberry juice cleaned up before they get here,” she remarked. She returned the phone to its cradle. She scurried across the living room to a closet right of the television. She ripped the door open. She brought out a steam cleaner, a bottle of solution, and a vacuum cleaner. She glanced at the instructions on the bottle. Then, she bent over and removed a plastic jug from the front of the steam cleaner. She dumped a little solution into the jug, returned the bottle to the closet, and took the jug into the kitchen.

Hailey filled the jug the rest of the way with hot water from the sink. She returned to the steam cleaner. She popped the jug into the steam cleaner, plugged it into the wall, and fired it up. It was funny. Next to the old, decrepit crap surrounding her in the living room, the steam cleaner and vacuum looked brand new. They had probably never been used. Hailey shook her head. She scrubbed the largest blood puddle on the carpet in a fury. It slowly disappeared in a heap of angry suds. “Ha-ha!” she shrieked. She finished that puddle then moved on to the next. The blood was still fresh, so it scrubbed clean fairly easily.

Hailey scrubbed away all the blood puddles then killed the steam cleaner. She turned her attention to the coffee table. She snagged the box of trashcan liners from the floor and went to work. She quickly filled two trash bags with pizza boxes alone. She tied them shut and tossed

them aside. She popped open a third liner. With one swoop of her arm, she slid the beer bottles, liquor bottles, and overflowing ashtrays into it. She gathered every remaining cigarette butt, beer bottle, and moldy slice of pizza from the carpet around the coffee table and tossed them in as well. Afterwards, she tied that bag off. She tucked the box of trash liners under her arm and dragged the three full liners into the kitchen. She lined them up and popped open two more trash bags. She quickly filled those full of dirty dishes. She screamed with maniacal laughter, tossing handfuls of plates and glasses into the bags. They shattered to pieces.

“Made quick work of THAT!” She popped open a couple more trash bags and turned to the pantry. She stared at the door for a long moment. She dreaded facing the terrible stench of it again. She sighed. With one last clean breath, she ripped the door open. She knelt down with both trash liners and got to work. The pungent aroma of the rotting pile of garbage was unbearable. Hailey squinted and turned her head away. She tossed handfuls of trash into the two bags. She tried not to think about. She tried not to look at the empty sardine can with maggots crawling all over it. She tried not to feel the creamy texture of a two month old apple core squishing between her fingers. She tried as hard as she could not to smell the baked salmon doggy bag from three weeks ago. She couldn’t. It was absolutely agonizing and horribly horrid. A couple of times, she turned her head and leaned into the trash bag to dry-heave. Her stomach threatened to release contents it did not have.

At long last, Hailey managed to pluck the floor of the pantry clean. She eagerly tied the two bags closed and added them to the line. She also retrieved the one from the trashcan itself. She couldn’t bear to look at her hands. She scurried to the sink and squirted the last few drops of dish soap onto her mitts. She rinsed them clean with a dash of scalding water. She had to shake her hands dry. There were no paper towels in the dispenser below the phone. Afterwards, she

returned to the front door and slipped her shoes on. She walked across the living room and threw the back door open. She began to herd the eight trash bags through the backyard to the dumpster. She hauled them two at a time. She returned from her fourth trip and gagged on the smell of garbage. It not only filled the kitchen but the living room as well. She had unleashed the beast.

Hailey kicked off her shoes and shut the back door. She returned to the pantry. She snagged a bottle of air freshener spray she had spotted earlier. She filled the pantry and empty trashcan with it. Then, she dropped in a fresh liner. She tossed the box of liners into the pantry and slammed the door. She wandered across the house, spraying the air above. She stopped once she had made it to her mother's room and returned to the living room. She tossed the spray can on the loveseat. Then, she scooted the coffee table out of her way and flicked the steam cleaner back to life. She took out the rest of the carpet stains as best as she could. Hailey finished everything off with a good vacuuming. Then, she returned the two machines to the living room closet. She replaced the coffee table. She stared at the ugly, beer stained coffee table with her hands on her hips. Just then, there was a knock at the door.

"Pizza," Hailey remarked. She padded across the living room and threw the front door open. A kid not much older than herself stood there with her pizza. He held it between his hands in a special bag that kept it warm. He wore a Jack Colby's uniform of course. It consisted of a pair of white overalls worn over a yellow shirt. The yellow shirt had pictures of holes, creating a Swiss cheese effect. A crop of chin length, dyed black hair fell from beneath a yellow cap with the company's logo. His hair surrounded a pale, acne covered face.

"Large, thick-crust with all meat," he remarked. His voice was shy and monotone. He plucked two Velcro strips from the side of the bag. Then, he removed a pizza box from the bag

and laid it on top. Hailey took out the wad of cash from earlier and yanked out seventeen bucks. The pizza boy balanced the pizza on top of the bag in the palm of his hand. He rummaged through his pockets with his free hand. “That’s...” he began, still searching, “it’s gonna be...”

“Fourteen ninety-seven,” Hailey told him with a smile.

“That’s it,” he remarked. He handed Hailey her pizza. He poked his head through the doorway and glanced around. “Man, what the hell happened to this place? It’s like...clean.”

“I happened to this place,” Hailey informed him. “I got sick of *looking* at all that damn shit.” The pizza boy smiled. Hailey snatched the pizza from him and dropped the seventeen dollars in his hand. “There’s seventeen. Keep it.”

“Hey, thanks, man,” he replied, stepping away. “You have yourself a nice one.” Hailey waved then shut the door. She sashayed into the dining room with her piping hot, pizza pie. The dining room table was covered with trash and beer bottles like everything else in her home. She turned around and walked into the living room. She plopped down on the loveseat and dropped the pizza on the coffee table. She flipped the lid open and grinned at the meaty concoction. She snatched up the largest slice and greeted it with an eager set of chompers. She was careful. She didn’t want to let any cheese looping between her teeth and the pizza drip onto the carpet. She dropped the slice of pizza on top of the rest and hopped up. Then, she skidded into the kitchen to find herself a soda.

While Hailey was sitting on her couch, Paul was sitting at the foot of his bed. He loaded a long, wooden pipe with weed. He had some punk music playing on a CD player. It sat on a small, wooden table at the head of the bed. The main light in the room was off. The bulb dangled from a trio of wires. They hung from the middle of a topsy-turvy ceiling fan, which whirled at a slow speed. The room was lit with florescent tube black lights. They were tacked

along the walls. The walls were plastered with posters of punk bands. Most of them had some type of glowing reaction to the black lights. Paul was quite the artist. Where there weren't posters, there were hundreds of drawings of random people he came up with. Some were colored. Some were sketched with pencil. They alternated between different shapes and sizes of paper. His bed was unkempt. The pillows, sheets, and comforter were tossed in a heap at the foot of the bed.

The door opened a crack. Paul looked up to find Vicky's head poking through. He smiled, motioning with his head for her to come in. Then, he finished loading the bowl on his pipe. Vicky walked up and stood next to him. There was a road cone plastered with wax from different colors of candles left to burn on top. She slid it out of her way and sat next to him. Paul handed the pipe to her and a lighter. "Vicky, will you do the honors?" he asked. Vicky put the pipe to her lips. Paul struck a plastic lighter to life and held it to the bowl. She looked at him then pulled the pipe away. She snatched the lighter from him. She set it and the pipe next to the CD player. "Wait, what are you doing?" Paul asked. Vicky slowly removed his blue sunglasses. "Vicky...?" Paul trailed off. Vicky folded Paul's shades. Then, she set them on the end table as well. She placed her fingertips on either of his cheeks just below his different colored eyes. Paul opened his mouth a little and took a quick breath. He blinked, staring into Vicky's dark brown eyes.

"You have the coolest eyes," she told him.

"I hate them," he replied. "I look like a freak." He took her hands and gently pulled them away from his face. Vicky smacked her lips.

"Awe, I like your eyes." Paul set her hands on the bed and dropped his on his lap.

"Well, if you don't like them, why don't you wear colored contacts or something?"

Paul shook his head. “Nah, they still look funny.” Vicky nodded. She flipped his hands over and slid her fingers across his palms. She gazed into his clashing eyes, and Paul smiled.

“Vicky, what’re you doing?”

Vicky shook her head with a smile. “I don’t know.” Paul didn’t waste another moment. He leaned forward and kissed her. He didn’t want to give himself a chance to talk himself out of it. He placed a hand at the side of her face and eased away.

“That what you had in mind?” Vicky placed a hand over her mouth with a snicker. She slowly nodded.

“I think so.” Paul pressed his forehead against hers and stared into her dark brown eyes. She let out a heavy breath. Her heart began to race. He could feel it beating through his forehead. Paul smiled and slid his fingers through her long, brown hair.

“Calm down, school girl,” he remarked. He was referring to her eccentric outfit. “Your little heart’s going to blow up.” Vicky let out a short laugh. Paul took her hands and kissed her again. It was nice. He had wanted her for some time. Now, he finally had her. It was perfect. And then, Tommy’s voice crept in from the doorway.

“You two finally hitting the sheets?!” he shrieked. Paul and Vicky whirled around. They looked as though they had gotten caught with their hands in the cookie jar. “Well, it’s about damn time, if you ask me.”

Paul pointed at him. “Tommy, *get* out of here!” Tommy laughed. He retreated from Paul’s bedroom, shutting the door behind him. “And, lock the door, man!” he added. The door opened a crack. Tommy’s hand crept through, locked the knob, and retreated. Then, the door eased shut. Paul turned to Vicky. He dropped a hand on her shoulder. “Damn,” he gasped. Vicky patted Paul’s hand. She leaned forward and kissed him to get things rolling again. A

moment or two passed and all seemed well. Then, there was a knock at the door. Paul pulled away and slapped his hands over his eyes. He gave them a rub then hopped up and headed for the door in frustration. Vicky snickered. She turned, put the pipe to her lips, and had a toke. Paul unlocked the door and ripped it open. He found Joe standing there. Joe dropped his hand on Paul's shoulder.

"Paul, mayun," he whispered. *"You getting it ON in here?"* He peered over each of Paul's shoulders as if trying to figure out what all the commotion was about.

"Joe, I swear..." Paul whispered back. Joe took Paul's hand. He held it out, palm up. Then, he slapped a condom into his open palm. Paul glanced at it with a wide pair of multi colored eyes.

Joe patted him on the shoulder. *"Don't say I never gave you nothing, mayun,"* he whispered. He turned and disappeared down the hallway. Paul turned his mouth to the side of his face. He stepped into his bedroom then closed and locked the door. He stood there for a moment. He stared blankly at the rectangle of wood in front of him.

"What's up?" Vicky asked. Paul turned around. He held the little packet up for her to see. He dangled it from his fingertips and shook it from side to side.

Chapter 13: “A Bubble Bath”

Walter was the word. Hailey took one look at the CD Wednesday gave her, plucked it from her CD player, and tossed it back in its case. Blades of Sloth just weren't her style, she decided. They were too dark. Hailey had opted for a more familiar, light hearted ambiance. She had chosen Walter, one of her favorite bands. It spun in her little CD player next to the tub on the floor. It was 2:30 in the morning. Hailey was finally relaxing in a nice, hot bubble bath. She basked in the warm water. Her arms were perched at either side of the tub. Her eyes were gently closed. The light was off. Hailey had scattered thirty candles throughout the bathroom. They bathed the room in a cozy, orange flicker. She'd finished half the pizza she had ordered. Then, she had cleaned the entire house. She had made a trip to the supermarket to gather supplies such as glass and wood cleaners, bleach, and paper towels. She had taken the liberty of washing all her mother's clothes and hanging them in her closet. Her bedroom floor had been covered with clothes. Hailey remembered her mother wearing some of them as long as a year ago.

Hailey slowly opened her eyes. She smiled at her toes. They poked above a mountain of suds floating in the water. She had re-painted her nails a luscious shade of red. The pink polish from Wednesday night had been jagged and chipped up after being buried and all. She had chosen red as an expression of her mood. The red inspired her. She had picked out an interesting outfit for Friday. It consisted of a red blouse and a red coat with large, white buttons. She had chosen a white skirt that draped to her knees and a pair of knee high socks. They were striped like candy canes with alternating bands of red and white. She giggled, picturing it. She had re-laced her white, canvas shoes with a pair of thick, red laces she'd found in her mother's closet.

Hailey had ditched her backpack's usual contents for something a little more fitting. She

had just grabbed things as she pushed her basket across the supermarket. She kind of let her mind go blank. She attempted to pick out weapons that seemed appropriate for the occasion. She wasn't even sure she would use them all. It wasn't what a person might imagine, either. Her weapons consisted of a couple of rolls of duct tape, a couple of hammers, an assortment of butcher's knives, a length of rope, a can of spray on rust remover, a package of plastic lighters, a staple gun, a set of billiard balls, a few packages of tube socks, and a bottle of lighter fluid. She purchased a pair of red leather gloves to match her outfit. She also snagged a six-pack of bottled water and a package of peanut butter crackers.

She stuffed her backpack full of tube socks, first. They would muffle the sound of all the weapons clattering in her backpack. She stuffed each billiard ball into a tube sock and knotted them at the ends. Hailey tossed those and everything else into her backpack. Then, she added one additional item to a pocket on the right side, her father's two shot pistol. It was the 9MM her mother had fired at Larry when Hailey was 14. She found a box of 9MM ammunition in her mother's closet. She dropped it into a pocket on the left side of the backpack. That was it. That's what she had come up with. Hailey reached down the side of the tub. She retrieved Travis, Jennifer, Gary, Tate, Vicky, Paul, Tommy, and Joe's schedules from the floor beside her CD player. She shuffled through them. She looked them over carefully to make sure she had read things correctly. It was too convenient. Apparently, all eight of them had the same class today at 9:45. That's when she would do it. A wicked grin twisted across Hailey's face. She shuffled through the schedules. She paused to stare at a circle she had drawn on each one around that class with a red, colored pencil. "Chemistry it is," Hailey sneered.

Joe sat on Paul's front porch, sipping at a bottle of beer. It was getting late. He knew he should be sleeping. He looked to his right. Tommy was sitting next to him. Tommy took a big

swig of beer then turned to find Joe staring at him. Beer shot out of his nostrils. He turned and cackled with shock and surprise. Joe patted him on the back. “You alright, buddy?” he asked.

Tommy stuttered through laughter. “I didn’t– I didn’t...” He took a drink then faced him. “Goddamn, Joe! I didn’t expect to see you there. How long have you been sitting there, next to me?”

“Dayum,” Joe replied, facing forward. “You need to relay-ux, dude.”

Tommy had another swig of oat soda. “Oh, I got that...” He held his hands in front of him as if to illustrate. “Hyperactive, attention...bullshit.” He turned to Joe. “You know what I mean?”

Joe nodded. “Yay-uh. You need to calm down.” Joe sipped his beer. “You ever try that? Just like...shutting the fuck up for a minute?” Beer shot through Tommy’s nostrils. He leaned forward, twisting up with laughter. Joe shook his head. “I’m still thinking about that chick today, mayun.”

“What chick?” Tommy asked. He hacked up a wad of snot and beer and spit it on the lawn.

“That Hailey chick,” Joe replied. He turned to him. “You know...the one we killed.”

“I know who you’re talking about, Joe. I don’t want to think about that right now.”

“Alright,” Joe conceded. “Mayun, I don’t want to think about that shit either. Thay-ut was so messed up, dude.” Tommy and Joe sipped their beers.

“I never seen that much blood before,” Tommy remarked.

“I know. She bled like a stuck pig, mayun.” Tommy was quiet. He had a drink then turned to his buddy.

“That freaked me out, man. You know, when she told us to wrap the tape around her

head. You know, in Vicky's car before?"

"I noticed thay-ut. I've never seen you be so quiet before."

"Right?" Tommy agreed. "It just didn't make no sense to me, why we were doing what we were doing. It didn't make no sense after that." Joe nodded. He had a sip of his beer. "I mean, this girl, Hailey..." Tommy shook his head. "I mean, she wouldn't hurt no one, man. I can't believe she even did that shit." He motioned with his hand. "To Jennifer and everything."

"I know," Joe agreed. "Didn't seem right after thay-ut, killing her and everything."

Tommy shook his head. "Guess that's just the way it is. I mean, you don't screw with Travis Griffin's girl."

Joe sipped his beer. "Yeah, I guess." They looked towards Limburger Drive. A mixture of loud music and engine noise began to fill the air. "Speak of the devil..." Joe finished off his beer. He set the empty bottle behind them on the porch. Tommy did the same. They wandered into the yard. Travis skidded onto Mark Anthony Road from Limburger Drive. He parked at the curb at the edge of Paul's lawn. Then, he killed the engine. He, Jennifer, Gary, and Tate emerged from the pickup. "Trav," Joe remarked. He reached out to shake Travis' hand. The group had this secret handshake they did sometimes, but it will not be described here. It is a secret after all.

"Jo-Jo," Travis replied. He gave Tommy the secret handshake. "Tom-Tom. What're you two fags doing?"

"Sucking each other's dicks," Tommy told him. "What's up with *these* two lesbos?" He wrapped an arm around Jennifer on his left and Tate on his right.

"Stop!" Tate screeched. She pushed him away with a playful grin. Her long, dyed red braids swooped back. "You're such a perv!"

“What’re *you* guys doing here?” Joe inquired.

Gary gave him the secret handshake. “We heard that Paul’s parents were out of town.”

Joe smiled kind of sarcastically. He bobbed his head up at him.

“We heard there was a par-tay up in here!” Travis remarked. Paul appeared at the front door. He sighed then walked through the yard to join them.

Joe shrugged. “Mayun, Paul and Vicky are in there, sleeping.”

Travis kept his eye on Paul. “What, with each other?”

“Yeah, with each other,” Paul told him. He wore his blue shades and a pair of pajamas.

“God dammit, Tommy!” Gary screamed. He was attempting to pry Tommy loose from his girlfriend. “Let go of her, dipshit!” Tommy shrieked with laughter. Joe smirked and nodded at Paul.

“You put thay-ut...raincoat to some good use?”

“I *did*,” Paul replied. He plucked a cigarette from behind his ear and dropped it between his lips.

“Need another one?” Joe asked. “I’ve got more.”

“Hmm,” Paul mumbled. He retrieved a lighter from the pocket of his pajamas. “Yeah, sure. Can’t hurt.” Joe reached into the front pocket of his black jeans. He came up with another condom and kindly tossed it to his pal, Paul. “Thanks, buddy,” Paul remarked. He dropped the condom in his pocket.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Travis remarked. Paul lit his stogie and narrowed his eyes. “All that for grabbing my balls, huh?”

“Heh,” Paul mused. He exhaled smoke. Then, he reached up and patted Travis on the shoulder. Travis flinched. Paul smirked. “I’m sorry about that Travis, alright? But, *you* were

being an ass-hole.” Travis shrugged.

“Tommy!” Tate shrieked. Everyone faced her, Tommy, and Gary. Tommy had Tate over his shoulder. Gary was attempting to pry his arms loose from her body.

“He does this,” Joe remarked. He walked over to try and get his friend under control. He stopped to look Jennifer over. “Hey, your nose is looking better, mayun.”

Jennifer smiled. “Thank you, Joe.” Gary cackled. He had Tommy in a chokehold.

“Tommy, you are one crazy sumbitch!” Joe walked up, and the three of them tumbled to the ground. “Dammit, get off my woman, Tommy! Get off of ME, too!”

“Ah! Don’t tickle me!” Tate screamed. Tommy roared with laughter. “No! No! Stop it!” Joe dropped on top of them.

“Jesus Christ, Joe!” Gary spat. “I think you broke my rib!” Tommy giggled like a maniac.

“Shut-up!” Tate shouted through a giggle.

“Tommy, I’m gonna break your fingers off!” Joe warned. He wriggled his fingers around Tommy’s.

“Let go, Joe!” Tommy screamed. “No! No, ass-hole!” Gary wriggled. He felt a crushing sensation on top of his thigh.

“Gaaaaaah!” Gary shrieked. Paul exhaled smoke. He stopped and puffed out a couple of smoke rings. Then, he turned to Jennifer. He took a deep breath through his nose and let out a satisfied sigh.

“How you doing?” he asked. She nodded. Her battered face was covered with a condescending grin. Travis placed a hand on either of her shoulders. “Feeling better now?”

“What,” she replied, “you mean after killing that little bitch?” She smirked. Her smile

was pure evil. Paul turned to Travis. He had an evil smirk to match. The two of them were perfect for one another. Paul looked at Tommy, Tate, Gary, and Joe. They were tied in a knot on the ground.

“Well, yeah,” Paul replied. He watched for a minute. Gary and Joe continued to pry Tommy loose from Gary’s girlfriend. It was mildly amusing. He turned back to Travis and Jennifer with a sly puff from his cigarette. He grinned at them as best as he could. “That make you feel better...Jennifer?” Jennifer and Travis looked at each other. They were overcome with wicked laughter. Paul turned away. The sight of them giggling about that poor girl’s death made him feel queasy. Images of her blood soaked body raced through his mind. The sensation of splintering light tubes ran through his arms from a pair of empty hands. He recalled a glimpse of her big, green eyes, pleading with him. He shuttered. He envisioned her lying in that cold, rain soaked hole they had dug for her. He could hear the sounds of their shovels stabbing soft mud. They tilted to the side and dropped their contents on top of her. Paul watched Tate roll away. She was coiled in Tommy’s snake like arms.

“*Tommy!*” she screamed. “Let me go!” Tommy cackled. Gary and Joe wrapped him in their arms, trying to pry him off. Paul turned to Travis and Jennifer.

“Come on, Paul,” Travis said over Jennifer’s shoulder. “It was fun, wasn’t it?”

Jennifer’s smile morphed into a look of anger. “Man you’re not freaking out on us, are you?” Paul stared back and flicked ash from the end of his cigarette. He looked from her to Travis then slowly back. Lightning scorched the sky behind them. He finished the gaze with a drag from his cigarette. “Paul...” she trailed off. “What’s up, man?”

“Yeah!” Travis bellowed. “You got a problem, dude?” Paul heard the storm door shut, and he turned around. He watched Vicky creep from the shadows of the front porch. She

padded across the wooden deck in her bare feet. Her footsteps made little thumps as she crossed. She wore nothing but Paul's black comforter. It draped from her shoulders, dragging the ground. She casually walked up and joined them.

"Paul!" Jennifer barked. "Paul, I'm talking to you!"

Paul's head spun around. "Shut-up, bitch!"

Travis shook his head. "Paul, don't start trippin'. I don't want to have to hack you up, too." Vicky arrived at Paul's side. He took her hand in his. Her other hand held the blanket closed around her.

"Am I next?" he asked. The cigarette flopped up and down in his mouth as he spoke. "Me and Vicky? Is that how it works?" Paul plucked the cigarette from his lips and placed it between Vicky's. Jennifer's eyes darted from Paul to Vicky. The end of the cigarette began to glow bright orange. It went dull, and smoke coiled from the end. Dashes of smoke darted from Vicky's nostrils. Then, she turned to Paul.

"They gonna kill us too?" Paul retrieved the cigarette from Vicky's mouth. He flicked ash from the end, and had a drag. He didn't look away from Travis and Jennifer.

"I think they might, Vick," he told her. "I think they might."

"Dork!" Tate hissed. She and Gary had finally torn away from Tommy. Joe sighed. He stared at them from the sidewalk. He slugged his friend Tommy in the shoulder.

"Ow!" Tommy screeched. He rubbed his arm. "You little prick!"

"Shut-up, ass-hole," Joe replied. He turned and hopped to his feet. Vicky stared into Jennifer's pale, blue eyes. They were cold like ice. Vicky snatched Paul's cigarette from him and took the final drag. She exhaled a white cloud right in Travis and Jennifer's faces. Then, she dropped the butt on the sidewalk. She stomped it out with her bare foot. Jennifer averted her

friend's gaze and stared at her foot. It snuffed out the last of the embers. Her toenails were painted purple. "Let's get out of here, man," Gary's voice popped in. Travis and Jennifer turned to him.

"Yeah, man," Tate added. "Maybe we can go somewhere a little less..." She looked at Tommy. He was grinning at her from the ground. "...creepy?"

"Hey, man," Tommy replied. "I was only kidding!" Tate snickered. Travis patted Jennifer on the back then turned and headed for the truck. She, Gary, and Tate followed suit. They took their usual seats around the vehicle.

"Hey, later on, guys," Joe remarked with a wave of his hand. Tommy hopped up. He waved both of his arms at them. Jennifer looked across the hood of Travis's pickup. She glared at Vicky and Paul one last time. Then, she hopped into the front, passenger seat. The other three waved at Joe and Tommy.

"Yeah, nice nose, bitch," Vicky mumbled under her breath. Paul smiled, snaking his arm around Vicky's shoulders. Travis fired up the engine and drove away. They could still hear Travis' engine and sound system when it was six blocks away. Tommy began to yawn.

"Baaaaaah...I've dired," he moaned.

"Yeah, really," Joe added. "What is it, like...three?"

"Pretty close," Paul told them. "You guys sleeping in the living room?"

"Yeah," Joe replied. Paul nodded. He and Vicky made their way to his bedroom. Joe and Tommy headed for the soft, fuzzy sofas in Paul's living room.

Chapter 14: “Friday”

It was 6:23. Wednesday looked at her mother from the passenger seat. They sat in her mother’s red compact. It was parked next to the sidewalk that traced the perimeter of Glory High School. Her mother had a stern look on her face. She stared down the road in front of her. A gathering of shoulder length, black hair framed her face. Wednesday looked like her mother in a lot of ways. They both had eyes of teal, velvet lips decorated with ruby red lipstick, and heart shaped faces. “Wednesday Williams, get out of this car, now!” she suddenly shouted. Wednesday smiled. A console ran between the front seats. She reached across and gave her mother a warm hug good-bye. Her leather jacket squeaked.

“You and Dad have a nice weekend, okay?”

“Yeah-yeah,” her mother replied, hugging her back.

Wednesday eased into her seat and pointed at her. “Be careful, now.”

“Uh-huh,” her mother replied.

“No drinking, no drugs...”

“Right-right,” her mother returned.

“No meth,” Wednesday continued, “no H, no coke, no ‘shrooms...”

“Wednesday, where do you hear about these things?” her mother demanded. “Who are these friends of yours, telling you about this stuff?” Wednesday leaned back in her seat, cackling. She hugged her stomach. “Wednesday, get out of the car,” her mother repeated. “Now.” Wednesday smiled. She retrieved her denim backpack from the floor and hopped out. She waved good-bye through the window. Her mother threw the car into drive and pulled away from the curb. Wednesday took her usual seat at the edge of the sidewalk. She watched her mother until she was out of sight. Then, she found herself a smoke and sparked it to life. She

looked down Dora Lane. She half-expected her friend Hailey to show up. But, she knew that would not be happening today.

Wednesday stared down the lonely road and sighed. The sky was overcast. The lights from the city filled it with a violet glow. She hoped Hailey had made it home okay. She took a drag from her cigarette and processed that thought. “Yeah, I’m sure she’s fine. I’m probably just being paranoid. Those guys wouldn’t try anything.” A light drizzle began to fall, and Wednesday looked up. She had come prepared today. She had been pelted by rain all day the day before. “Jerks,” she remarked. She snatched up her backpack and tore it open. “They better not have tried anything.” She retrieved a compact, black umbrella from her backpack and flipped it open over her head. “I’ll kill them.” Wednesday stared down Dora Lane and puffed away at her smoke.

“I should’ve called her.” She had wanted to call her friend so badly the night before. She’d laid in bed until one o’clock in the morning worrying about her. She sighed. She turned her head and puffed out a couple of smoke rings. “Her mother is so...weird. She always gets mad when I call.” She drummed her feet in the gutter. She wore a pair of black and white saddle shoes with a pair of frilly socks. Wednesday smiled, looking them over. She slid her fingers over her silk skirt. It reached down to her knees. It was red with white polka dots. “I should’ve called her.” She had a drag of her cigarette and exhaled. She shrugged her shoulders, huddling inside her soft, leather jacket. “Yeah, if I was a real friend, I would’ve called.”

Wednesday began to feel ill. She had felt that way most of the night. She’d tossed and turned beneath uncomfortable covers. She worried no matter how many times she reassured herself. She knew something terrible had happened to her little buddy. She ran her fingers through her hair. She heard it sing against the tip of her cigarette. “Oop!” Wednesday

muttered. She switched her smoke to the other hand, which held the umbrella. She flicked her free hand through her chin length hair to assess the damage. “Still there.” She retrieved her cigarette and had a drag. Then, she worried some more. She wanted to see Hailey so badly. She wanted to know she was okay. Most of all, she missed having somebody to talk to.

Wednesday’s mother always dropped her off for school an hour and a half early, so she could get to work by seven. It was okay, though. She’d always had her good friend Hailey to pass the time with. Hailey was an early riser. She typically showed up an hour and a half early, herself.

A cold wind blew past, and Wednesday shivered. She wasn’t shivering because of the cold. She was trembling with torturous terror. She held out her hand. It was shaking. She held her cigarette between her first and second fingers. It wobbled back and forth. She felt her eyes tearing up. She sniffled. She flicked ash from the end of her cigarette and pressed it against her lips. She looked down Dora Lane. Some silly impulse kept telling her that her friend would be arriving any moment. She couldn’t shake it. “Bah!” she shrieked, facing forward. “She’s not coming.” She looked at her saddle shoes, drumming them to an uncertain beat. “I’m calling her at lunch.”

Wednesday closed her eyes. She took a couple of deep breaths and tried to gather up her random thoughts. She stacked them neatly like paperwork then filed them away. She opened her eyes and gazed through drizzle. She took the final drag of her cigarette and smashed it into the road beside her feet. There was a long block of houses across the road. Wednesday stared at the house directly in front of her, the house at the east corner of the block. Like all the others, it was made of brick. Its bricks were a deep shade of red. She pored over the details of the building, and her mind began to unwind. The front door was made of polished oak. There was a semi circular window at the top. It was sectioned into four pieces. It looked like half a pie that

had been cut up. Three tall, white numbers were laid vertically to the right of the door.

Wednesday read them quietly to herself, “9-6-3...”

Paul flicked drizzle from his brown hair. Then, he threw the hood of his black hoodie over his head. He retrieved a pipe from the pocket of his black jeans. He held it to his mouth and took a hold of it with his teeth. Next, he snagged a plastic lighter from the same pocket. He dropped it, naturally. It fell and rested atop his right shoe. He wore a pair of black, canvas shoes. He bent over and recovered the lighter. Then, he struck it to life and rested the flame against the end of the pipe. He took a toke and passed the pipe and lighter to Martin. He was standing beside him in the grass. They stared across the yard from his front lawn. They were looking at Martin’s twisted oak trees. Martin took a toke. He held it for twenty seconds then let it go. He handed the pipe and lighter to Paul. Paul tapped the side of the pipe with his lighter.

“You know what time it is?” he asked.

Martin looked at his gold wristwatch. “Quarter ‘til seven.”

Paul nodded. “She ought to be ready here pretty quick.” He put the pipe to his lips and had another puff.

“Paul,” Martin remarked.

“Mm,” Paul mumbled. He took the pipe from his lips and held a hit. “*What’s up?*”

“Paul, it’s becoming more and more apparent to me that you and my daughter had sex last night.” Paul half-laughed, half-snorted. Smoke dashed through his nostrils each time he exhaled. His smoky laughter led to a harsh cough. He patted his chest then passed the pipe and lighter back to Martin. Paul cleared his throat and spit out a wad of phlegm.

“Damn,” he gasped. “That obvious, huh?” He watched Martin take a toke. “We used a rubber.”

Martin held his hit for a similar amount of time as before then calmly let it go. “That’s reassuring,” he replied. He handed the pipe and lighter back to Paul.

Paul looked up. “Look, I like Vicky, okay?” Martin stared at him through a pair of stern eyes. Paul put the pipe to his lips then took it away. He threw his hands out at his sides. “I’ve *always* liked her! I-I’d do anything for her.” Martin glared at him through those crinkly eyes of his. They were piercing and dark brown just like Vicky’s. Paul patted Martin’s shoulder. “Martin, come on, man. We need each other, Vicky and me. We’re like...” Paul rubbed his forehead. His concentration was slipping because of the pot. He looked at Martin. “Martin, please don’t be mad.” Martin narrowed his eyes. He shook his head and faced the trees.

“I’ll get her on the pill.”

“Look, you don’t have to do that,” Paul replied.

“Oh, I’m *going* to do that,” Martin assured him. “Because you two aren’t gonna come around here with no babies.” Paul snorted, choking on another hit. He handed the pipe and lighter to Martin. “If she’s going to screw you, I want her to do it smart.” Paul exhaled a series of coughs. He held up his hand to put an end to Martin’s little rant.

“Alright.”

Martin had a hit then handed the pipe and lighter to Paul. “So, what about this other thing?”

Paul tapped the side of the pipe with his lighter. “What’s that?”

“Travis mentioned a fight.”

Paul looked up. “Yeah, this girl at school beat Jennifer up. Attacked her.”

“Travis mentioned that,” Martin replied. “Said she was...stalking him.” Paul shrugged. “So?” Martin inquired. Paul put the pipe to his lips and lit up. “Paul! What happened?”

Paul looked at him. “We killed her.” Martin shook his head. He stared at him through those penetrating eyes of his.

“You get rid of the body...like I taught you guys?” He snatched the pipe and lighter from Paul. “Or, did you just toss her out in the street somewhere like last time?” Martin looked around as if searching for a body.

“We buried her,” Paul replied.

Martin put the pipe to his lips and flicked the lighter to life. “Where?”

“Some vacant lot. Outside the city limits.”

“Good,” Martin remarked, and he took a hit. He held it for half a minute then handed the pipe and lighter to Paul. “If you guys had to do it then you had to do it.” Paul shook his head. They *hadn’t* needed to do it, and he knew it. It was too late now, though. It was done. Paul and Martin jumped at the sound of the front door opening. They whirled around to find Vicky. She walked into the yard and joined them. She wore a pair of black, bell bottom jeans, a white turtleneck sweater, and a pair of red flats. She stood beside Paul, and he reached for her hand. She quickly patted it away.

“He knows,” Paul informed her. “Everything...”

Vicky took Paul’s hand and looked up at her father. “Dad...”

Martin shook his head. “There’s a cigar box in the top drawer of my dresser.” He stared into space then disappeared into the house. Paul turned to Vicky.

“What?”

Vicky giggled. “He doesn’t smoke cigars, Paul.”

Paul stared at her. “Um, huh?” Vicky’s eyes widened. She grinned.

“Jeez, you two are really stoned, huh?”

“Mm,” Paul mumbled. “Oh...yeah. Yeah, we did. We got...stoned.”

Vicky sighed. “I’ll be right back.” She disappeared into the house. Paul stared into space then walked to the front of the house. He sat on the end of the porch. It was a wondrous stoop. It was overhung with an awning of finished pine. Two square shaped posts supported the awning at the end of a knee high, pine deck. Paul took a good, long look at the twisted oak trees. They were glorious. They made Paul smile. Their long, crooked branches took his eyes on an utterly chaotic journey through a jagged, twirling cosmos of incoherent lucidity. He began to nod off. His mind continued to race through braided, whirling grooves in mahogany branches, creeping from behind jade leaves. His body went limp, anesthetized with tetrahydrocannabinol. Vicky returned with the cigar box Martin had mentioned. She sat next to her new squeeze. Then, she weaved her arms through his left arm and leaned on his shoulder.

“Paul, we have to go get Joe and Tommy,” Vicky remarked. Paul’s eyes blinked open. They were narrow and hazy.

“Huh...?”

Vicky giggled. “We dropped them off at their houses this morning so they could get ready for school, remember? We’ve got to go so we can go pick them up.”

“Mm,” Paul muttered. He smacked his lips. His mouth was dry and sticky. It slowly hinged open, and he rolled his tongue around. “I’m gotta...” Vicky turned to him. He drearly pointed towards the house with his thumb.

“Huh?” Vicky asked.

Paul smacked his lips. “Uh...” He blinked his eyes, trying to swim out of a murky daze. “Water!” he managed to get out. He began to stumble to his feet.

“Um, okay then,” Vicky remarked. She dropped the cigar box on the porch, wrapped

Paul in her arms, and sat him back down. “Yeah, why don’t you just stay here for a minute, honey. I’ll go get you some water. That sound good?”

“Mm...” Paul moaned. He blinked his eyes and stared across the yard. “Yeah.” He cleared his throat and looked up. “Yeah, would you please? I’d, um...” He leaned forward, rubbing his chin. He was in deep thought. “Appreciate!” he shouted with a snap of his fingers.

“Jesus, Paul,” Vicky replied. She knelt beside him and patted him on the shoulder. “How much bud did you guys smoke?” Paul opened his mouth to say something then closed it and shook his head. Vicky giggled. “I’ll go get you some water.” She hopped up and wandered into the house. The storm door swung shut behind her.

“Um, yeah,” Paul mumbled.

Travis and Jennifer were alone in Travis’ living room. They were up to no good as usual. Their time alone was typically comprised of one part scheming, one part kinky lovemaking. They had gotten their scheming done early that morning. Travis gleamed. He stared at his girlfriend’s naked body. The welts Hailey had painted her with yesterday were nearly gone. Travis stood behind her, looking his handiwork over. He pulled a knot tight. He had woven her arms behind her back with a long strand of thin rope.

“Gyah!” Jennifer squealed. “Not so tight!”

Travis slapped her on the ass. “Shut-up, bitch!” he kindly returned. “Now get down on your knees.” He dropped a hand on either of her shoulders and forced her to her knees.

“Travis...” she moaned. “I told you, no blowjobs. I am *not* in the mood.”

“Well, now you don’t have no idea what I’m doing.” He knelt behind her. Next, he grabbed a hold of the coils of rope that bound her arms. “Now, shut your trap.” He snagged a strand of rope. He had left it dangling from the knot he’d tied at her wrists. He wrapped that

strand of rope around her ankles. He pulled her arms tight and knotted it all up.

“God, Travis!” Jennifer squealed. “You’re gonna rip my arms off.” Travis held her up by her arms. Then, he reached over her shoulder and clamped his hand over her mouth.

Jennifer’s eyes widened, and she breathed heavily through her nostrils.

“If you don’t shut-up, I’m going to gag you too,” he told her. He let go of her. Jennifer rolled onto her stomach and swayed back and forth like a rocking horse.

“Wh...” she muttered. She looked up. Travis walked out from behind her and headed for his bedroom. It was at the other end of the house. “What are you going to do to me, sir?” she asked.

“Well, that depends!” he hollered from his room. “If you start being a good girl, maybe something good will happen to you!” He emerged from his bedroom. He had one of those old fashioned yardsticks. Not one of the newer, flimsier ones. It was the really heavy, thick kind the school teachers used to smack their kids’ fingers with. “If you keep being a little bitch,” he continued, “probably about to be some serious SHIT up in here!” He held up the yardstick and slapped it against the palm of his hand. Jennifer smacked her lips.

“Man, not this tired, old bullshit again,” she moaned. “Can’t you come up with something else for a change?” Travis was across the hallway. He pointed the yardstick at her.

“You’re not making this any easier on yourself, young lady.”

Jennifer rolled her eyes. “Uh-huh,” she replied, sarcastically. “Oh, please don’t hurt me. I’m like...so terrified.”

Travis narrowed his eyes. “My, my. Them’s pretty tough words coming from a helpless little girl tied up on the floor.” He strolled towards her. He smacked the yardstick against the palm of his hand with every few steps. He walked in front of her and stopped. Jennifer looked

at him from the floor. She closed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

“Eat me,” she told him with a kind smile. Travis was not pleased. He glared at her through a pair of narrow eyes. He poked his cheek out with his tongue. Then, he smiled and lurked to her side. Jennifer slowly turned her head as he crept along. She stared at him through a pair of big, blue eyes. He stopped just out of Jennifer’s sight. “Travis, what’re you doing?” He snagged a hold of the length of rope that bound her wrists to her ankles. Then, he tugged on it, slowly lifting her off the floor like a suitcase. Jennifer shut her eyes at the sensation of her spine folding in half. “Travis!” she squealed. Travis grinned. He slipped the yardstick below her calves, above her bare ass. Then, he paddled her. He did it just right, not too hard, not too soft. Jennifer moaned with ecstasy at the gentle pain of her supposed punishment. “*Thank you, sir...*” she began to chant. Travis couldn’t help but giggle. A sadistic grin twisted across his face.

“*Catherine J. Smith,*” Hailey whispered. “*Catherine J. Smith.*” She folded her arms over the top of an upright gravestone. She gazed from underneath the hood of her red coat, silently observing Catherine’s wake. She leaned forward and took it all in. Tiny droplets of rain pelted her and the fifty gathered around Catherine’s coffin thirty yards in front of her. It was a typical burial. The coffin hovered above a long, rectangular hole. An awning stretched above that. Catherine’s box was pink. “Cat,” as Hailey had now playfully nicknamed her. She didn’t know if anyone had actually called her that in life. She didn’t even know Catherine. She was just trying to remember her name as best as she could. As the coffin lowered into its new home, Hailey tossed the name around in her head. She burned it into her cerebral cortex. “*Catherine J. Smith,*” she reiterated. “*Catherine J. Smith. Cat...Cat...Cat...*”

She didn’t care anything about Catherine J. Smith or any of her family and friends that

were in attendance. She wasn't here for Catherine. She was here for her mother. Hailey blinked her eyes closed, and tears rolled down her cheeks. "*Catherine J. Smith*," she whispered through a sob. "*Catherine J. Smith. Cat.*" They were about to start tossing dirt on top of her.

According to the obituary in the paper delivered to her home that morning, the service was supposed to end at 8:30. It was time to get a move on. Hailey had her mother's S.U.V., but she didn't have a permit to park in the school parking lot. She was going to drive herself home from her mother's "funeral," then walk to Glory High as usual. She needed to get there and be ready just after 9:45. That's when Travis, Jennifer, Gary, Tate, Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy would be in their chemistry class. She didn't have a plan. She just figured on luring them out somehow then getting to work. Hailey wiped tears from her face. She turned and stalked through Cherry Cemetery to find her mother's S.U.V.

Chapter 15: “The Glory High Slasher”

Hit men are loathsome scum. They kill for money. Murder is nothing more than an industry for them. They don't care why someone must die. They merely care that they must be killed, period. They get bombarded with stories their clients tell about how their wife cheated on them or how the creepy gym teacher molested their kid. The hit man folds his fingers below his chin and listens with a series of nods. When you get right down to it though, he would rather be cashing a check than listening to such dribble. Hit men carry the tools of their trade in briefcases much as an auto mechanic carries wrenches, screwdrivers, and pliers in a toolbox. The difference between a hit man and a mechanic is that those are silenced pistols, throwing knives, and vials of digitalis they're lugging around.

Then, there are the real psychos. Those are the ones you find lying in a pool of their own drool at the mental institution. They kill without purpose. Their minds are lost in a heaping pile of random thoughts. They need only pick a reason at random to commit murder and voila. For example, schizophrenics may become convinced that a person is out to get them for no reason which exists in reality. Their minds concoct a cockamamie chronicle. The person they murder becomes a spy that is out to get them. Or, maybe something more psychedelic like a giant, man eating cockroach is to blame. Then, there are those with personality disorders. Those are the ones you have to watch out for. They kill because a person wore a red shirt to go jogging, because they waved as they drove by, or something absolutely meaningless like that. Dissociative identities, or multiple personalities, may cause a person to kill because the victim suddenly reminded them of an abusive parent. This triggers a protective personality to commit the murder. Manic depressive people have psychotic breaks. They may become suddenly convinced their children are a pack of wolves for no reason. Then, they drown them in the lake.

So, what about school kids that kill their fellow classmates? Stories abound of such atrocities. Many of them offer no reason whatsoever. It may never be understood why a small group of high school kids got a hold of a few machine guns then went and shot a few kids and faculty. Once they'd finished, maybe they'd shot themselves. Maybe they had a reason, and maybe they didn't. One thing's for sure, Hailey Holloway had her reasons for what she was about to do. Truth be told, maybe Travis, Jennifer, Gary, Tate, Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy deserved to die. Then again, maybe that's not the case. It's difficult to say. To answer that question, one would need a complete and distinct definition of justice. The problem is that truth is subjective. Hailey wanted an eye for an eye. However, it can be said that others would not feel so sure in her situation. Someone else may have called upon the law to do their sinning for them. Some may have just let it go. That doesn't matter, though. All that matters is what happened next. There is no truth in justice. There is only truth.

The weather was spasmodic. Lightning twirled across a vivid assembly of charcoal black clouds. Little rain was falling. It was just a lightshow. It was comprised of orange, violet, and blue bursts of crackling vivacity, contrasting with an enthralling, dark backdrop. Hailey gazed at the sky. She stood in front of the entrance to Glory High she had used to gain admission the night before. The scorching canopy filled her with energy and bursting vitality. She was shrouded in the mildly eccentric outfit she had picked out the night before. It consisted of a hooded, red coat with large white buttons, a red blouse, a white skirt, knee-high red and white striped socks, white, canvas shoes with red laces, and the red leather gloves she had purchased the night before. She was frozen. She gawked at multicolored bursts of electricity, questioning her sanity. "*Shall we?*" she whispered through a pair of trembling lips. She had enhanced them that morning with red lipstick to match her outfit.

Hailey's jade green eyes snapped shut. She recalled painful events from the two days past. She felt Larry's rough, catcher's mitt hands sliding across her breasts. She closed her eyes harder. She shut them so tightly, her eyelids crinkled. She saw things like a movie playing in her mind. A memory of her looking down at herself flashed before her eyes. A torrent of blood gushed down her bare torso in the vivid image. There were shards of shattered glass and white powder stuck to it. She could feel pain from cuts where glass had sliced her skin. She recalled dangling from her wrists, bound to a pallet rack with bailing wire. She recalled the helplessness she felt. She envisioned eight of her classmates taunting her and screaming obscenities in her face. She remembered bits and pieces of when they had strung her up from the hoist hook. She remembered dangling from rope wrapped tightly around her slender throat. She remembered her body going limp.

Hailey's head rolled down, and her eyes popped open. She caught a glimpse of the double doors in front of her. She lunged forward, jerked the right hand door open, and dashed inside. Their chemistry class was down the hall on the right. The boy's restroom was a few doors from there on the left. It was at the end of the hallway. It was settled then. She would set up shop in the bathroom then lure them to it. With any luck, they would only come a couple at a time, and she could pick them off easily. It would be like guerrilla warfare. Hailey grinned. She crept down the hall. She looked at the ceiling. She counted three dysfunctional security cameras along the way. The hall was nice and quiet. Stillness filled the air. Hailey was surrounded by rows of heavy, wood doors. They were all drawn closed. The only sound Hailey could hear was the casual rumble of thunder from the storm outside. It was just enough to conceal her soft footsteps. She strode across the tile floor to the boy's room at the end of the hall. She glanced at a digital clock sticking out of the wall. It was 9:52. She was right on cue. She entered the

bathroom.

The lights flickered out as the door swung closed behind her. Hailey was shrouded in total darkness. She heard faint shouts through the walls of nearby classrooms. Then, came the murmur of teachers instructing their students to calm down. Just as suddenly as they had burned out, the lights came back on. Thunder ripped across the sky. It began as a slow crackle then ceased with a wall shaking eruption. Hailey glanced across the boy's room. It was as one might expect. There were two sinks on the wall to her right, a large mirror above each of them, a paper towel dispenser in between, three urinals along the wall beyond the sinks, two stalls at the end of the wall, painted white, large, white tiles covering the walls, and tiny, white tiles across the floor. Hailey was the only occupant as near as she could tell.

She got to work. She walked to the middle of the room, dropped her backpack on the floor, and ripped it open. She grabbed two socks with billiard balls in them, a couple of knives, a roll of duct tape, a lighter, and the can of rust remover spray. She retrieved the roll of rope and cut off a few strands with a butcher's knife. She cut each one about eight feet long. She laid each piece of rope on the floor alongside everything else. Then, she slid her backpack out of the way and headed for the door. Hailey opened the door a crack and looked around. The coast was clear. She grinned. She stalked out and crept towards Travis, Jennifer, Gary, Tate, Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy's chemistry class. The classroom doors were made of polished wood with a square window at the top. She knew how to get them out, now. The window would be her lure.

"That was cool," Tommy remarked. "You guys think if the power goes out they'll let us all go home?" The class was broken into groups amongst lab tables at the back of the room. Travis, Jennifer, Gary, and Tate were in a group across from Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy. They had tables at the back of the classroom, right next to the door. Vicky, Joe, and Tommy

were leaning in. They watched Paul as he worked. He held a test tube over the flame of a Bunsen burner with a pair of tongs. It contained a clear fluid. Paul looked at Tommy behind the blue lenses of his shades, through the plastic lenses of his safety goggles.

“That would kick ass.”

“Yeah, mayun,” Joe added. They stared intently at the test tube. Paul held it steady against an orange flame. “So, when’s that shit going to do something already?” Joe inquired. His patience was beginning to slip. Paul looked up.

“It’s water, Joe.”

“Oh.” Joe looked away. He leaned back and stretched his arms behind his head. Joe and Tommy’s stools faced the door. It gave them a perfect view of the window at the top. Paul and Vicky sat at the other side of the table with their backs to the door. Joe finished his stretch. He peered across the aisle at Travis, Jennifer, Gary, and Tate’s table. The four of them were focused on a similar test tube that Travis held over *their* Bunsen burner. They were next to the door. Travis and Jennifer sat with their backs to the door and Gary and Tate faced it. Joe narrowed his eyes. His eyeballs rolled down Tate’s long, red braids. He followed them from the top of her head and down the back of her chair. Joe smiled. He stared at the ends of her twisted, crimson locks. They dangled a foot above the white, tile floor.

Something else caught his attention. It was something at the window. He ignored it at first. He opted to stare at the ends of Tate’s hair. She moved to and fro, chattering amongst her peers. Her long, red braids twirled around like little tornadoes. Finally, Joe decided to look at the window on the door. His eyes widened, his jaw dropped, and he was frozen with terror. He stared across the room, trembling as he fought to alert his friends. “*Uh...*” he gasped. Paul whispered something in Vicky’s ear, and she giggled. Tommy leaned across the table and

bobbed his head up at them.

“What?” he demanded. Paul and Vicky shook their heads. Then, they smiled and turned their attention to the test tube. “*Dammit!*” Tommy whispered, pointing his finger at them. “*You better tell me, you shit-heads!*” Paul and Vicky looked at each other. They snickered then faced Tommy. “It’s about me, isn’t it?”

“*Guys!*” Joe interrupted in a harsh whisper. Paul, Vicky, and Tommy turned to him. Joe sighed then pointed across the room. The three of them instinctively looked towards the window at the top of the door. They stared in shock.

“*Aye!*” Paul whispered in pain. He turned and set his test tube in a wooden rack on the table. He dropped the tongs, put the knuckle of his index finger to his lips, and sucked on it. Then, he turned back around and looked through the window at the top of the door. He glared into Hailey’s jade green eyes. He shook his head. He turned and smacked his buddy Gary on the shoulder. Gary and Tate whirled around in their seats.

“*The hell, man?*” Gary whispered, rubbing his shoulder. Paul looked at Travis and Jennifer. He had their attention as well. He glanced around the room. All of their classmates were caught up in their projects. Their instructor was at one of the other group’s worktables. He sat with his back to the door, joking with them about something from their experiment. No one was paying attention to what was going on at the back of the room. Paul turned to Travis, Jennifer, Gary, and Tate and pointed at the door. The four of them turned around. They joined Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy in their condition of disbelief. Hailey greeted them with a warm, toothy smile. She reached up and tumbled her fingers, waving hello.

Travis swirled around, capturing everyone’s attention. He dropped his test tube in the rack on their table and tossed his tongs aside. All eyes were on him. Travis folded his fingers

underneath his chin and thought. He smacked his fist lightly on the table. He whispered Joe and Tommy's names, pointing them out. With a flick of his thumb, he motioned for them to dash through the door after her. Travis turned around and had another look. Hailey glared back. His blood began to boil. Her cheery, little smile filled him with red hot fury. Hailey gazed into his furious eyes then reached up and flipped him off. Travis spun around in his chair. He motioned for Joe and Tommy to chase after her. "*Go get that bitch!*" he whispered.

Joe and Tommy looked at their teacher. He was still talking it up with the other group. He was completely oblivious to the situation. Joe and Tommy returned their attention to the window. Hailey had given them the slip. They turned to each other with a nod. Then they slithered off their stools and crept towards the door. Their instructor, Mr. Craddock, picked that exact moment to glance across the room.

"Uh, guys?" he remarked. Joe and Tommy froze. They turned to him with looks of dread. "You two going somewhere?"

"Bathroom!" Tommy barked.

"Water fountain!" Joe added.

Mr. Craddock stared at them. "Well, alright. But, hurry back. We've got a lot to do today."

"Hey, can I go, too?" Gary asked with a wave of his hand.

"Ooo! Me too!" Tate demanded.

Mr. Craddock narrowed his eyes. "No...uh-uh. Two at a time, guys." He pointed at Tommy and Joe. "Wait for them to get back first, alright?" Gary turned to Joe and Tommy with a shrug. Joe bobbed his head up at them. He and Tommy slid through the door and eased it shut. Joe looked down the hallway in either direction.

“*Where the hell is she?*” he whispered. Tommy turned and narrowed his eyes. He fixed his sights upon the boy’s room at the end of the hall. He stared at the closed door carefully. He noticed it bobbing in its frame. He continued to watch. The door opened a crack, and Hailey’s head popped out. Tommy stared at her, and his spine tingled. It was like looking at a ghost...or worse. He patted Joe on the shoulder and pointed her out. “Yeah, I see the little bitch,” Joe told him. They crept towards her, looking around for witnesses. Hailey grinned, slipping behind the door. “You know that’s the boy’s room, right sweetheart?” Joe beckoned. Tommy grabbed a hold of his buddy’s arm. He stopped him just short of pushing the door open.

“*Joe, what if she’s got a gun?*” he whispered.

“*Dayum-it, Tommy. Don’t be such a pussy.*” He shoved the door open and stomped in. Tommy followed on his heels. The door swung shut. Joe threw his hands on his hips. He stared at the items Hailey had scattered along the floor. He tapped his foot, looking them over. Next, he turned his attention to the two stalls in the far corner. He figured she was probably in one of those, standing on the lid of one of the toilets. Tommy stared at the stalls as well. “Oh, Hailey!” Joe beckoned. “You in there?” Tommy unleashed one of his maniacal cackles. His throaty laughter echoed off the tile walls of the spacious restroom. Joe picked up the can of rust remover and tossed it across the room. It smacked into the closest stall and crashed to the floor. “I’m gonna rip your THROAT out, *Hailey!*” he hollered.

Hailey crept up behind them. She’d been standing behind them ever since they walked in. She was hidden behind the door when it was open. She stalked towards them like a leopard sneaking up on a couple of zebras. She held a billiard ball sock in either hand, ready to pounce. “Hai-ley!” Joe teased. Hailey drew her right arm back, quietly preparing her first strike. She focused her sights on the back of Tommy’s head. They had a couple of interesting heads

between the two of them. Tommy's was covered with hair of short blue spikes. Joe's was blanketed with black hair. It was shaved close, except down the middle. It was a Mohawk combed down for school appropriateness. Hailey was going to paint those blue spikes blood red. Things were about to get messy. She wanted to taste their blood. She wanted to bathe herself in it, and trample in their bowels.

She cracked Tommy over the back of the skull. Little dots of blood splattered her in the face. He fell in a heap at her feet. Joe spun around on his heels, eyes wide, mouth open, ready to shout. Nothing came out. Hailey threw her arms out at her sides. She clutched a billiard ball sock in each hand. "Hello, Joe," she remarked with a kind smile. Then, she smashed the billiard balls into his temples. She quietly cackled as Joe fell limp next to his friend. "Stupid-asses," she remarked. She dropped the billiard ball socks next to everything else. Then, she snatched up a length of rope. "I'll show them how it's done."

Hailey wound the end of the rope around Tommy's wrists, bound them up, and dragged his limp body to the closest stall. She tossed the free end of the rope over the top of the stall. Then, she scurried to the other side to retrieve it. She pulled it down, hand over hand, and lifted him up. She watched the space underneath the stall until Tommy's feet were nearly a foot off the ground. She held the rope tight, knelt down, and wound the other end around his ankles. She knotted everything off as tight as she could. She tied Joe's wrists, dragged him to the stall, and hung him next to his friend in the same manner. Hailey stared at them with a grin. She walked over and got the duct tape and a couple of socks from her backpack. She walked back, stuffed a sock in each of their mouths, and wound the duct tape around their heads. Hailey placed her hands at the sides of their faces.

"Hey!" she shouted with a couple of smacks. "Wake up, losers!" Joe and Tommy

jiggled to life. Their eyes blinked open, and they began to struggle with their restraints. They mumbled this and that behind their sock gags. Hailey had no idea what they were saying. They could have been screaming for all she knew. It was an efficient little setup she had going.

“Perfect,” she remarked. She walked across the bathroom then turned to face them. She knelt next to the two knives she had gotten out earlier. “Well, guys,” she remarked. A sinister little smirk slid across her face. She clasped the tip of a butcher’s knife handle and raised it for them to see. The point of the blade rested against the floor. Their heads shook and their eyes popped open. Hailey’s face lit up with excitement.

“Heh-heh!” she squealed. She rose to her feet and stalked towards them. “I think this is the one.” She stopped in front of Tommy. She held the point of the knife to his belly and glared into his eyes. “Okay then, *Tommy*.” She undid three buttons at the bottom of his black shirt. The, she swept both sides out of the way. “Time for a lesson in basic anatomy.” Tommy breathed heavily through his nose. He was unable to get air through his tape covered mouth. Hailey watched his belly rise and fall with panicked breaths. She looked into his eyes. “Now, your liver is located here...” She circled the area where his liver was with the tip of the blade. Tommy moaned through his gag and labored breathing. He glared into her jade green eyes, pleading with her as best as he could. She smiled back.

“What do you say we start with *that* one?” Hailey asked. She slid the knife into his flesh just below the middle of his ribcage. Tommy squealed. He pinched his eyes shut and rolled his head back. Warm blood began to trickle down his abdomen. “Oh, yeah!” Hailey taunted. She continued the wound to the top of his blue jeans. Tommy struggled with the rope that bound him. He kicked and shook as much as he could. It was no use. Hailey had tied the two of them very tight, and the stalls at Glory High School were nice and sturdy. They didn’t rattle or shake

at all. Joe looked at his friend's hideous gash. Then, he turned away. He began slamming his head into the stall. The reality of the situation set in. He mumbled something beneath his gag, and Hailey looked up. "Oh, don't worry, honey," she told him. "I'll get to you soon enough."

Joe shrieked a muffled shriek. Hailey snickered and returned to her anatomy lesson. She added two horizontal slices across the top and bottom of the vertical one. Then, she knelt down and set the knife on the floor. She gazed into Tommy's eyes. "There, you see?" she remarked. "Now, we just peel these layers away..." She put her hands together at the knuckles, jammed her fingers into the vertical slice, and ripped Tommy's belly flesh open. Blood bubbled up in the back of Tommy's throat. He let out a gurgling sound through the sock and duct tape over his mouth. Then, his head went limp on his shoulder, and the life drained from his body. "Oh, no!" Hailey pleaded. She smacked him across the face. "Don't leave me, yet!" Tommy's eyes popped open. They were wide and filled with terror. "Here..." She sliced his liver loose and held it up to show him.

"You see?" she asked. She wiped blood away, revealing a green sack at the bottom. "This is your gallbladder. And these...are the bile ducts." She smiled, pointing those out for him. His eyes rolled into his head. His head went limp on his shoulder again. The smile slowly faded from Hailey's face. She dropped Tommy's liver below his dangling body and turned to Joe. He stared into her jade green eyes. His heart began to beat faster. She slid her fingers into Tommy's intestines. She ripped them loose with a few vigorous jerks. Then, she held them up for Joe to see. "In-test-ines..." she moaned. Joe watched blood leak from his buddy's guts and abdominal wound. It pooled on the tile floor below his feet. Hailey held Tommy's bowels up and retrieved the knife. She sliced them loose from his body and dropped them on the floor with a gooey smack.

She tip-toed around the mess she'd made of Tommy's insides. Then, she walked up to Joe. She held the tip of the bloody butcher's knife to his throat. "You...messed around with the wrong girl." Joe blinked. He mumbled something beneath his gag. "You're sorry?" Hailey inquired. Joe closed his eyes and slowly nodded. Hailey shook all over. She reached up, snagged a fistful of his non-Mohawk, and jerked his head down to face her. His eyes popped open. "Well, I don't CARE!" she screamed in his face. She reeled back and gouged out both of his eyes. She did it in a series of angry jabs. Joe groaned beneath his gag. Hailey's eyes began to tear up. She let go of his hair and backed away. She watched blood trickle from his slashed up eye sockets. "You're sorry?" she repeated, through a sob. Even though he was in agonizing pain, Joe nodded.

Hailey sniffled. A sick feeling washed over her. She turned away. A couple of tears fell from her eyes and pooled on the lenses of her glasses. "*God...*" she gasped. She turned back to Joe. She snagged a handful of his hair to hold his head up. Then, she held the knife to his throat. "I'll-I'll finish you quick, then." She slashed Joe's throat and held his head up until it went limp. Next, she wiped the blade of the knife clean on Tommy's shirt. She retrieved the can of rust remover from the floor by the stall. She placed it and the knife next to the rest of her things. Afterwards, she fell to the floor next to her backpack. She removed the bloody, leather gloves from her shaking hands and dropped them in her lap. She removed the spectacles from her face and wiped the lenses dry with her red coat. She wiped tears from her eyes with her thumb. She stared across the bathroom at a blurry door.

Hailey began to rethink the whole thing. Her motivation was slipping. She felt bad, now...regretful. Everything was beginning to sink in. She thought about poor Joe and Tommy for a moment. Then, she thought about the others. "Th-This isn't right. No one deserves this."

Her mind switched gears. She tried to remember why she had come in the first place. “No...” she whispered. She recalled that long crawl out of her own grave the night before. She focused on what she wanted and why, recalling it more clearly. She thought of Larry. She thought of her mother. Hailey tugged her gloves back on and smashed her fists into the tile floor at her sides. She pushed herself to her feet. She dashed across the restroom, opened the door a crack, and peeked out. No one appeared to be the wiser. She poked her head out a little further and gave the hallway a thorough examination. The coast was clear. It made her grin. She began to tingle all over. Anticipation surged through her. “*Who’s next?*” she muttered under her breath.

Travis looked across the room. He stared at Tommy and Joe’s empty lab chairs. He turned to Paul and Vicky. They were turned around in their seats staring back. Paul shrugged. He turned to Vicky and whispered something in her ear. Travis and Jennifer exchanged looks. They nodded at Gary and Tate on the opposite side of their table. Tate held her hand up high. She waved it frantically at Mr. Craddock, fidgeting impatiently in her lab chair. Gary watched her inquisitively then raised his hand. Mr. Craddock looked at them. He was now sitting at his desk, grading papers. He was at the opposite end of the room.

“Gary?” Mr. Craddock inquired. He noticed Gary’s girlfriend, dancing around in the chair next to him. His face lit up with a smile. “Tate?” He folded his fingers on his desk. “Do you guys...need something?”

Tate slammed her hand down on their lab table. “Mr. Craddock, I *really* have to go!”

“Yeah, me too!” Gary added. Mr. Craddock squinted. He turned his attention to the lab table across from theirs. “You mean those two still aren’t back yet?!” he demanded. Tate and Gary shook their heads. Mr. Craddock sighed. He leaned across his desk and pointed a stern finger at them. “Alright, go...” Gary and Tate sprang to life. They hopped to their feet and

headed for the door with a sigh of relief. They knew something was up. Joe and Tommy had been gone for way to long. “And if you see Tommy and Joe...” Mr. Craddock added as Tate ripped the door open. “Tell them to get their BUTTS back here, pronto.” Gary and Tate nodded. They waved good-bye, stepped into the hallway, and shut the door.

“God dammit, what the hell’s going on?” Tate whispered.

“I don’t know, Tatum,” Gary replied. He glanced up and down the long hallway. *“I don’t know WHAT she’s up to.”*

Tate patted Gary’s shoulder, pointing towards the end of the hall. *“Gary, look!”* He narrowed his eyes. He focused his sights on the restroom door. It was open a crack. He caught a gleam from one of the lenses of Hailey’s glasses. He could make out a grin on her face. She slithered into the bathroom, allowing the door to creep closed. Gary clasped Tate’s hand in his. He dragged her down the hallway, pushed the restroom door open, and dashed inside. What Tate and Gary found was comparable to a scene from a slasher film. The details bear repeating. Joe and Tommy were in a bad way. Their bodies were all contorted. They hung from wrists and ankles, bound together behind a bathroom stall. Joe’s head was cocked to one side. His eyes and face were jabbed to pieces with a kitchen knife. His throat had been sliced from one ear to the other. Blood dripped down his shirt. The facades of his favorite rock group were becoming soaked with warm crimson.

Tommy’s lesions were more barbaric. He looked like a frog in a dissection tray. His abdomen was slashed open from sternum to groin. It was sliced perpendicular to that at the top and bottom. His flesh had been peeled back and flopped to either side. Blood had literally poured from the wound. The floor underneath the stall and around the toilet was covered in a pool of red. The city of Malley had a new fishing hole, Lake Tommy. In a heap below his feet

lay Tommy's entrails. The end of his colon was still attached to the inside of his body. It hung from the wound in his abdomen, leading to a stack of entrails on the floor. At the bottom of the mountain of Tommy's intestines lay his squishy, brown liver.

Tate clamped her hands over her mouth and fell to her knees. She stared across the restroom at her slaughtered comrades. Her big, blue eyes popped open. Gary pinched his eyes shut and turned his head to the side. There was a gagging sensation on the back of his throat. He felt like screaming, but he couldn't make a sound. The door eased shut. Then, Hailey darted up behind them with her billiard ball socks. She smashed Gary and Tate over the backs of their heads simultaneously, and they fell to the floor. Hailey didn't waste any time. She stuffed socks in their mouths then wound a bunch of duct tape around their heads and mouths. She hopped over, retrieved another length of rope, and used it to bind Gary's wrists behind his back. Then, she tied his wrists to his ankles. She flipped Gary onto his stomach. Next, she went for another piece of rope to tie up his girlfriend.

Tate's eyes popped open. She tried to scream. Nothing came out but a muffled whine. She felt dizzy and disoriented from the billiard ball smack. She looked across the floor at Hailey's white sneakers. Her long, red laces were tied in a big bow at the top. They bounced up and down as she moved. Tate's eyes wandered up from there. They followed a pair of red and white striped socks, wrapped tightly around Hailey's skinny calves. Tate's eyebrows fell in the middle. She filled with fury. She glared at the candy cane limbs of her gracious host. She reached across the floor. Then, she clasped both of Hailey's ankles in her long, slender fingers. Tate slid Hailey's little feet out from under her and dropped her to the cold, tile floor. Hailey gasped with surprise.

Tate twisted Hailey's ankles, flipping her onto her back. Then, she slid on top of her.

She straddled her, resting a black panty hosed leg at either side of her abdomen. Hailey was in a state of shock. Tate looked at Hailey's pale belly. The bottom of her red coat and shirt were scrunched up just above her navel. Her breathing was short and panicked by the sudden twist of fate. Her stomach rose and fell in short bursts. Tatum reached behind her head to pick the duct tape loose. Hailey grabbed at her arms in desperation. She unraveled it from her head and spit the sock in Hailey's face. The sock bounced off Hailey's cheek and rolled to a stop on the floor next to her head. Hailey pinched her eyes shut.

"Bitch!" Tate shrieked. She clamped her hands around Hailey's throat. Hailey began to gag. She wriggled her fingers around Tate's. She got a hold of her pinky and wrenched it back as hard as she could. She hoped the pain might make her let go long enough for her to regain control of the situation. Tate's eyes intensified with anger. She moaned through a pair of closed lips. She tightened her grip on Hailey's midsection with her thighs, and Hailey let go of her pinky. She tilted her head back and shrieked a quiet shout. She caught a glimpse of the rust remover spray and the lighter. "Say 'goodnight,' *Hailey!*" Tate screamed. "You're goin' back in the ground you little GEEK!" Hailey reached above her head. She stretched her little arms just as far as they would go. She extended the tips of her fingers to their absolute limits, fumbling desperately with the rust remover. It stubbornly avoided her grasp. It rolled across the floor in every direction except in the direction of her fingers. She desperately snatched at it again and again.

Hailey wriggled between Tate's thighs. Tate's face twisted into a wicked smirk. She stared at Hailey's skinny, little body with torturous intentions. A veil of black cloaked her sinister soul. "I'll bet you listen to that band Walter, don't you? That's probably your favorite band and shit, huh?" Hailey pinched her eyes shut. She reached a little further. She finally

managed to collect the lighter and the rust remover. She was filled with relief. “You...nerdy little FREAK!” Tate shrieked. Hailey flicked the lighter to life in front of Tate’s menacing face. Then, she sprayed through the flame with the rust remover. Tate was greeted with a fireball in the face. Her vise like grip was instantly released. Tate screeched with scorching agony. She cried out in breathless bursts of insanity. She frantically scrambled away from Hailey’s little flame thrower. Hailey swallowed a few anxious breaths then fought to her knees. She lit Tate up a second time. Tate scurried across on the floor.

She filled the room with horrifying shouts. She desperately inched her way to a corner beside the door. Hailey trapped Tate between the wall and her homemade blowtorch. Then, she bombarded her with an incessant flame. She torched her ceaselessly until she stopped wriggling. Afterwards, Hailey released her pressure on the nozzle of the spray can. She was greeted with a muffled moan from Gary. He had recovered consciousness just in time to watch the whole thing. He gasped through his nostrils. He stared at twisted ropes of ash that were once his girlfriend’s long, red braids. Hailey hopped up. She looked towards the ceiling at the sound of sprinklers kicking on. They turned on automatically whenever a heat sensor went off. The heat sensor also set off one additional appliance, the school’s fire alarm. A high pitched squeal hummed over the loudspeaker. Hailey’s eyes darted towards the door.

“*Oh, no...*” she whispered. She flew to her stuff and shoved everything into her backpack. The last thing she picked up was the knife she had killed Tommy and Joe with. She turned to Gary with a pair of narrow eyes. Then, she pointed at him with the knife. “You’re lucky, Gary.” She threw her red backpack over her shoulders. She snagged a handful of Gary’s hair. She held his head up and slashed his throat. Then, she dashed through the door and into the hallway. Travis, Jennifer, Vicky, and Paul had already stumbled out of their chemistry class

to see what was going on. They stood in the hallway a few doors down. They stood with their backs to her. “*Shit!*” Hailey whispered. She skidded around the corner at the end of the hallway. She clutched the butcher’s knife behind her back and flattened against the brick wall on the other side.

Travis turned around and narrowed his eyes. He stared at the door to the boy’s bathroom. “*Guys...*” he whispered, patting Jennifer on the shoulder. He pointed towards the restroom. Then, he jogged to the end of the hall. Jennifer, Paul, and Vicky followed on his heels. Hailey waited for the door to ease shut behind them. Then, she snuck around the corner. She raced past the boy’s bathroom with an angry glance at the door. She skidded towards the double doors at the end of the hallway. She shot a look over her shoulder as she pushed through the one on the right. The four of them were nowhere in sight. However, a few other students had begun to make their way into the hallway due to the fire alarm. One more student emerged from Travis, Jennifer, Gary, Tate, Vicky, Paul, Joe, and Tommy’s chemistry class...Wednesday. Hailey didn’t even know she *had* that class with them. Wednesday turned just in time to catch a glimpse of her little buddy. Hailey noticed her just as the door eased shut in front of her.

“*Hailey?*” she whispered. An ice cold voice shot through Hailey’s ears. Hot breath dampened the back of her neck.

“I’ve got you now, Hailey HOLLOWAY!” Hailey spun around on the balls of her feet. She stood frozen. She hid the kitchen knife behind her back. She stared into a pair of crinkled eyes shaded by an amber colored, beehive hairdo. Hailey’s eyes popped open.

“M-Ms. Goodwin.” She gazed into her dark, fiery eyes. Ms. Goodwin pointed a bony, crinkled up index finger right between Hailey’s jade green eyes.

“You are *not* supposed to be here, young lady!” She folded her arms across her chest. A

fierce look of sternness tore across her face. “Let’s find out what Principal Roberts has to say about this.” Hailey’s fire orange eyebrows fell in the middle. She stared into Ms. Goodwin’s smug, shriveled-up face. She’d come too far to be taken down by Glory High’s little watchdog. Ms. Goodwin uncrossed her arms and planted her hands on her hips. “Don’t give me that look, *Hailey*. You were suspended yesterday for fighting, or have we forgotten about that, already?” Hailey didn’t say anything. She lunged forward and jabbed the butcher’s knife into Ms. Goodwin’s heart. She jerked the blade back out, and warm blood splashed her gloved hand. Wild thunder crackled overhead.

Ms. Goodwin gasped, clutching her chest. She crumbled into a heap on the sidewalk, and Hailey dashed into the parking lot. Wednesday was the first through the double doors after her. She gazed through a pair of frantic eyes. She watched her friend skid to the end of the parking lot. Then, she scampered down the sidewalk to the east. There was a bit of shouting and crying from the hallway. The right hand door shut and the noise ceased. The other students had already discovered the bodies of their dead classmates in the boy’s restroom. Wednesday watched Hailey sprint away. She clamped her hand over her mouth. She still couldn’t believe what she had just seen at the end of the hall behind her. She didn’t know what to do. She just didn’t know. She stared towards the end of the parking lot. She took a step forward and snagged Ms. Goodwin’s ankle with her instep. Wednesday stumbled to the side and nearly fell over. She regained her balance and glared at her with a grimace. Ms. Goodwin trembled. She lay on the ground in a pool of blood. Her blood appeared dark, reflecting charcoal clouds in the sky. She stared at Wednesday through a pair of wild eyes, clutching her left breast.

“*Wednesday...*” she gasped, reaching out for her. “*Help me. C-Call an ambulance...*”

Wednesday’s face became solemn. “Shut-up, bitch,” she coldly replied. She cautiously

stepped around the puddle of Ms. Goodwin's blood. Then, she jogged through the parking lot after her friend. Ms. Goodwin turned her head and laid the side of her face in her warm blood. She let out her last breath, blowing bubbles in her blood.

Chapter 16: “The Blame Game”

Hailey slowed to a steady jog. Her knees, back, and lungs ached. She had sprinted from the side door at the high school to half a block from Martin’s house. She jogged then stopped dead in her tracks. She was now beside the twisted trees in his front yard. Her body refused to go any further. She had to stop and catch her breath. Hailey bent over and dropped her hands on her knees. Her orange hair hung her face. She panted like a dog. Her mouth was dry and sticky. She felt sick to her stomach. “*Water...*” she gasped. She tossed her backpack on Martin’s neighbor’s grass. Then, she ripped it open, tossed in her red leather gloves, and snagged one of the bottles of water she had purchased the night prior. She unscrewed the cap with a single flick of her fingers. Afterwards, she plopped the tip of the bottle against her eager lips.

Hailey sucked down a third of the bottle in one gulp. With a grateful sigh, she screwed the cap on and wiped her chin. She froze. She heard a pair of quick feet approaching her from the west. Her head jerked to the right. Her friend Wednesday was barreling towards her. She was a few steps away. She smashed into her, and the two of them went tumbling to the ground. It was quite a shock. Hailey hadn’t anticipated that at all.

“Bah!” she screeched. Her water bottle rolled across the sidewalk, and she rolled across the grass. She landed on her back, and Wednesday landed on top of her. Wednesday got right in her friend’s face. She snagged a hold of her wrists and planted them at the sides of her head.

“What did you do?!” Wednesday growled. “WHAT DID YOU DO?!” Hailey breathed in a panic. Her heart thumped in her ears. She fought to speak.

“*They– They...*”

“*What?!*” Wednesday demanded. Hailey flinched. She turned away and pinched her eyes shut. “They...WHAT?!” Hailey timidly faced her friend. She strained to lift her head off

the ground.

“They tried to kill me!” Wednesday narrowed her angry eyes. She took a moment to comprehend exactly what she was hearing. Then, she let out a breathy sigh and loosened her hold on Hailey’s wrists. Hailey tore her hands away. She yanked her spectacles off her face and tossed them on the ground. “*They tried to kill me...*” She covered her eyes with the palms of her hands and sobbed. Wednesday could feel her shaking. It made her ill. She hated to see her little buddy upset.

“Jesus, Hailey!” Wednesday spat. She rolled to the side, sat next to her on the grass, and watched her cry. She began to feel tears in her own eyes. “*Damn,*” she gasped. She eased back and wrapped Hailey in her arms. She laid her cheek upon hers. “*I knew it...*” A single, salty teardrop fell from the corner of her eye and plopped down on Hailey’s temple. Wednesday sniffled. Then, she lifted her head and looked down. “Hailey, stop crying.” Hailey turned her head and looked up. She didn’t have her glasses on. Wednesday looked all blurry.

“You’re crying too,” she replied. She wiped tears from Wednesday’s pale, blue eyes. Wednesday smiled sadly and took Hailey’s hand in hers. She slid her thumb back and forth across her knuckles.

“Tell me...” she began. She stopped to clear her throat. “Tell me what they did to you.” Hailey closed her eyes. Then, she turned away, shaking her head.

“No, Wednesday. Uh-uh...” Wednesday slid her other hand beneath Hailey’s cheek. She turned her head, forcing her to face her.

“Come on, Hailey. Talk to me. Tell me what they did. I want to hear.”

“No you don’t, Wednesday,” Hailey assured her.

“Yes, I do.” Hailey stared at her friend through a cold gaze. Then, she rolled her eyes

and sighed.

“Alright,” Hailey replied. “How about if I tell you about those jerks beating the crap out of me with metal bats? Is that...intimate enough for you, Wednesday?” Wednesday’s eyes popped open, and she looked away. “How about if I tell you they bled me like a stuck pig? Then, they tied me up and screamed in my face.” Hailey snagged a hold of Wednesday’s chin. She turned her buddy’s head, sat up, and glared into her eyes. “Is that GOOD enough for you, Wednesday?!”

“Hailey...” Wednesday squealed.

Hailey let go of Wednesday’s chin. “That pig, Larry, raped me the other night. You wanna hear about that, too?!” Wednesday let out a shaky sigh. “He killed my mother last night. You wanna know what I did about it? Huh?!” Hailey crossed her arms over her chest. “ANSWER ME!”

Wednesday took her hand from the side of Hailey’s face and draped it across her eyes. “*God, Hailey,*” she sobbed. “I didn’t...KNOW all that!” She leaned back and sighed. She wiped tears from her eyes. Then, she returned her trembling hand to the side of Hailey’s face and looked at her. “He killed your mother, too?” Hailey closed her eyes and nodded. Then, her head twisted to the side. She looked towards the end of the block. The sound of loud rock music was approaching. She recognized the artist. It was YKC.

“*Shit!*” Hailey whispered.

Wednesday looked around. “*What?*” she whispered back. The music grew louder, and Hailey’s eyes widened.

“It’s Travis!” she shrieked. She tore free of Wednesday’s grasp. Then, she snatched her backpack and glasses off the ground. “Hide!” Hailey threw her glasses and her backpack on,

dashed to the edge of the sidewalk, and retrieved her water bottle. Then, she and Wednesday sprinted through Martin's neighbor's lawn. They dashed towards a row of shrubbery which resided next to the neighbor's front door. They squeezed behind a set of thin bushes and crouched out of sight. Travis' truck peeled around the corner. Hailey and Wednesday watched from their tiny hiding place. The truck screeched to a stop in front of Martin's house next to the sidewalk. Travis and Jennifer emerged. They jogged through the yard and up the stairs to Martin's pine porch. The sky filled with lightning. Hailey stared across the few rows of grass that separated them. Twisted thoughts began to flood her brain. Thunder roared overhead.

"I could kill them right now," Hailey whispered. She quietly unzipped a side pocket on her red backpack. Wednesday faced her. Hailey held up her father's two shot pistol and took aim. *"I could pick the little shit-heads off one at a time...like little birdies."*

Wednesday placed her hand on top of Hailey's hands. *"Hailey, PUT that back up! Are you out of your mind?"* Hailey glanced at her. Then, she withdrew her weapon and let it rest at her side.

"You're right," she coldly replied. *"There's no way I could hit them from here with this tiny, little thing."* She returned the gun to the side pocket of her backpack and gingerly zipped it closed. Vicky and Paul screeched around the corner in the Station Cruiser. Vicky drove her olive green car onto her father's driveway. She quickly got it stopped and killed the engine. Afterwards, she and Paul hopped out. They hurried to the porch and joined Jennifer and Travis. Paul pointed at them as he trotted through the grass.

"This is your fault! You see what you two started?" Travis threw his arms out at his sides. He stared at them through a pair of angry eyes.

"Shut-up, Paul!" he shouted back. *"Don't give me that. You're just as much a part of*

this as *I* am.”

Paul hopped onto the porch and got right in Travis’ face. “Here in a minute, you won’t be part of *nothin’!*” Vicky hopped onto the porch. Jennifer flipped open a butterfly knife and held it to her neck.

“Touch him. And, I’ll slice her throat, you little faggot!”

“Guys, *this* isn’t helping anything!” Vicky screamed. “Will everyone please calm down?” Paul crossed his arms over his chest and backed away. Jennifer flicked her knife closed. She dropped it in the pocket of her red and black, flannel pants. She bent forward, shaking her index finger.

“YOU better keep that pin prick boyfriend of yours on a leash, honey.”

Paul turned to her. “Jennifer, I’m gonna rip your head off and stick it up your *ass* if you don’t shut the hell up.” Travis threw a fist at him. Paul stepped to the side and wrapped his fingers around his wrist. He jerked Travis’ arm to one side. Then, he swept his legs from underneath him with his foot. Travis landed flat on his back atop Martin’s pine deck with a grunt. Paul treaded to the left side of the porch, and Travis hopped to his feet. Martin’s car pulled into the driveway. It was a white, 1980 Cutler. Paul dodged a couple more furious fists from Travis. Then, he dashed at him. He shoved him off the end of the knee high deck. Travis smashed into the hard ground. He fell on his back. Martin hopped out of his car and slammed the door.

“Boys! Boys!” he shouted. Travis and Paul turned him. Martin walked around the front of his car, pointing at them. “You two need to calm down.”

Paul raised his hands at either side of his face. “Sorry.” Travis blew air through his lips. Then, he scrambled to his feet.

“So, what’s going on, guys?” Martin demanded. He arrived at the end of the porch and looked down at Travis. “She came back? To settle the score?” Travis shrugged. He smacked chunks of dirt off his red, leather jacket. Martin looked at Paul. “I thought you guys took care of this already.” Wednesday turned to Hailey. They had a great perspective on things, hidden behind the neighbor’s bushes. It was like watching a soap opera.

“*Wait a minute,*” she whispered. “*He KNOWS?*”

Hailey shrugged. “*Apparently.*”

“*Who IS this guy?*” Wednesday inquired. Hailey shushed her.

“Who is this...girl...again?” Martin implored.

“Her name is Hailey...something,” Vicky told her father. “She’s in our English class.”

“Yeah,” Paul added. “I can’t remember her last name.”

“Hailey?” Martin repeated. “You mean that little red headed girl that walks by our house every day?” Vicky nodded. Martin narrowed his eyes. He looked around at all of them. “You mean that teeny...tiny little girl?” He held his hand to his waist, palm down. “She’s like...this tall?”

“Very funny,” Paul replied. “You should’ve seen what she did to Gary, Tate, Joe, and Tommy. You wouldn’t be saying that.”

Martin shook his head. “You’ve gotta be kidding me!” He pointed towards the street. “I’ll bet I could toss that little girl all the way across the road over there.” Travis looked at the grass. He felt ashamed. Martin turned to his daughter. “Vicky, go get your yearbook.”

“You never got me one last year,” she told him.

Martin rolled his eyes. “Does anybody have their yearbook from last year?”

Travis looked around. “Was she even *at* our school last year?”

“Nope,” Hailey whispered from the bushes. A grin twisted across her face. *“I wasn’t IN high school yet.”*

“She seems young,” Vicky replied. “Probably not.”

“I think I have a yearbook in my bedroom,” Paul remarked. Everyone turned to him. He looked away, thinking. “Somewhere...”

Martin pointed at him. “Well, let’s go find it. We need a last name so we can figure out where she lives.” He turned to Travis. “Travis, you and Jennifer follow us in your truck.” He turned to Paul. “You and Vicky ride with me.” He looked at Vicky and pointed towards the garage. “Vicky, park the Station Cruiser in the garage.”

“Yeah, sure,” she slowly replied. She hopped off the porch; Travis helped Jennifer down; and everyone hurried to their vehicles.

“Jesus Christ, there like a cult or something,” Wednesday remarked.

“It’s worse,” Hailey replied. *“They’ve done this before.”*

Wednesday turned to her. *“How do you know?”*

“Look at all their faces.” Hailey pointed at them through the bushes. *“Calm, collected, poised– They all know the drill. It’s like their packing up a lunch.”* Hailey leaned against the sandy brick wall behind her with a quiet sigh. *“I noticed it before, too.”*

“You mean when they attacked you?”

“Yes,” Hailey replied. She swallowed hard. *“They had a bat for everyone. They had all their little ropes and rolls of tape and light bulbs all nice and neat and organized.”*

“Light bulbs?” Wednesday inquired.

“Yeah.”

Wednesday tugged on the end of Hailey’s red coat. *“Let me see.”* Hailey glared at her.

“Come on, Hailey. I want to see what those bastards did to you.”

Hailey shook her head. *“I’ll show you when we get out of here. You don’t want them to hear us, do you?”* Wednesday shook her head. They returned their attention to the others. Vicky stood beside her father. He rolled the garage door down behind her car. Then, they wandered over to *his* car.

“Can’t we just...call the police?” she asked. Martin ripped the driver’s door open and glared at her. He reached over the front seat and unlocked the rear, passenger door.

“No. This situation is screwed up enough as it is.” He climbed into the driver’s seat, and Vicky climbed into the seat behind him. Vicky reached across and unlocked the opposite door for Paul. Paul pulled his door open and climbed in. Next, Martin fired up the engine, backed out, and pulled away. Travis and Jennifer followed in their earsplitting truck. A few seconds later, Hailey and Wednesday emerged from their hiding place behind the neighbor’s bushes.

“Now, can I see?” Wednesday begged. Hailey dusted leaves off the sleeves of her red jacket. She narrowed her eyes.

“No. I’ll show you when we get to *my* house.” She turned and headed for the sidewalk. Wednesday grabbed her by the arm.

“Wait. *Your* house? We can’t go there. They’ll be looking for you there.”

“I have to go back home,” Hailey explained. “I have to get my mother’s S.U.V.”

“Her S.U.V.? Why didn’t you just drive it to school?”

“I don’t have a parking permit,” Hailey replied. She tore away and headed for the sidewalk.

“Wait!” Wednesday pleaded. “We *can’t* go to your house. We CAN’T!” Hailey stopped in her tracks then turned to face her friend.

“So, stay here.”

Wednesday crossed her arms over her chest. “Fine.”

“Fine,” Hailey replied with a nod. She turned and began to walk.

“Hai-ley!” Wednesday cried. She jogged across the grass and down the sidewalk. She caught up with her buddy. “No way,” she told her. She hooked her arm through hers, and they walked together. “There is NO way. I’m never letting you out of my sight again.” Hailey smirked. She flicked the lid off her water bottle and had a sip. Then, she handed the bottle off to Wednesday. Wednesday took a good, long drink then handed it back. “Thanks, man,” she told her with a gracious sigh.

“Wednesday, let go of my arm,” Hailey demanded. Wednesday laid her head against Hailey’s shoulder. She looked up and smiled at her as they strolled along. Hailey shook her head with a smirk. “I swear. You are such a lesbian.” Wednesday gasped. She picked her head up and turned to her.

“I am *not* a lesbian!”

Hailey laughed. “Wednesday, let go of my damn arm!” Wednesday smiled and let go.

Chapter 17: “Hailey’s House”

A clock hung near the ceiling on the southern wall of the kitchen. According to it, the girls arrived at Hailey’s house at 11:02. It was a novelty clock, made to look like a certain cartoon cat. It had a pair of oversized eyes that rolled from left to right, ticking away the seconds. The tail swung back and forth like a pendulum. The storm door eased shut without flopping in the door frame like it usually did. Wednesday looked around in disbelief. The kitchen table, floor, and countertops were all clean and shiny. The carpet in the living room looked fresh and fluffy. There wasn’t a trace of stale pizza or beer cans anywhere. The wooden television had been dusted and cleaned. The entire house smelled like lavender. Hailey had even managed to make the old, cruddy coffee table look immaculate. Hailey set her red backpack next to the front door. She glanced at her friend. Wednesday’s jaw swung open, and her eyes darted around the room.

“*My God,*” she gasped. “Is this the right *house?*” Hailey smiled. She slipped off her friend’s denim backpack. She set it on the floor next to hers. Then, she eased the door shut and latched it. She took Wednesday’s hand and led her down the hall to her bedroom. Hailey flicked on her bedroom light. As usual, she closed and locked the door behind her. “Expecting someone?” Wednesday inquired. She tossed her leather jacket onto Hailey’s bed.

“Habit,” Hailey told her. She twisted the lock the other direction and jerked the door open.

“Alright,” Wednesday remarked, “now, let me see.” Hailey ripped off her red coat. She retrieved Wednesday’s and hung them both neatly in her closet. “Come again?”

“Let me *see!*” Wednesday hissed.

“Oh, Wednesday!”

“One tiny peek,” Wednesday begged. “Here, I’ll show you *mine* if you show me *yours*.” She yanked off her white, button up shirt. It was a girly, dressy shirt to go with the rest of her fifties style getup.

Hailey threw her hands out at her sides. “Wen— You are such a lesbian.”

“I am not a lesbian!” Wednesday shouted back. “Now, show me. You promised!” Hailey pressed her lips together and narrowed her eyes. Then, she sighed. She slowly, reluctantly peeled off her red blouse and tossed it on the bed. She threw her arms over her head and turned around to show her.

“Happy?” Hailey demanded.

“Nice bra!” Wednesday replied with a smile and a nod.

Hailey smirked. “Right back at-cha, Pokie-Dot.”

“Hey, it matches my little skirt here,” Wednesday explained. She snatched her shirt off Hailey’s bed and slid it back on. Then, she wandered over to check out her friend’s battle scars. Hailey winced at the touch of her cold fingers. Wednesday placed a hand here and there, feeling her baseball bat welts. Her skin was jagged and bumpy where it had been sliced by glass shards. “Man, these look terrible,” Wednesday remarked. “There healing up pretty...”

Hailey looked at her over her shoulder. “What?”

“You didn’t even listen to it!” Wednesday shouted. She snatched the Blades of Sloth CD she had given her off the table next to her bed.

“I did *too*,” Hailey assured her. “I don’t like them. They’re...not my style.”

“Right...” Wednesday mused. She crossed her arms over her chest. “And, what’s in *here*?” She placed her finger on the open button on Hailey’s CD player. “Let me guess...Walter!”

“I like Walter,” Hailey replied.

Wednesday popped open the CD player and had a look. “Hailey, you are such a loser.”

“Shut-up, lesbo,” Hailey replied. She snatched her blouse off the bed and threw it back on.

“Hailey, stop calling me a lesbian.”

“Stop acting like one!”

“Ugh!” Wednesday replied with a disgusted face. Hailey snickered. She reached behind Wednesday’s back and smacked her CD player closed. Wednesday tossed the CD she had given her on the table. Then, she looked up, slowly. She peered deep into Hailey’s jade green eyes. Hailey cringed. She stared into Wednesday’s eyes of teal.

“You’re coming onto me, aren’t you?” Hailey asked.

“No!” Wednesday shouted. She turned her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. Hailey placed her hand on her buddy’s shoulder.

“Wednesday? What is it?” Wednesday looked into her eyes. She took her friend’s hand off her shoulder and held it between hers.

“Hailey...” She stopped and swallowed hard. “Hailey, are you going to kill Travis and the rest of them?” She narrowed her eyes. “And, that other guy– What’s his name again?”

Hailey sighed. “Martin. Vicky’s father.”

Wednesday nodded. “Are you going to kill them all, too?”

“Wednesday, I have to.”

“Why?” Wednesday asked. “Can’t you...call the cops or something?”

“Yes,” Hailey replied. “But, I’m not going to.”

“How come?”

Hailey patted Wednesday's hands with her other hand. "Because it's none of their business. This is between me and them."

"And *me*," Wednesday added.

Hailey shook her head. "This has nothing to do with you, Wednesday."

"Yes."

"No, Wednesday."

"Yes, it does!" Wednesday shrieked. She placed her hand over her heart. "You're my friend!" Hailey looked into her eyes then looked away. "Hailey..." Wednesday trailed off. Her voice was shaky. "Come on, man. L-Let me help you." Hailey looked at her. A tear trickled out of Wednesday's left eye and tumbled down her cheek. Hailey shook her head.

"O-Okay..." She reached across and flicked the tear from Wednesday's face. "Alright, damn." She took Wednesday in her arms. Wednesday laid her head on her shoulder. Hailey dropped her hand on the back of Wednesday's head. "I-I'm sorry, Wednesday. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." She turned and sat her friend on the end of the bed. "Here, I'll tell you what. I'm going to tell you a secret, okay?" Wednesday looked at her with a pair of big, sad eyes. Hailey grabbed the chair from her desk, rolled it to the bed, and sat face to face with her. She sat backwards in the chair, folding her arms over the back.

"It's about my mother and Larry."

Wednesday narrowed her eyes. "She's not really dead, is she?"

"No...she's dead," Hailey assured her. "She's...really, really dead."

"Okay," Wednesday blew through a laugh.

"Alright," Hailey continued. "Now, I'm telling you this because you're my friend, and I trust you. Really." Wednesday looked down at her lap then back up. "Now, when I came home

last night, there was Larry, leaning over my mother's body, dismembering her with an axe."

Wednesday made a disgusted face. "Ew, God!"

"Yeah," Hailey replied. "And...that's when I killed him."

Wednesday patted Hailey's hand. "How?"

"Kitchen knife," Hailey told her. "Stuck it right in his nuts."

"No way!"

"Right in the balls, Wednesday. Then, *I* chopped my mother's head off." Hailey swallowed hard. "Then, I chopped him up, too."

Wednesday withdrew her hand. "Maybe you're right, Hailey. Maybe I *don't* want to know this."

Hailey chuckled. "Told you. Then, I buried them."

"Where at?"

"Cherry Cemetery. They're underneath someone else's casket."

"What?" Wednesday asked. "How?" She leaned forward. "How did you do that?"

"I hid them in the open grave the night before," Hailey explained. "Just threw a little dirt on top of them."

Wednesday narrowed her eyes and nodded. "And...what's the name on the headstone?" Hailey was silent with hesitation. Wednesday awaited her response. She reached across and placed her hand on top of hers. "Hey...trust me."

Hailey nodded then turned away. "Cat. Catherine J. Smith."

Wednesday was overwhelmed with a smile. "Thank you," she replied. She fidgeted on the end of Hailey's bed, settling in. "Now, let me tell *you* a secret."

"You're really a lesbian?"

“Dammit, Hailey!” Wednesday shouted.

Paul stepped into his bedroom. He flipped on the light switch next to the door. Every bulb in the room flickered on except for the main bulb. It dangled from the middle of the ceiling fan. The ceiling fan slowly spun to life. It shook from side to side. Paul walked in followed by Vicky, Travis, Jennifer, and Martin. Martin placed his hands on his hips. He had a good, long look around the room. The walls were covered with punk posters, black lights, and Paul’s drawings. On the ceiling was a multicolored array of stick on stars. They glowed in reaction to the black lights. Not an inch of carpet could be seen. It was covered with old clothes, schoolbooks, homework papers that should have been turned in long ago, and countless other novelties.

“Good God, Paul,” Martin remarked. “You didn’t have to clean the place up for us.”

Paul turned to him with a smirk. “Sorry, Martin.”

“Who’s your decorator there, Paul?” Jennifer inquired. “Hunter S. Thompson?”

“Shut the hell up, and find the damn book,” Paul replied. He knelt down and tossed a couple of pairs of blue jeans aside. Everyone began to sift through Paul’s junk. Martin came up from the floor. He had an old skateboard shoe in one hand and a bowling pin and deflated basketball in the other.

“Can’t we at least get a decent light in here?” he asked. Paul pointed at the light bulb that hung from the middle of the ceiling fan. It dangled from three long wires.

“*That* light doesn’t work,” he explained. He motioned towards the corner across from the door. “Go turn on a T-V or something.” Martin looked at the corner with a pair of narrow eyes. Paul was pointing at a stack of old, dysfunctional televisions. He turned back.

“Paul, what the hell is wrong with you?” Martin asked.

“Here,” Vicky said. She handed her father a power strip she had found on the floor. “Go plug them *all* in.”

Paul watched Vicky hand the power strip to Martin. “Hey, there’s that damn thing!” He remarked. Martin carried the power strip to the corner of televisions. “I’ve been looking for that.” Martin plugged the power strip into an outlet in the corner. Then, he began plugging televisions into it. There were so many, he couldn’t fit them all. Martin stared at the pile of televisions.

“Paul, where did you get all of these?”

“He collects them,” Vicky explained. She smacked a few empty soda cans out of her way. Martin knelt down. He turned on the six televisions he had plugged into the power strip. They added a bright, eerie light of white snow to the black lighted room. He shook his head and went back to work. Travis tossed around a couple of t-shirts and half a broken skateboard deck. He turned to the table at the head of Paul’s bed. He sat up, craning his neck. He stared at a CD player on top.

“What-cha got in the ole music box?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Paul replied. “Turn it on.” Travis pressed the play button. The disc inside spun to life. Then, the CD player filled the room with a dash of funky, fast, furious punk rock. Travis grinned. He nodded his head to the energetic beat. He turned to see the look on Martin’s face. Martin shook his head behind a pair of squinted eyes.

“Travis, turn that shit off!” he demanded.

“Come on, Martin!” Travis teased. “Marty!”

Martin snapped his fingers and pointed at him. “Hey, I told you not to call me that!” Travis turned the volume down, and Martin listened. “Who the hell *is* this?”

“Kinky Sex Dog Collars,” Paul told him.

“Well, it sucks!” Martin replied. He turned to his daughter. “Vicky, you listen to this kind of crap?”

She smiled and nodded. “I *like* K-S-D-C.” Martin sighed. He folded a few pairs of Paul’s jeans and stacked them against the wall.

“I need a beer,” he remarked.

“I think we could all use one,” Paul conceded. He stacked a couple of schoolbooks next to his bed. Then, he hopped up and left the bedroom. Jennifer looked up from a pile of trash she was accumulating.

“What a mess! We’re *never* going to find this damn thing.”

“Yeah, really,” Travis agreed. “Where is this... ‘yearbook,’ I wonder?”

“It’s here somewhere,” Vicky assured them. She tossed a handful of cigarette butts into a small trashcan she’d managed to come up with. “He’s showed it to me before.” She held the trashcan out to Jennifer, and Jennifer crammed her pile of garbage into it. Vicky set the trashcan down, and Martin pointed at it.

“Was that a banana peel?”

“I hope not,” Jennifer replied with a pair of raised eyebrows.

“Gyah!” Travis screeched. He turned away and buried his face in his arm.

“What?” Vicky and Jennifer asked simultaneously. Travis returned his gaze to the space beneath Paul’s bed. He reached inside, gingerly. Next, he slowly dragged something out with the tips of his fingers.

“*Pork rinds!*” Travis groaned. He slid the bag across the floor towards his girlfriend. It came to rest against her leg. Jennifer shrieked and hopped away.

“Oh my...God,” Martin gasped. He fixed his eyes upon the bag of fried pork skins. The clear plastic sack was completely covered on the inside with giant, black spots of mold.

“What’s up?” Paul asked from the doorway. Everyone turned to him. He stood with five glass bottles of beer in his arms. He looked at the putrid bag of moldy pig flesh on his floor. He narrowed his eyes. “Oh, yeah...” he trailed off, handing Martin a beer. “Forgot all *about* those.” He leaned over and handed Vicky and Travis a beer. Then, he tip-toed across layers of miscellaneous junk and handed one to Jennifer.

“Thank you, Paul,” Jennifer remarked.

“Welcome,” he replied. He wriggled across the floor and sat by Vicky.

“Hey, Paul?” Jennifer began.

“Yeah?” Jennifer twisted the top off her beer. She flipped it into the small trashcan Vicky had found.

“Look, I’m sorry about earlier.”

Travis took a drink of his beer. “Yeah, me too.”

Paul half-smiled at them. “Now’s not the time guys.” He cracked open his beer and had a sip. “Let’s just find this damn yearbook.” He tossed a couple of things out of the way. “We can kiss each others’ asses later.” Martin looked up from a stack of homework papers he was collecting. He glared at the bag of pork rinds Travis had found underneath the bed earlier. He narrowed his eyes. They just lay there, rotting and stinking up the room. He chanced a glance inside the bag. Its contents were horrifying and unrecognizable. The inside was a blurry brew of undecipherable forms and multicolored pellets.

“Can we please do something about this bag of shit on the floor?” Martin begged.

“Yeah, that thing’s really freaking me out!” Jennifer added. “I think it just breathed.”

Paul found an old radio antenna and hopped to his feet. “You guys are such a bunch of pussies.” He bent over, poked the antenna into the end of the bag, and lifted it off the floor.

Then, he exited the bedroom. Jennifer threw her hands up at either side of her face, palms out.

“That’s gross!”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t look under there anymore if I were you guys,” Vicky told them. “I’ve seen him shove all kinds of things under there.”

Chapter 18: “Moth to Flame”

It was after six. Wednesday slowly swished to and fro on Hailey’s good swing. She dragged the toes of her saddle shoes through loose dirt. She stared down at her buddy. Hailey was tinkering with the other swing. She was trying to reattach the broken side of the seat to its chain. Behind them, a pack of puffy, white clouds hovered in front of a grey sky. Wednesday turned her head and looked across Hailey’s backyard. It was bare dirt where it wasn’t overgrown with hideous weeds. She squinted, looking it over carefully. There wasn’t a single blade of grass. Here and there was the occasional candy bar wrapper and grocery sack that had blown over the fence from time to time. There were a couple of old tires and a gathering of empty beer bottles. But, there was not a single blade of grass throughout the entire yard. There wasn’t even a thin, scraggly one.

“You should mow,” Wednesday remarked. She tumbled a pack of cigarettes between her fingers. Hailey looked around then resumed work on the swing seat.

“Wednesday, the only hope for this yard would be to dig it up and plant a new one. You know, put down some of that Saint Augustine?”

“Mm,” Wednesday replied. She placed a cigarette between her lips and dropped the pack in her lap. “We should do that, you and me. That would be fun.”

Hailey smiled. “Got any money?”

“I’ve got five bucks in my pocket.” There was a ring attached to the side of the seat. Hailey squeezed the bottom chain link around it with a pair of channel locks. Then, she slid onto the swing to try it out. She laid the pliers in her lap and gingerly slid her slender fingers around the chains. She slowly rocked back and forth. She turned to Wednesday.

“I don’t think that’s going to cover it.”

Wednesday flipped open a shiny, gold lighter and flicked it to life. “Bummer.” She brought the lighter towards her face. She sparked up the coffin nail that hung from her ruby red lips. “I was really looking forward to it, too.” She slid the lighter into the pack of cigarettes. Next, she plucked the cigarette from her mouth, exhaled a white cloud, and swung through. It whooshed passed her face. “Need some trees too, huh?” She offered her cigarette to Hailey.

“Mm-hmm,” Hailey agreed. She snatched the cigarette from her. She tossed it into the dirt and smashed it out with a dash from her white canvas shoe.

“Hey, ass-hole!” Wednesday shrieked with an angry smirk. Hailey cackled. Then, she leaned back and swung faster. Wednesday smacked her lips and glared at her friend. “Little bitch.” Hailey looked at her lap. Her swinging slowed and her laughter turned into a smile. She looked at Wednesday.

“Sorry, man. It was just so tempting.”

“Uh-huh...” Wednesday trailed off. She popped another stogie in her mouth. “I’m going to remember that, Hailey.” She flipped her lighter open and sparked the second cigarette to life. “I’m writing it down right now.” She held her finger in front of her face and wrote in the air. “‘Hailey – one cigarette’.” The new cigarette bounced up and down between her lips as she spoke. Hailey giggled. She dragged the toes of her shoes through the dirt and eased her swinging to a slow rock. “Don’t laugh,” Wednesday remarked. She plucked her smoke from her mouth and exhaled through her nostrils. “Seriously, Hailey, today’s the day you’re going to start smoking.”

Hailey looked at her friend. “Yeah, go ahead and hold another one of those up for me. See if I don’t do the same damn thing.” Wednesday smacked her lips. She looked away with a shake of her head. She had a drag. “Maybe *you* should be the one to change,” Hailey remarked.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe you should quit smoking. Then, we’d both be happy.”

“What? No!” Wednesday smirked and took a puff of her cigarette. “Guess again, honey.”

“Fine then,” Hailey replied. A confident smile crossed her face. She faced forward. “We’ll *both* be miserable.”

Wednesday turned to her. “Really? You want me to quit smoking? It-It makes you miserable?”

“I wish EVERYONE would quit smoking,” Hailey replied. “It makes *everybody* miserable.”

Wednesday stared at the dirt, pondering that. “That’s very wise,” she concluded. She flicked ash from the end of her smoke and put it to her lips. “Doesn’t mean I’m going to quit smoking, though.”

“*No one ever does,*” Hailey mumbled under her breath. The girls swung in silence for a little while. The silence was interrupted by a growling stomach. Wednesday patted her belly and looked at Hailey. “I’m hungry,” she told her. The wind picked up, and her hair began to whirl in front of her face.

“Got some pizza in the fridge,” Hailey replied. Wednesday grabbed Hailey by the arm. Her eyes widened.

“What kind?”

“All the meats.” Wednesday tossed what was left of her smoke on the ground and stomped it out. She hopped off her swing and took Hailey by the hand.

“Man, why didn’t you say so!” Wednesday hauled her friend inside and to the

refrigerator. She dropped her smokes on the counter next to the sink on her way past.

“Go ahead,” Hailey told her. She flicked on the lights and set the channel locks next to Wednesday’s smokes. “Help yourself.” Hailey jerked open the refrigerator door. Then, she gathered a couple of paper plates from a cupboard above the sink. Wednesday found the half pizza Hailey had left in the fridge and tossed it on the counter. She flipped open the box.

“Hailey?” Wednesday inquired. She tossed two slices of pizza on each plate. She popped one in a microwave on top of the refrigerator. She set the timer for a minute and a half. Hailey snagged two sodas from the refrigerator and handed one to Wednesday.

“What’s up, man?” she asked.

“Man, I’m worried,” Wednesday replied. “Don’t you think they’re going to find us here?”

Hailey shrugged. “I don’t know what *you’re* worried about. You didn’t do anything.” Wednesday set her soda on the counter. She placed her hand on Hailey’s shoulder.

“Dammit, Hailey...YOU! I’m worried about *you*.”

Hailey stared into her eyes. “You know what? I hope they do come by. Then, maybe I can finish this.” Wednesday shook her head. She turned away to watch her pizza spin in the nuke box. “Wednesday, if you don’t like this, you can always leave.” Hailey placed her hand over her heart. “I-I’ll understand.” Wednesday’s eyes filled with tears. She pinched them shut. Hailey dropped a hand on Wednesday’s shoulder. “Hey...screw them. Don’t let them scare you.” She patted her friend’s shoulder. “Let’s scare *them* for a change.” Wednesday smiled a little. She turned and met Hailey’s jade green eyes.

“Now, I get it.”

“What?” Hailey asked. She slid her hand off Wednesday’s shoulder. Wednesday

snatched Hailey's glasses off her face. She held them to a light on the ceiling and looked them over.

"You see, *I* was afraid that you wanted to die." She exhaled a couple of hot breaths on each of Hailey's lenses then rubbed them with her shirt. "But that's not it at all. You just want to make them pay for what they did." Hailey nodded. Wednesday held her spectacles to the light again. "You're not afraid of them, but you don't have a death wish." Wednesday exhaled a couple more breaths on Hailey's lenses. She rubbed them with her shirt again. Hailey shook her head.

"No, I don't want to die. I want to live. Definitely." Wednesday glanced at Hailey's glasses. She rubbed a few final smears from the edges of the lenses. Then, she handed them back. "I'm not suicidal," Hailey continued, "but I'll die before I'll let them get away with what they did to me." She looked at her nice, clean spectacles then tossed them on her face. Wednesday took her friend in her arms.

"I-I hope it doesn't come to that," she told her.

Hailey hugged her back. "Well, that's what I've got *you* for. You've got my back, right?" Wednesday relaxed her arms. She backed away and nestled her forehead against Hailey's.

"*Yes...*" she whispered. They gazed into each other's eyes. The microwave dinged. Hailey sighed. She let go so Wednesday could get her pizza. Wednesday popped the microwave open. She poked at the cheese a couple of times. Then, she removed the plate and tossed Hailey's in its place. She initiated a second 90-second heating cycle. Afterwards, she snatched up her soda and moseyed into the living room. She sat on the loveseat across from the television. She set her plate on the crummy coffee table. She cracked open her soda and had a sip. She set

the soda next to her plate. “I should’ve ditched class,” she remarked.

“What?” Hailey asked from the kitchen.

Wednesday turned and faced her over the back of the loveseat. “I should’ve ditched class and left with you yesterday,” she repeated.

“No, I told you to stay there.”

Wednesday shook her head. “No— No, I should’ve walked you home, man. A real friend would’ve skipped class and walked home with you.”

“It’s not your fault, Wednesday. It’s *their* fault.” Hailey flicked her fiery hair out of her face. “*They* tried to kill me.” She cleared her throat. “It’s me, I’m the one.” Wednesday turned, grabbed a slice of pizza, and whirled around to face her. She took a big, cheesy bite.

“You don’t think you’re a good friend?”

Hailey shook her head. “I remember...yesterday morning, you were asking me if there was anything wrong.” Wednesday nodded. She swallowed and took another bite.

“Yeah, I remember that,” she replied. “And, *you* wouldn’t talk to me about it.” She turned, had a sip of her soda, and turned back. “So, you had Larry on your mind.” Hailey nodded. Wednesday looked out the window. “See, I knew something was up. That...piece of shit!” She turned to Hailey. “So, why didn’t you tell me *then*? Probably could’ve prevented this whole thing, you know.” Hailey made a sarcastic smirk. She glanced at the timer on the microwave and turned back.

“Yeah, I don’t know.”

“Care to hear what I think?” Wednesday inquired. The microwave dinged. Hailey snatched up *her* two slices of pizza and her soda. Then, she joined Wednesday in the living room. She sat on the adjacent couch.

“I’d love to hear what *you* think,” Hailey replied. She opened her soda. Then, she set it and her pizza on the coffee table.

“I don’t think you *wanted* to talk to me about it.” Hailey chomped down on the tip of a slice of pizza and pulled it away from her teeth. It left a stringy trail of cheese in its wake.

“Why?” she asked. She nibbled up the bit of cheese that hung from her lips.

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about that since you left the school yesterday.” Wednesday had a sip of soda. “Do you not trust me, Hailey? Is *that* it?”

“No,” Hailey replied. She tossed a pepperoni into her mouth. She hopped up and returned to the kitchen. She tore off a couple of paper towels for herself and her guest. “M-Maybe...” she conceded.

“Huh?” Hailey returned to the living room. She dropped one of the paper towels in Wednesday’s lap on her way to the couch.

“I think you may be right about that,” Hailey admitted. She reclaimed her seat. “Sorry.” Wednesday smirked on one side of her face. She had a bite of pizza. “Well, what about you, Ms. Perfect? Put yourself in my shoes. You’re faced with a situation. Not just anything, something BAD...”

“Bad, eh?”

“Yeah. Earth-shattering,” Hailey stipulated. “And, you’re really hurt, and, I guess, embarrassed by this particular thing.”

“You’d be the first person I’d come to,” Wednesday assured her through a mouthful of pizza. Hailey lowered her head and planted her hands on top. She stared at her lap then came up for air.

“Alright, fine,” she replied, followed by a sip of soda. “Fine. Next time I need *anything*,

you'll be the first person to know."

Wednesday pointed at her. "You're damn right I will," she told her. "You...got that right." She had a bite of pizza. "I owe you one."

Hailey looked up. "What do you mean? Why do you owe me one?"

"Because that's what friends do, Hailey," Wednesday explained. She held the last of her first slice in front of her face. "They owe each other." She stuffed the rest in her mouth and turned to her. "EVERYTHING!"

"Oh-kay..." Hailey trailed off. She turned and widened her eyes. "I *see* then." She took another bite and washed it down with a dash of soda. "I'm sorry, Wednesday. I didn't mean to upset you." Wednesday smiled at her next slice of pizza. It dangled from the tips of her fingers.

"That's okay, dear," she replied. Hailey plucked her red shoelaces loose. She kicked her shoes onto the empty couch cushion next to her. "I just wish you'd talk to me more. That's all." Wednesday sank her teeth into the tip of her second slice of pizza and gave it a couple of chomps. "I don't want you to feel like you have to *hide* that shit from me." Hailey looked at Wednesday. She was sitting on the loveseat with her legs folded up. She reached across and flicked *her* shoelaces loose as well. "That's just not what...friends..." Wednesday watched. Hailey jerked one of her saddle shoes off her foot. "What the hell are you doing?" she demanded. Hailey looked up and smiled. She removed the other one. She placed them side by side on the loveseat. Then, she patted her on the knee. She sat back in her seat and finished off her first slice of pizza.

"Friends don't hide stuff from each other, Hailey," Wednesday continued. "You know what I mean?" Hailey narrowed her eyes. She had a sip of soda and set the can on the table.

"Not really," she replied.

“Bah!” Wednesday cried. “I’m gonna punch you in the nose!” Hailey cackled, poking at the other piece of pizza on her plate.

“That’s not a bad idea!” Travis called from across the room. Hailey and Wednesday’s sights became glued to the hallway. Travis grinned at them, waving hello. He stepped to the front door, unlatched it, and ripped it open. Jennifer was on the other side. She greeted the two of them with a disgusting smirk. She moseyed inside and slid the door shut. Wednesday hopped across the loveseat and joined Hailey on the couch. She timidly placed her hands on Hailey’s shoulders. Hailey reached up and took her hands in hers. Wednesday lowered her head to whisper in Hailey’s ear.

“*What do we do?*” she demanded.

“We run!” Hailey yelled back. She hopped up and dashed for the back door. Wednesday dashed after her. No sooner had Hailey ripped the back door open, they were both backing away. They returned to the living room. Paul, Vicky, and Martin wandered in after them. Martin eased the door shut and latched it.

“Not so tough without her little bag of tricks, eh Pauley?” Travis sneered.

Hailey spun around on the red and white heels of her socks. “How– How did you find me?”

Travis crossed his arms over his chest. “Now, did you really think that I could forget *you*, Hailey Holloway?”

“Took him some time and a couple of beers to do it,” Paul explained. Wednesday and Hailey turned to him. “But, he finally pulled your last name out of his ass.”

“Who the hell are *you*?” Jennifer demanded. She pointed across the living room at Wednesday.

“None of your damn business!” Wednesday promptly replied.

“She has nothing to do with this,” Hailey told them. “Let her go.”

“Good God, you MORONS!” Martin shouted. “I gotta do *every* thing around here?” He stomped up to Hailey and smacked her across the face. Wednesday watched her friend smash to the hard, tile floor of the kitchen. She felt her blood boiling. She lurched at Martin and grabbed a hold of his arm.

“You prick!” she shrieked. Martin wrapped a set of thick, firm fingers around Wednesday’s throat. Then, he lifted her a foot off the floor. He gazed into her widening, blue eyes.

“Shut-up, you stupid little bitch!” he shrieked into her terrified face. He tossed her to the floor next to Hailey. He turned to Paul and Vicky. “Tie them up,” he told them. “We have to make an example out of these two.” He turned to Travis and Jennifer. “Travis, Jennifer, go get the gas cans.” He turned back. Paul and Vicky were still standing there. “DO IT!” he screamed with a pulsating stomp of his foot. “They killed four of your friends for Christ’s sake!”

“*I...didn’t kill ANYBODY,*” Wednesday moaned from the floor. She rubbed the back of her head. Her fingers were greeted with warm, bloody hair.

“You two hurry up!” Martin yelled. Travis and Jennifer nodded and crept out the front door. “We ain’t got all *night*, here.” Martin glared at Hailey. She began to slide away. She looked at him timidly above the golden rims of her glasses.

“Hailey,” Martin grumbled.

“M-Martin,” she stuttered back.

Wednesday crept up next to her and threw her arms around her. “It’s okay, Hailey,” she told her. “It-It’s going to be okay.”

“No, it isn’t,” Paul assured her. He stepped up next to them. Then, he let a length of rope unravel to his feet. Paul knelt down and yanked Wednesday’s arms away from her little buddy. She let out a short cry, and Paul dragged her away. Vicky threw her hands on her hips and stared down at Hailey.

“I believe you know the drill.”

Hailey glared at Vicky then at her father. “She’s your daughter!” she gasped. “You can’t— She can’t...” Hailey wiped a tear from her cheek. “You’re out of your mind.”

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with here, Hailey,” Martin told her. He reeled back and kicked her in the stomach. “No...idea!”

Vicky turned to her father. “Dad...”

“Shut-up!” Martin yelled. He pointed at Hailey. “Tie...her...up!” He turned to Paul. He was now in the living room. “Paul, you got the other one tied up, yet?”

Paul made a ring with his thumb and index finger. “We’re good!”

Martin smacked Vicky over the back of the head. “*He’s* done!” he shouted in her ear. “Next...” Vicky glared at Hailey through a pair of dark, brown eyes. Her hair was stringy and wet. Hailey lay trembling on the floor, curled in a ball.

“It...” she gasped. “*It must be raining outside...*”

Vicky let out a shaky sigh. “*Yeah...*” she whispered back. Martin swung one of his snakeskin boots into his daughter’s behind. She fell to the floor next to Hailey.

“Vicky,” Martin ordered, “tie that geeky little bitch up.”

“*I’m sorry...*” Vicky whispered. Hailey closed her eyes. She slowly crossed her arms behind her back at the wrists.

“*I understand...*” she whispered back.

Vicky let out another shaky sigh. “God...dammit, Dad!”

“Vicky!” he screamed back. “Tie her up!” Vicky’s face twisted up with anger. She jerked another length of rope from the pocket of her black bell-bottom jeans. She furiously wrapped it around Hailey’s wrists and knotted it off. She left a little hanging off the end. Hailey went ahead and relaxed her legs. She folded her calves back and crossed her ankles together for her. A tear rolled out of Vicky’s eye. She turned and shook her head. “Vicky...” Martin warned. Vicky swatted the tear away. She rolled the other end of the rope around Hailey’s ankles and knotted it off. Then, she stumbled to her knees, bowed her head, and pinched her eyes closed.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God,” she whispered, *“pray for us sinners...now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.”* She finished up with a wisp of her fingers. She motioned from the top of her head to her breast then from shoulder to shoulder. Martin thumped Vicky on the top of her head.

“Vicky, get up!” She planted her hands on the white, tile floor, pushed herself to her feet, and scurried into the living room. Martin glared at Hailey. She gazed back with a nervous sigh.

“Mr. Turner...” she pleaded. Martin snagged a handful of her fire orange hair. He dragged her across the floor and into the living room. Hailey let out a couple of terrified whimpers along the way. She came to rest next to her friend, Wednesday. She glanced at her horrified face. Then, she heard the screen door ease shut. She chanced a look towards the front entrance. Travis and Jennifer stood in the doorway. Each of them had a gas can at their feet. They were soaking wet from the rain. Apparently, it was pouring out. The two of them looked at Martin.

“Do it...” he instructed. Jennifer and Travis sprang to life. They lugged their cans of

gasoline across the living room. They flicked off the caps and doused Hailey and Wednesday with foul smelling, highly flammable liquid. Wednesday began to cough. She squinted at the awful fumes. Travis soaked Hailey in ice cold fossil fuel. She shivered. It was so cold, it made her lips quiver.

“Hope it was as good for you as it was for me, bitch,” Travis kindly remarked.

“Shut-up, ass-hole!” Hailey shouted back. He made a gasoline trail from Hailey to the front door. Then, he splashed some on the floor and walls. Jennifer finished off her gas can then joined her boyfriend at the front door. Travis produced a shiny lighter from the pocket of his jeans and promptly flipped it open.

“Got a light?” he remarked. He rolled the flint-wheel. The lighter flicked to life, and Travis’ forearm lit up with orange flames. “Bah!” he shouted. He shook his arm, dropping the lighter. It landed next to his gas can.

“Travis, you dingleberry!” Paul screamed. Travis smashed his arm against the door frame in desperation. Jennifer shoved him through the screen door. He crumpled in a heap on Hailey’s front lawn.

“It’s raining outside, dipshit!” A puddle of gasoline beneath Travis’ gas can ignited. The spot where Travis had patted his arm on the door frame had also caught fire.

“Paul!” Martin shouted. He pointed at the gas can next to the puddle of flames. “Grab that damn thing!” Paul looked around. He didn’t even know what he was talking about. A fireball shot from the nozzle of the gas can, and fire began roaring out. “Shit!” Martin yelled. “EVADE!” He, Paul, and Vicky scurried through the back door. Jennifer disappeared through the front. Hailey looked in all directions. Different splashes of gasoline went up in flames. The end of the trail Travis had laid down caught fire. That trail of gasoline led to her from the front

door. Orange flames darted towards her, preceded by a semicircular ring of blue. Her eyes widened. Bright orange light glinted across the lenses of her glasses. She turned to Wednesday.

“Roll!” she shouted. Wednesday rolled towards the coffee table. Hailey rolled towards the kitchen. They lucked out on *that* dash of flames. But, it was only a matter of time before their luck would run out.

“What do we do?!” Wednesday cried.

“*Hold on...*” Hailey groaned. She struggled with her ropes. “I’m coming!” Hailey was pretty flexible. It didn’t take her long to wriggle her wrists beneath the bottoms of her feet then out front. From there, she undid the knot with her teeth and untied her ankles. She lucked out. Vicky had been so upset, she hadn’t made her knots very tight. Hailey tossed the rope aside. She heard Travis’ pickup and Martin’s car peel away. “*Perfect...*” she gasped. She dashed across the living room to untie Wednesday.

“Hailey, hurry!” Wednesday shouted over the roar of flames.

“Gee, I would’ve never thought of that!” Hailey screamed back.

“Oh, shut-up, you damn smart-ass!”

Hailey undid Wednesday’s knots then leaned down. “Get our shoes!” she screamed in her ear. Wednesday sprang to life. She gathered up her and Hailey’s shoes. Then, she turned and widened her eyes. She watched in horror as Hailey danced through flames towards the front door. “Hailey, what the HELL are you doing?!”

“Backpacks!” she shouted. They were yet untouched by flames. Hailey snagged their book bags then dashed back through the flames. She shoved Wednesday through the kitchen and out the back door. Wednesday snagged her smokes on the way out. They were on the counter next to the sink where she had laid them earlier. The girls were greeted with a downpour of

torrential rain. The stink of gasoline was flushed away. Hailey felt her whole body relax. They jogged through the overgrown backyard.

“You’re out of your mind, going back for those!” Wednesday screamed.

“My arsenal’s in here!” Hailey yelled back. They shot down the side of the house. Then, they burst through a decrepit gate that led to the driveway. “Some cash, too.” Wednesday and Hailey stopped dead in their tracks. Hailey’s mother’s S.U.V. had been doused in gasoline as well. It too was engulfed in flames. Hailey threw her hands on her hips. She glared at her ride through a pair of angry eyes. Wednesday tugged at Hailey’s hand. “*Hailey...*” she whispered. “*We have to go!*” Hailey stared for a few seconds. Then, she turned and shoved Wednesday through the gate. They dashed across the backyard, through the back gate, and into the alley.

Chapter 19: “Twisted Trees”

Hailey had hoped the rain would remain steady. She had hoped it would quickly smother the raging inferno in her living room. She had looked to the heavens and pleaded for her mother’s S.U.V. to be extinguished. She had prayed the damage would be minimal. None of those things happened. Hailey and Wednesday heard the car explode when they were a couple of blocks down the alley. They dashed across the Patrick Peterson freeway. The rain calmed to a steady drizzle once they had crossed. Now, glancing back as they scurried down Dora Lane, Hailey and Wednesday could see a tower of black smoke. It plumed into a lightning filled sky a few blocks back. It was lit up by a pulsating, orange glow at the bottom. They heard sirens in the distance. They were the shrieking cries of fire trucks flying down the freeway. They were headed to extinguish the blaze that was once Hailey’s home.

“Damn gasoline,” Hailey whispered.

Wednesday turned to her. “Huh?” Hailey looked down Dora Lane with a shake of her head. She spotted Martin’s twisted oak trees. They were a couple of blocks away. Wednesday took Hailey’s hand. “It’ll be okay, Hailey,” she assured her. They slowed to walk. Hailey narrowed her eyes, glaring at Martin’s front yard.

“They’re not back, yet.”

Wednesday turned to her with a smirk. “You want to burn *Martin’s* house down?” Hailey giggled. She would brim with satisfaction at such a payback. She leaned across and whispered in Wednesday’s ear.

“No. They probably think we’re dead. That’ll buy us some time.”

“Yeah,” Wednesday whispered back. *“Then, we can figure out how we’re going to get them back.”* She stumbled, nearly falling on her face. Hailey slowed and helped her catch her

balance.

“You alright, Wednesday?” They continued to walk. Wednesday rubbed her thigh.

“*Yeah,*” she groaned. “Hey, can we stop and rest for a minute?” They were across the street from Martin’s house. Hailey turned to the house next to them. She pointed at the porch. It was similar to Martin’s. It had a long roof that extended from the house and hung over a wooden deck. The deck had an old fashioned, hand carved railing at the end. Three steps led to the front. Hailey started towards the porch. Wednesday held Hailey back by her hand. Hailey turned to her. “*We can’t go up THERE!*” Wednesday whispered. “*That’s somebody’s house.*”

Hailey shrugged. “*Do you want to rest or not? Just be quiet.*” Hailey jerked her hand away. She scampered through the front yard, and plopped down on the top step. She smiled and motioned for Wednesday to come up and join her. Wednesday looked around kind of skittishly. Then, she cautiously dragged her feet through the yard and sat next to her. Wednesday tore off her denim backpack and dropped it beside her. She reached back with both hands and rubbed her aching spine.

“*My God...*” she moaned. “*How do you do this every day?*”

“*What are you talking about?*” Hailey whispered back. “*You walk home from school every day.*”

Wednesday untied her right shoe and jerked it off her foot. “*Yeah, I walk HOME. It’s like two blocks.*” She slipped off her little, frilly sock. She held it in front of her and wrung out about ten gallons of water. “*This is killing me.*” Wednesday stuffed her wet foot back into her sock and threw her shoe on. Hailey patted Wednesday on her cold, damp back.

“*We’re almost there,*” she told her. Wednesday looked down Dora Lane. She tied her right shoe. Then, she plucked the laces loose on her left shoe. She shot Hailey a hopeless, wide

eyed glance.

"Yep...that was the breaking point," she whispered back. *"You've completely lost it, now."* She popped off her left shoe, slipped off her other sock, and wrung it out as well.

"Come on, man," Hailey told her. *"It's only...five blocks."* Hailey watched Wednesday curl her toes. Her toenails were all different colors. *"Nice paint job."*

"Huh?"

Hailey pointed at her toes. *"You painted them all different colors."*

"Yeah, I was kind of bored the other night," Wednesday explained. She tugged her sock back on. She started to put her shoe on, but Hailey snatched it out of her hand. She looked it over, curiously.

"Those are nice," she told her. *"When did you get those?"*

"Couple of weeks ago," Wednesday replied. She snatched it back from her and slipped it on her foot. *"Yeah, you said you got money, right?"* Hailey nodded. *"We should go shopping tomorrow. Get you some new threads, man."*

"Yeah, we'll have to," Hailey whispered. *"All MY clothes are at the bottom of that big smoke cloud over there."* She turned and pointed at the column of black smoke. It continued to emanate from her home. Wednesday dropped her hands on Hailey's shoulders. They gazed at the aftermath of the past two days.

"Yeah, we should go shopping, tomorrow," she whispered in Hailey's ear. *"It'll be fun."*

Hailey faced her. *"That WOULD be fun,"* she agreed. *"Just you and me."*

Wednesday smiled. *"We can figure out what you're going to wear tomorrow when we finish off the rest of those ass-holes."* Hailey smirked. They looked across the road. Travis' pickup roared in the distance. They could just barely make it out, meaning it had to be at least a

couple of blocks away. Hailey and Wednesday looked at each other. Then, they scurried behind the supports of the hand carved guardrail next to them. Wednesday reached back, snatched her backpack, and threw it on. They cowered next to each other, watching through gaps in the supports. Travis skidded to a stop at the edge of Martin's yard. Wednesday and Hailey heard rock music coming through the windows. The rumble from Travis' tunes shot through the street, crept up the neighbor's yard, and rattled the porch where Hailey and Wednesday sat.

"YKC," Hailey remarked.

Wednesday cackled. "*Yeah, that IS who that is.*" Martin showed up a few seconds later in his white Cutler. It swooped into the driveway. He and Travis killed their engines simultaneously. Then, everyone hopped out and began to assemble on Martin's porch. Hailey and Wednesday had a perfect view of them right down the middle of Martin's twisted oak trees. They were overcast by a black shadow that rained from the overhang. They couldn't be seen. Hailey reached around beside her. She found Wednesday's trembling hand and slowly closed her fingers around it. "*Don't...move...*" she begged. Wednesday squeezed her hand back. Martin headed for the door, fumbling through his keys.

"I have to use the restroom," he announced. He unlocked the door, stepped inside, and shut it. Vicky watched Travis all the way to the porch.

"Good job, numbnuts," she told him. Travis showed her the charred sleeve of his red, leather jacket. He also pointed out some blisters on his hand.

"Feel's much better, Vicky. Thanks for asking!"

"Yeah," Paul retorted, "if it wasn't for *you* we could've watched and made damn sure them two bitches were dead."

"Will you *look* at that shit?" Travis remarked. He motioned towards the column of

smoke across the freeway. Everyone looked at it. Orange and violet lightning squiggled across the sky. “They’re dead, Paul.” He planted a hand on Paul’s shoulder. “DEAD.”

Vicky crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. “I’m not so sure.”

“Well, one thing’s for sure,” Jennifer replied. “We could’ve been out of there a lot faster if it wasn’t for *your* screwing around. Took you like ten minutes to tie her up!” She threw her hands out at her sides. “Do you even give a shit? Do you even care what she did?”

Travis narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, we should kill her too, man.” Travis got the word “too” out of his mouth, and Paul had a fistful of his jet black hair. He slung Travis down the porch steps. Next, he hopped onto the flat guardrail of Martin’s deck and dropped an elbow on Travis’ ribs. “Bah!” Travis squealed. He reached up to defend himself.

“You dick-head!” Paul screamed. He smacked his arms away. “If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t even be *in* this mess!”

“Oh, God!” Travis yelled. “Here we go, again!” He glared into the blue lenses of Paul’s shades. “Paul, you are such an ass-hole! We’re all in this together! Stop trying to push all that shit on ME!” He grinned at him. “Take some responsibility.”

Paul pounded his fist into the ground beside Travis’ head. “I’m about to take your *eyes* out of your HEAD!”

“At least they match, you retarded looking little *freak!*” Paul reeled back and smashed a fist hammer into Travis’ nose. Jennifer flicked open her butterfly knife. She glared at him from the porch.

“Paul, I’m gonna slice your ear off!” she screamed. She started towards the steps. But, Vicky shoved her off the porch.

“I’m about *sick* of you, Jennifer!” Vicky shouted. “You and your stupid little knife!”

She rolled up the sleeves of her white sweater and stared at her. Jennifer lay on her stomach in the grass. "I'm about to stick that knife up your ass!" Jennifer pushed herself up and faced her.

"Well, hop on down here then!" she screamed back. She recovered her knife from the grass. Then, she held it up to show her. "I'll chop your little titties off!" Vicky started down the steps. Martin snatched her up from behind. "I don't think so," he remarked. Vicky wriggled in his arms. She looked at Paul and Travis. They had rolled halfway across the yard, pounding each other. Travis lay on top of Paul. He shook his head from side to side, slinging blood into his face.

"How do you like that, you freaky looking little fuck!" Travis shouted through a twisted, bloody grin. He smacked Paul's shades off his face. "Get those out of the way, so I can see the fear in your eyes."

Paul snagged a hold of Travis' nipples. "Titty twister!" he shrieked. Travis reeled back and screamed with a gurgle. Blood was leaking down his throat. Paul shoved Travis towards the porch. He hopped to his feet and glared at him. Travis groaned. He lay on his back in the wet grass. Martin tossed his daughter over his shoulder and hopped off the porch. Jennifer lunged at him. He shoved her to the ground. He skipped over Travis and stopped between Travis and Paul. He dropped Vicky on her feet next to Paul. Then, he turned so he could watch everyone at once.

"Everybody calm down!" he yelled. "Now!"

Vicky pointed at Jennifer. "No, I'm gonna KILL that slut!" Jennifer was on her knees. She threw her arms out at her sides.

"Bring it, ho!"

"*Guys, keep your voices down!*" Martin growled. Jennifer glared at Vicky. She stabbed

her knife into the ground, repeatedly. Travis ripped his eyes open. He turned his head and looked up at Martin. *"Thank you,"* Martin whispered. He sighed. *"I could hear every single word you guys just said while I was in there. That...means..."* He pointed in all directions. *"All THESE people can hear you, too!"*

"And...what?!" Vicky shouted, glaring at her father. "And, now you want to kill all of them, too?!" Martin smacked his daughter over the back of the head. She tumbled to the ground.

"Vicky, SHUT-up!" he growled in a whisper. Vicky threw her arms over her head. She looked at him from the ground with a pair of narrowed eyes and a trembling lower lip. Martin sighed. *"Look guys, now is not the time or the place for this. Now, if you'd like to go settle this..."*

"Church!" Travis screamed. He rolled over and stumbled to his feet. He pointed at Paul. "Church! I'll see you at church!" Paul wiped Travis' blood from his face and flicked it off his fingers. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He snagged himself one and tossed one to Vicky. He popped his cigarette in his mouth, sparked it up, and knelt beside Vicky to light hers. He looked at Martin from the ground.

"I really wish you wouldn't hit her like that, Martin," he calmly remarked. Martin stared at them. Then, he rubbed the back of his head.

"I'm sorry, Vicky. I didn't..." Jennifer lurched towards them, and Martin's head jerked to the left. She stopped. She threw her hands up at the either side of her head and looked at the ground. Martin looked down at Vicky and smiled. "I didn't mean to hit you that hard, honey. I'm sorry."

Vicky looked away and took a drag of her cigarette. "I shouldn't have...said that a while

ago.” Paul spotted his glasses on the grass next to Vicky. He snatched them off the ground, returned them to his face, and glared at Travis.

“Sure,” he told him, “I’ll kick your ass again. Any time, *pal*.”

Travis pointed at him. “Bite it, Paul. Bite it.” Paul took a drag of his cigarette. He puffed out a nice, big smoke ring for him. “*Oooooo...*” Travis groaned. “You little shit-head!”

“Travis,” Martin remarked, motioning for him to be quiet. Paul whipped out his pipe, took a toke, and handed it to Vicky. She took a toke then tossed it to Travis and Jennifer. Travis caught it and looked at the two of them through a pair of narrow eyes.

“Peace pipe,” Paul told him. “Why don’t you hit that, and then we’ll go in and kick it for a while. How’s that sound?” Travis stared at the pipe and stuck his tongue through the side of his cheek. Then, he shrugged. He motioned for a lighter. Paul snickered and tossed him his plastic lighter. Travis took the biggest hit he could and held the pipe up for his girlfriend. He widened his eyes. He threw his fist in front of his mouth and coughed. He choked on the harsh smoke. Smoke puffed out of his bloody nostrils and mouth with each cough. Jennifer flicked her butterfly knife closed. Then, she dropped it in her pocket and snatched the pipe and lighter from her boyfriend.

“Nice one,” she remarked. She put the pipe to her lips and took a puff. Martin cackled then held his hands out.

“Toss it here.” Jennifer tossed Martin the pipe and lighter. He had himself a toke and handed it all back to Paul. Paul returned the pipe and lighter to his pocket. Next, he hopped to his feet, tossed his cigarette between his lips, and dusted himself off.

“Great,” he mused. “Let’s go inside.” He turned to help Vicky up. Then, the five of them made their way to the porch and through the front door. Hailey and Wednesday turned to

each other.

“NOW let’s burn his house down!” Wednesday whispered.

Hailey returned her gaze to Martin’s house. *“No,”* she replied, *“not tonight.”*

Wednesday smacked her lips and gave her a shove. *“Come on, man. Let’s finish this.”*

She pulled out her lighter and flipped it open. *“Right...now.”*

Hailey faced her. *“Yeah, that’s what they were going to do to us, remember? And, just look at how great THAT turned out.”* She let go of Wednesday’s hand and stumbled to her feet.

“Let’s finish this tomorrow. You know, think it through a little.” She held out her hands and helped Wednesday to her feet. Wednesday slowly nodded and put her lighter back up.

“Alright. Tomorrow then.” They scampered down the porch steps and skidded through the yard. Then, they headed down Dora Lane towards Wednesday’s house. The rain had picked up a little. *“Oh!”* Wednesday gasped. She threw her backpack off, dropped it on the sidewalk, and ripped it open. *“We left in such a panic a while ago, I forgot I had this.”* She pulled out her small, black umbrella, flicked it open above their heads, and returned her backpack to her shoulders.

Chapter 20: “Wednesday’s Dwelling”

The girls were in Wednesday’s bedroom. They sat across from each other on different colored beanbag chairs. Wednesday’s beanbag chair was red, and Hailey’s was white. They were listening to Blades of Sloth. Hailey was wearing her friend’s YKC t-shirt and a pair of red and black, flannel pants. Wednesday was decked-out in black. She wore a long sleeve, Kinky Sex Dog Collars shirt. The ends of the sleeves wrapped around her knuckles. She also wore a pair of black pajama pants with vertical, white stripes. They had dipped into Wednesday’s nail polish collection. Wednesday had painted all of her nails black. She spread her fingers apart, holding her hands in front of her face. She leaned back and blew on her nails. Hailey had opted for a pairing of bright orange fingernails with bright green toenails. She folded her fingers on top of her head and stared at Wednesday’s ceiling.

A string of red Christmas lights ran along the tops of the walls. Wednesday had plugged them in as soon as they’d entered the room. There was a ceiling fan with five black blades in the middle of the roof. It whirred on its lowest setting. Five lights hung from the middle of the fan, turned off. Wednesday had lit exactly thirteen candles and scattered them throughout the room for their main light. Wednesday’s bed sat in the corner on Hailey’s side of the room, the left side. The head of the bed rested against the wall at Hailey’s back. The bed had a metal frame. Square shaped posts stuck up at all four corners. There was a shiny, metal ball on top of each of them. Wednesday had all black sheets and pillow cases. A black blanket was laid neatly on top. Her walls were coated with a layer of posters of her favorite bands.

“Wednesday, are you punishing me?” Hailey asked.

Wednesday dropped her hands at her sides. “Huh?” Hailey grabbed one of her shoes off the floor and tossed it across the room. It struck Wednesday in the knee. “Ow!” she shrieked.

She sat up and rubbed her leg. “You little bitch!”

Hailey leaned forward and greeted her with a smile. “I told you, I don’t like these guys.”

“Yeah,” Wednesday replied, “and when I’m in my room, I’ll listen to what I want. In fact...” She reached beside her and got her cigarettes, lighter, and an ashtray off the lowest shelf of her bookshelf. “I think I’ll have myself a smoke, too.”

Hailey smacked her lips. “Man, what happened to all that talk about friends, earlier. You know, about how they *owe* each other...” She threw her hands up at either side of her head. She shook them with a pair of wide eyes. “...EVERYTHING!”

Wednesday snagged the unlit cigarette between her lips with her first and second fingers. “Oh, you’re going to play *that* card now, huh?” She uttered a single laugh through a pair of closed lips then returned the coffin nail to her mouth. “Alright then, I’ll tell you what. I’ll turn this off and play whatever you want, if you’ll...” Wednesday had a good, long look around her bedroom. She turned her attention to the cigarette between her fingers. “Smoke this cigarette with me!”

Hailey crossed her arms over her chest. “Bartering does not a friendship make.”

“On the contrary, genius,” Wednesday informed her, “it was once the bond that tied us *all* together, the system of barter and trade. It still goes on to this day in some form or another. It is the universal peace treaty.” Hailey stared at her friend then shook her head in disgust. She threw her hands out in front of her.

“Wednesday, don’t make me do that! That’s not cool.”

“Come on, Hailey,” Wednesday begged. “Hailey! Smoke this cigarette with me!”

“No, douche bag. I’m not doing *that*!”

“Just one drag. Then...” She turned and dug through the shelves of her bookshelf.

“Where’s my Walter CDs?”

“Wednesday, no!” Hailey screeched. Wednesday held up one of Walter’s albums.

“You...got their second album, huh?” Wednesday nodded, rocking it from side to side. Hailey shook her head. She looked at the black carpeted floor in disgust. “Nope, not doing it.”

Wednesday flipped her lighter open and spun the flint-wheel. She held a fat, orange flame to the end of the cigarette dangling from her grinning lips. She closed her lighter and laid it on the floor. Then, she hopped up and crept towards her.

“Here, Hailey,” Wednesday remarked. “You can just hold this for me, okay?” Hailey threw her hands up at the sides of her face. She turned her head to the side and reeled back.

“No, Wednesday!”

“Then, when you’re feeling a little more comfortable with it, you just take a little puff, alright?”

“Wednesday!” Hailey squealed. Her buddy placed the cigarette between her trembling fingers. Then, Wednesday dashed back across the room and plopped down on her beanbag chair. “Wednesday, come take this damn thing back!” Wednesday leaned back in her little, red seat and cackled. Hailey smirked. She held the cigarette cherry side down and lowered it towards the floor. “I’m going to snub this stupid thing out on the carpet,” she told her. “That’s what I’m going to do.”

Wednesday looked up with a pair of wild eyes. “Hailey, NO!” she screamed. She darted across the carpet and snagged a hold of her friend’s skinny, little wrist. She struggled with both arms to keep the tip of the cigarette from touching the floor. “Hailey, my dad will *kill* me if he finds out I’ve been smoking! Don’t...you...do it!” Hailey leaned forward. She glared into her friend’s bright, blue eyes. She eased up and allowed her to claw the cancer stick from her

fingers. Wednesday tore it away from her with a look of relief and a satisfied sigh. “Burn my damn *carpet*.” She put the cigarette to her lips and took a drag. Hailey let out a breath. Then, she snatched it back and took a drag. She leaned back and puffed out a couple of smoke rings. “Hailey, you did it!” Wednesday screamed. “You finally did it!”

“Big deal,” Hailey replied. “I smoked my first cigarette like...three years ago.”

“Well, you little shit-head,” Wednesday replied with a slug on the shoulder. “You never told me that.”

Hailey shrugged, handing her smoke back. “You never asked.” She folded her knees against her chest and folded her arms on top. “Now, play me some Walter!” she demanded with a snap of her fingers.

Wednesday narrowed her eyes. “You are an evil girl, Hailey Holloway. Profoundly wicked.” Hailey turned her head and glared at her. She didn’t move or say anything. She just...stared. Wednesday threw her hands up at either side of her face. “Okay, you’re freaking me out!”

Hailey grinned. “Well, I *did* kill four of our classmates today, Wednesday. Let’s not forget.” Wednesday stared back, widening her eyes. She sprang to life.

“I’m going to play this CD for you.” She dashed to the dresser across from her bed.

“Yeah, you’d better do that,” Hailey replied. Wednesday nervously popped open the CD player on top of her dresser. Hailey shook her head and cackled to herself. Wednesday removed the Blades of Sloth album they had been listening to and replaced it with Walter. She rifled through a stack of jewel cases and returned the Blades of Sloth CD to its rightful place. Hailey noticed her hands shaking. “Wednesday,” Hailey remarked. She instantly had her attention. “You’re not really afraid of me, are you?”

“Mm...” she moaned. She held up her thumb and index finger, slightly spaced apart.

“M-Maybe a little.”

“Seriously?” Wednesday nodded. Hailey was shocked. Her own friend was afraid of her. She felt like one of those big, mean bullies. Walter’s second album replaced an eerie silence. Wednesday plopped down on her red beanbag chair. Hailey shrugged. “I guess I’m just scary like that.” Wednesday nodded. She took a drag of her cigarette. Then, she flicked ash into the ashtray she had gotten earlier.

“You *can* be, sometimes.”

“Well, of course,” Hailey replied. “I mean that’s why Travis and them tried to kill me in the first place, right? Travis was afraid of me. I believe he referred to me as a...‘stalker’.”

Wednesday held her stomach in her arms and chuckled. “Well, you little freak, you!” She had a drag of her cigarette and exhaled smoke through her nose. “I’m going to have to keep my eye on you.”

Hailey hopped into Wednesday’s bed and threw the covers over her. “Ah...” she sighed. She wrapped the sheets around herself. They were cool and comforting.

“Well...just make yourself at home,” Wednesday remarked, flicking ash into the ashtray.

“It’s a queen,” Hailey replied. She shuffled through a pile of pillows Wednesday had at the head of her bed. “You’ve got like...twenty pillows.” She yawned then laid her head down on a smooth, velvety pillow. “There’s room for two.” Wednesday had a drag of her smoke. She wandered to the CD player and turned it down a touch. She walked around her bedroom and blew out all the candles. Then, she returned to her bean bag chair. The room was dimly lit by the red Christmas lights around the ceiling.

“So, are you going to sleep, already?” she asked. She looked at a digital clock on a table

beside her bed. It had bright blue digits. “It’s barely after ten.” Hailey replied with a really loud, highly annoyed yawn. Wednesday smirked. She finished off her cigarette, stubbed it in the ashtray, and crawled into bed next to her buddy. Hailey laid on her left side, facing the wall. Wednesday picked up her side of the blanket and got it nice and even over the two of them. Then, she turned and slid her arms around Hailey’s waist.

“*Lesbo...*” Hailey muttered behind a pair of closed eyes. Wednesday smacked her lips. She lifted her head and looked at her.

“I’m not a...” She paused. “Hailey, you’re wearing your glasses, honey.” She slid her spectacles off her face. She turned and laid them on the table next to the bed. Then, Wednesday readjusted their covers. She lay back down and wrapped her arms around Hailey’s waist. “Come here, *you*,” she remarked. She squeezed her tightly. Hailey smiled without opening her eyes. She laid her right arm on top of Wednesday’s.

“Thanks for changing the music, man,” Hailey remarked. “That’s much better.”

“Welcome,” Wednesday replied. She turned her head. She glanced around the room at the tiny red lights bordering her ceiling. “Hailey, you don’t think those guys will come looking for us while we’re sleeping, do you?”

“*Mm...*” Hailey groaned. “You heard what they said. They think we’re dead.”

“Yeah, I know,” Wednesday replied. “But, what if they figure out we’re not.”

Hailey turned her head and opened her green eyes a crack. “What if the sun blows up? What if it starts raining bowling balls?” Wednesday faced her, letting out a nervous sigh. Hailey slid her fingertips across the tops of Wednesday’s knuckles. Then, she closed her eyes and faced the wall. “It’ll be okay, Wednesday,” she assured her. “Don’t worry so much.”

“I’m sorry, man. I just– I don’t even know if I’m going to be able to sleep tonight.”

Hailey smacked her lips. “You’re going to have to learn how to relax, Wednesday.”

“How can you *say* that?” Wednesday demanded. “How can you just go to sleep, now?”

Hailey shrugged. “YOU know what I mean. You were...raped the other night.”

Hailey growled under her breath. “Yeah, thanks for reminding me.”

“Well, what did you do after— You know, *after*?”

“I vomited,” Hailey told her. Wednesday uttered a single laugh. “And yeah, then I laid down in bed and went back to sleep.”

“Oh, my God!” Wednesday shrieked. “He crawled into bed with you while you were sleeping?”

Hailey let out a shaky sigh. “*Yeah...*” she gasped.

Wednesday sighed. “I’m sorry, Hailey,” she remarked, placing her hand on Hailey’s shoulder. “I shouldn’t have brought this up.” Hailey curled her fingers around Wednesday’s. Then, she returned her arm to her waist and planted her arm on top.

“Just relax,” she told her. “Sleep now. Worry later.”

“*Okay,*” Wednesday whispered in her ear.

Chapter 21: “Saturday”

Hailey’s eyes popped open, and she stared at the wall. She basked in the embrace of Wednesday’s arms. They still clung lightly to her waist. Her own arm lay atop her friend’s. She smiled at a row of red Christmas lights shining on her from above. Actually, they looked more like a row of red cotton balls, since she didn’t have her glasses on. Hailey slithered onto her back and wriggled free of her buddy’s grasp. She quietly slipped from underneath the covers and crept around the end of the bed. Then, she headed for the clock on the other side. She got within a couple of feet before the blur of blue light finally came into focus and became “5:47.” She snatched her glasses off the table and threw them over her eyes. She snuck out of Wednesday’s bedroom and moseyed into the kitchen.

Wednesday and her family had a nice, little kitchen. It was furnished entirely with stainless steel appliances. Those included a microwave, a gas stove, and a side by side refrigerator/freezer. The way the house was laid out, Wednesday’s bedroom and her parents’ bedroom were adjacent to one another at one corner of the house. A full bathroom ran down the wall next to Wednesday’s room. That wall led to the front door. The kitchen stood at the opposite corner from the bedrooms. The rest of the house was living area. That was it. It was a tiny, little house. The kitchen was just another part of the living room. It was separated by a divider that ran around the corner at the front. The divider was covered in wood paneling. It stood four feet tall. It had a row of short, wooden columns that ran around the top. A two inch thick layer of wood ran over the top of those.

There was one entrance to the kitchen. The divider wall that faced Hailey stood a door’s width from a row of cabinets on the back wall of the kitchen. Next to that, beyond the kitchen, was the door to the backyard. Hailey slipped across the grey carpet in the living area. She

stepped onto the cold, black and white, checkered, tile floor of the kitchen. She stared at it with a grin. It reminded her of the chessboard floor of her *own* bedroom. It had likely burned to a crisp the night before. Hanging from the ceiling on the wall to her right was a row of cabinets. Below that was a stainless steel sink. Below that was a row of cabinets and drawers. They were wood to match the paneling of the divider at the adjacent corner.

Hailey found a light switch below the top row of cabinets, above a marble countertop around the sink. She eagerly flipped it on and wandered to the refrigerator. It stood at the opposite corner to the left of the stove. The refrigerator had a water and ice dispenser built into the freezer door. She turned to her right and looked through a window. It hovered above the sink, facing the backyard. She jerked the refrigerator door open and looked inside. She smirked, nodding at the sight of a carton of eggs. She slid open the meat drawer. She fumbled through a few different bags of sandwich meats and cheeses. She came up with a package of bacon. She set that, the eggs, and a pitcher of milk on the dining table in the center of the room. The table was made of wood that matched the wood throughout the kitchen.

Hailey eased the refrigerator door shut. She gathered up a frying pan from one of the cabinets below the sink, a spatula from the holder next to the sink, a couple of forks from one of the drawers, and a couple of plates from above the sink. She set the plates and forks on the table. Then, she found a couple of glasses and set them out. She turned to the eggs. "*Bowl...*" she whispered. She found a large bowl in one of the cabinets above the sink. She snagged a whisk from the same holder she had gotten the spatula from. In the bowl, she beat a few eggs with some milk. She sprinkled in a dash of salt and pepper from a pair of wooden shakers on the table. She turned on a stove burner, dropped the pan on top, and tossed in twelve strips of bacon.

She returned the rest of the eggs, milk, and bacon to their respective places in the

refrigerator. She slid the bacon around in the pan with the spatula. The smoky aroma wafting from the strips of pork made her smile. “*Yummy*,” she remarked. Hailey couldn’t remember the last time she had enjoyed a nice breakfast. She got the bacon strips all nice and crispy and slid them onto another plate from above the sink. She dropped the plate of bacon strips on the table. Then, she whisked the eggs into the pan in their place. She began scrambling them atop the stove. Wednesday walked up behind her, sniffing the air. Hailey snickered.

“Man, something smells *good*,” Wednesday commented from the entrance to the kitchen.

Hailey turned around. “Come on in. It’s almost ready.” Wednesday wandered in and sat at the dining table. Hailey turned back to the eggs. Wednesday yawned. She folded her arms on the table and laid her head on top of them. “It’s not even six yet,” she groaned.

Hailey smiled. “Too early?” Wednesday lifted her head and nodded. “So, go back to sleep.” Wednesday replied with another yawn. “You just need some breakfast,” Hailey told her. “It’s the most important meal of the day, you know.”

“Better be a hell of a breakfast,” Wednesday remarked. Hailey flicked off the stove and set everything on the table. She snatched up her and Wednesday’s glasses and set them beside the refrigerator. She jerked the door open.

“What would you like to drink?” she asked. Wednesday picked out a few strips of bacon. She reached for the spatula that was sticking out of the eggs.

“Is there any O.J. in there?”

“Yeah,” Hailey replied. She filled Wednesday’s glass with orange juice and her own with milk. Then, she joined Wednesday at the table. She handed Wednesday her orange juice. Wednesday put it to her lips sucked it halfway down. Hailey snickered. “Feeling better?”

Wednesday burped. “Excuse *me*,” she remarked with a chuckle. She nibbled on a piece

of bacon. “I appreciate it.”

“That’s alright,” Hailey assured her. She tossed some eggs and bacon on her own plate. “*You* can do the dishes.”

“Ah,” Wednesday returned. “It’s like *that*, huh?”

Hailey patted her hand. “*I’ll* wash them. Don’t worry.” Wednesday smiled. They had a happy little meal together. The conversation consisted mostly of crunch-crunch, squish-squish, slurp-slurp. Wednesday sipped what was left of her orange juice. Next, she watched her friend intently. She wasn’t sure exactly what she was looking for. She was waiting for some key move to signify she was done. Hailey finished off the last bite of her third helping and collapsed into her chair. “I’m never eating again,” she remarked. That was it, Wednesday decided. She scooped up her and Hailey’s plates, headed to the sink, and flicked on the water. Hailey looked at her. “What? I said I’d do it.”

Wednesday turned to her with a smile. “I’ll do this. *You* go get ready.”

Hailey narrowed her eyes. “Huh?”

Wednesday swabbed the silverware with a soapy sponge. “So, we can go shopping,” she reminded her.

“Oh,” Hailey replied. “Right, yeah.”

“Go pick out some of my clothes, and then get in there and get after it.” Hailey nodded. She headed across the house for Wednesday’s closet. Hailey got ready. Wednesday finished the dishes just as Hailey hopped out of the shower. Then, she picked out some clothes and got ready. Wednesday picked out a long sleeve, teal shirt, a pair of old blue jeans that had holes in the knees, and a pair of black sneakers. They had three white stripes on either side. The color of the shirt brought out the teal in her eyes. She also threw on a red and black, flannel jacket. It

was a long jacket with a belt sewn in. Hailey had come up with a yellow, turtleneck sweater, red, corduroy pants, and a pair of black flats. Wednesday joined Hailey in the living room.

“So, I’ve been thinking...” she remarked. She sat on a grey, fabric recliner, adjacent to Hailey. “We should probably burn the clothes you were wearing yesterday. You know, just in case there’s any...trace evidence.” Hailey nodded from the matching couch. “Oh, by the way...”

“What?” Hailey inquired.

“Don’t they have cameras at the school? I mean, couldn’t they have *seen* you?” The corners of Hailey’s lips curled into a grin. “You took care of it!” Wednesday surmised. She was overtaken with a grin of her own. “I see, then. We just need to get rid of those clothes, I guess.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Hailey replied. “We can do that later, I suppose.” Hailey looked across a wooden coffee table in front of her. A wooden cuckoo clock hung above a television on a matching wooden stand. It was 7:27. She slid her hand into the front pocket of her bummed corduroys. She produced a roll of cash and waved it through the air for Wednesday to see.

“Yeah, we’d better head on over to the mall,” Wednesday remarked. “It’ll probably be open by the time we get there.”

“How does it look out there, today?” Hailey inquired. She narrowed her eyes. She hopped up and wandered to a square window at the front of the living room on the right. Hailey had been staring at it from the awning in the park the other day. On the exterior of the house, it was trimmed with wood around the edges and across the front in the shape of a plus sign. Inside, a set of white mini blinds kept prying eyes from seeing in. They also kept curious eyes from gazing out. Hailey pulled on the front of a loop of string that hung from the left side of the blinds. She flipped them open and looked at the sky. Today, there was a little sunshine for a

change. The sky was interwoven with varying hues of clouds. They ranged from higher pressures of cirro-stratus to lower pressures of stratus. A small cumulus was mixed in here and there. They were illuminated with every single hue of light possible. The sun was just beginning to cast light on them from the left. Some were light and fluffy. Some were dark and looming.

Hailey looked at Wednesday's yard. It was rich and green. It was filled with thick, healthy blades of grass. She spotted Saturday's newspaper in the middle of the lawn. She turned to Wednesday. "Look's fine," she remarked. "Let me have a look at your paper before we roll." Wednesday bowed her head and motioned towards the front door. Hailey flipped the blinds closed. Then, she slipped through the front door and wandered into the yard. She slipped the newspaper out of its plastic sleeve and looked at the front page. She grinned. The title read "Glory High Slasher Kills Five." It was a good thing. It meant that her house burning down was not the only interesting thing going on. There would be very little about it in today's news. "*Glory High Slasher, eh?*" she mumbled under her breath. "*Is THAT what their calling me?*"

She flipped through the newspaper and returned to the house. The storm door slowly eased shut behind her. She scanned through and found an article about her home. It was on the last page of the A section. It was two paragraphs long. It made no mention of whether or not anyone was killed in the fire. It merely said the police were "not releasing any information at this time." She smiled and flipped to the crossword. She looked at Wednesday. "Six letter word for shooting?"

Wednesday narrowed her eyes. "Are we going or what?" Hailey folded the paper and tossed it on the coffee table. Then, she and Wednesday wandered out. Wednesday closed and locked the door behind them. They marched down a concrete walkway that split the yard in two

and made a right at the sidewalk. They rounded the corner of the block and headed north.

Wednesday popped a cigarette in her mouth and sparked it up. Hailey pretended to cough. She waved her hand in front of her face as if waving the cigarette smoke away. “Shut-up!”

Wednesday shouted through a giggle. She turned to Hailey with a shove, and Hailey dropped off the sidewalk. “Always treat me like I’m such an ass-hole.”

Hailey returned to the sidewalk with a hop. “So, stop acting like one.”

“Hailey, I’m about to kick your scrawny little ass!” Wednesday shouted back. She had a drag of her cigarette. “Take you in, feed you...”

Hailey tugged on the shoulders of the sweater she was wearing. “Oh, thanks for the threads, by the way.”

“Yeah!” Wednesday shrieked. “You’re welcome!”

Hailey patted her on the back. “Poor, poor Wednesday,” she remarked. “Big, mean, old Hailey keeps picking on her. Seriously, though. You should quit sucking on those smoky dildos.”

“Hailey, I’m going to put this damn cigarette out on your forehead! You’re going to have three ugly eyes on your ugly little face!”

Hailey kicked Wednesday in the butt with a chuckle. “Shut-up, bitch.”

“Oh, that’s it.” Wednesday replied. She stopped dead in her tracks. She tossed her smoke between her lips. Then, she snatched up Hailey in her arms and began to tickle her.

“No, Wednesday, stop!” Hailey screeched. She was filled with the giggles.

“Still ticklish, I see,” Wednesday remarked. Hailey tried to wriggle free. Wednesday smacked her arms down. “No! Come here, YOU!” Wednesday tickled her until she was on her knees. She finally let up with a light smack over the back of the head. “Yeah, mess with me

some more,” Wednesday told her. “See if I don’t do the same damn thing, again!” Hailey began to stagger to her feet. Wednesday took a drag of her cigarette and blew it right in Hailey’s face. Hailey grinned. She dusted dirt off the corduroys she had borrowed from Wednesday.

“You know, these are *your* pants,” she remarked, pointing at them.

“Yeah, you can *have* those,” Wednesday told her. They resumed walking. “They’re more your style, anyway.”

Hailey turned to her with a pair of wide eyes. “And what is *that* supposed to mean?” she demanded.

Wednesday replied with a roar of laughter. “It mean’s that there’s a *reason* I offered to go shopping with you, today.” She looked her over, exhaling smoke through her nostrils. “I got here just in time.”

Hailey smacked her lips. “Man, you’re just along for the ride. The only reason I didn’t leave you at the house this morning is...well...” She placed a condescending hand on her friend’s shoulder. “I didn’t want to hurt your feelings there, buddy.” Wednesday nodded. She tossed what was left of her smoke into the street.

“It’s okay. You’ve been dressing that way since we were little kids. It never hurt *my* feelings before.” Hailey turned her head sideways. She closed her eyes and made an “o” with her mouth. She nudged Wednesday in the shoulder. “Ho.”

“Slut,” Wednesday replied.

The Malley Mall was four blocks north of Wednesday’s house. It took up the next ten blocks of the east side of Main Street. That was the street the girls were traversing. The mall was as long as it was wide and two stories tall. It was an all brick building, golden yellow in color. Here and there was a set of large white letters denoting the name of a business. The four

rows of stores enclosed a rest area dotted with artificial trees, tables, and benches. The rest area in the middle was overcast with a dome of glass panes. It rested in the middle of the two story roof. With 62 different department stores and a food court with 17 outposts appealing to a wide manner of different palates, it was the place to be on a Saturday. By the time Hailey and Wednesday had arrived, the parking lot was already filling with cars. Most of the stores had just opened their doors.

After a bit of browsing, Wednesday and Hailey were hanging out in C.J. Nickell. Wednesday sat on a bench outside the girl's dressing room. Her arms were crossed over her lap. Her toes faced one another. She waited for her little friend to emerge. Her patience was in short supply. They had been through three different stores. So far, Hailey had tried on two pairs of pants. That was it. Wednesday was beginning to wonder if she would ever be able to get her to buy anything. She had finally just gathered up a pile of stuff and handed it to her. She told her to get her butt into the dressing room and try something on. Alas, Hailey appeared at the doorway in a ruffled white shirt and a pair of grey slacks with vertical stripes. The slacks were actually the lower half of a two piece suit. Wednesday grinned from ear to ear. She came running up to her. Hailey felt her cheeks turning red.

"Alright!" Wednesday remarked. "Look at your cute little ass in those!"

"Wen-!" Hailey began. She watched a couple of cute boys walk by. Her eyes widened.

"Seriously," Wednesday told her. She jerked her towards a mirror on the outside of the door to show her. She pointed at her butt in the mirror. "Look at that! Look what we got going on here. See?" Hailey had a peek. She quickly faced forward again, throwing a hand over her eyes.

"Okay, Wednesday. I see!"

“Well, *I* think you should definitely get that suit AND that shirt. *It* looks nice, too.”

Hailey turned to her. She couldn’t help but grin. Wednesday motioned for her to go back in.

“Alright, let’s see something else.”

“*Okay...*” Hailey whispered. She lowered her head and timidly returned to the dressing room. Wednesday patted her on the shoulder. She shut the door behind her and reclaimed her spot on the bench. It wasn’t long before Hailey emerged once again. This time, she wore a pair of dark, skinny blue jeans, a black shirt covered by a maroon, button up sweater, open at the front, and a pair of black, leather boots. She couldn’t resist throwing them on to go with it.

“Oh, yeah,” Wednesday commented. Hailey stopped as if posing for a picture.

Wednesday walked up to check her out. “See? I am just...good.”

“I look very fetching, don’t you find?” Hailey remarked.

“Indeed, ma’am. Indeed.” Wednesday looked her up and down. She tapped her fingernail against her teeth. “Well, you’re definitely buying...” She held her hands out to demonstrate. “...all of this.”

“Okay,” Hailey replied with a chuckle.

“Alright, then.” Wednesday snapped her fingers and pointed towards the dressing room with her thumb. “Next.” Hailey wandered into the dressing room. Wednesday closed the door behind her and sat on the bench. She felt like smoking ten cigarettes at once. She looked at a clock on a wall across from her. It was nearly ten. “*She’d better hurry up and buy some stuff,*” Wednesday whispered. “*I’ll be needing me a smoke here PRETTY quick.*” Wednesday managed to sell Hailey on a few things. Then, they found a register and paid. They headed for the parking lot for a cigarette break. They were near the door when all of a sudden, Wednesday snagged a hold of Hailey’s arm. She jerked her behind one of the clothes racks.

“*What’s up?*” Hailey whispered. She glared at her, rubbing her arm. Wednesday had pulled her behind a rack of black dresses. Wednesday eased them aside to reveal a few familiar faces. Hailey narrowed her eyes. She gazed across a few rows of clothes at the happy, giggling faces of Jennifer and Travis. She filled with anger. She stared at them like a lion waiting to pounce. She gathered details as she observed. Jennifer had on a maroon blazer over a white blouse, a grey skirt with crisscrossing black lines, hose, and black heels. Travis had on a black, leather trench, black shirt, black jeans, and black boots. They chuckled, flirting with one another. It made Hailey sick. She turned to Wednesday. She opened her mouth, stuck her tongue out, and pointed down her throat.

Paul and Vicky approached them with similar, cheery dispositions. Vicky had on a brown, leather jacket atop a red shirt, bell bottomed blue jeans, and a pair of brown, leather boots. Paul wore a red shirt with two horizontal white stripes across the middle, a white jacket, a pair of dark wash blue jeans, and a pair of red, canvas shoes. He and Vicky stopped. Paul showcased her to them with his hands.

“Very nice,” Jennifer remarked.

“Stylish,” Travis added. “Did you...pick up anything *else* this morning? Little– Little fry, maybe?”

Paul stroked his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Mm, perhaps, sir. Perhaps.”

“*Fry?*” Wednesday whispered.

Hailey turned to her. “*I think he means– What is it?*” She thought for a moment.

“*Lysergic acid diethylamide?*”

Wednesday narrowed her eyes. “*Huh?*”

“*L.S.D.*” Wednesday made an “o” with her mouth. Then, she turned back to the quartet.

“Church?” Jennifer asked.

Paul nodded. “That’s what I’m thinking. I’ll meet you guys at Vicky’s tonight, and we’ll...pass out some samples.” Travis nodded. He rubbed the back of his head and looked behind him.

“Is Martin coming?” Jennifer asked.

“I figure we’ll all take our own cars,” Paul replied, “and he’ll meet us there, yeah. He can be our...designated drunk driver.”

“No fry for him, then,” Travis remarked. Paul replied with a nod. Travis and Paul did the secret handshake. Travis held his arm out for Jennifer, bent at the elbow.

“Posse out,” he remarked. Jennifer slid her arm through his, and he and Jennifer continued into the store. Paul and Vicky wandered through the door to the parking lot. Hailey and Wednesday crouched behind the rack of clothes for a moment. They wanted to make sure they were gone. Then, they poked their heads over the top to have a look.

“They’re gone,” Hailey remarked.

Wednesday let out a nervous breath. “What the hell is ‘church’ supposed to mean?” Hailey smiled. The little pieces were beginning to fall into place.

“It’s their little hangout,” she explained. “It looks like we’re going to have to *crash* that party.”

Chapter 22: "The Church"

Hailey and Wednesday were in Wednesday's living room. It was past six according to the cuckoo clock above the television. Wednesday sat on the couch, twirling a cigarette between her fingers. Hailey sat on the recliner across from the T.V. Wednesday stopped twirling her cigarette. She stared at it with the narrow eyes of intent. She was confused, yet hopeful. She was confused in that she had no idea where this "church" was. She only sensed that it was very far away. She was hopeful that she wasn't up for another long walk, not after yesterday's charade. Her little feet were *still* aching. She looked at Hailey.

"So, how are we going to get there?" Hailey turned to her. She was unnerved, as if stepping off a train of deep thought.

"Huh?"

"Well, this church," Wednesday asked, "where is it exactly?"

Hailey stared at the blank television screen. "Right..." She rested her elbow on an armrest. She dropped the side of her face in her hand. She tapped her finger against her cheek and thought. "It's way outside of town. Like ten miles, probably."

"I was afraid of that," Wednesday remarked. "Some old abandoned building on the outskirts of Malley." Hailey nodded. Wednesday smacked her left palm with her right fingers. "Damn, if only we had a car!" Hailey's eyes popped open. A grin shot across her face. It was a simple problem. All she needed was a car. She knew at once what she had to do. "Hailey?" Wednesday demanded. "What are you *thinking*?"

"I'm thinking about my buddy, Lloyd."

Wednesday threw her hands out at her sides. "Lloyd? Lloyd who?"

"Lloyd, my friend who picked me up the other night," Hailey explained.

“‘Picked you up’?!” Wednesday repeated. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Jealous?” Hailey inquired. Wednesday closed her eyes and shook her head. She leaned forward and pinched the bridge of her nose. Hailey giggled. “I told you, they buried me in a shallow grave.”

“Yeah?”

“So, when I came to, I was in the middle of nowhere,” Hailey explained. “I began to walk home. It was *pouring* rain.” Hailey took a breath. “I didn’t expect anyone to stop. But then, out of the blue, this blue Cammy pulls up next to me.”

“Lloyd,” Wednesday surmised.

“Lloyd,” Hailey replied. “He likes me. He’s in our psychology class.”

Wednesday nodded. “Never seen him.”

“Well, *I* have,” Hailey told her. “Anyway, he gave me a ride home. Gave me his number...” Hailey hopped up and dashed into Wednesday’s room.

“Wait, he gave you his *number*?!” Wednesday shouted after her. “Did you call him back?”

“*Not yet!*” Hailey screamed from Wednesday’s bedroom.

“Hailey, you are so RUDE!” Wednesday shrieked. She could hear Hailey laughing from the bedroom. Hailey returned to the living room and plopped down on the recliner.

“Well, I’ve been a bit...preoccupied.” She had the piece of paper with Lloyd’s number in one hand. She had a red cordless phone from Wednesday’s bedroom in the other. She pressed the talk button and listened for a dial tone. Then, she punched in the number.

“So, you’re going to ask for his help?” Wednesday inquired. “To kill a few of our classmates?” Hailey shrugged. Lloyd’s phone began to ring.

“He said he’d help.” Wednesday was very confused by Hailey’s vague answer. She narrowed her blue eyes and threw her hands up at her sides. “Hey, Lloyd,” Hailey said into the receiver. “H-How’s it going?”

There was a pause. “*Who IS this?*” Lloyd demanded over the phone. Hailey uttered a single laugh. She placed a hand over her heart.

“Lloyd, it’s *me!* It’s me, Hailey.”

“*Nuh-uh!*” Lloyd replied. “*Really?*”

Hailey rolled her eyes. “Nah, it’s that *other* girl you gave your phone number to the other night.”

“*Oh, Sheila?*” Lloyd inquired. “*Sheila, is that YOU?*”

“Ha-ha, very funny.”

“*Veronica?*” Lloyd asked. “*Barbara?*”

“Lloyd, you dick.”

Lloyd chuckled over the receiver. “*Yes, Hailey Holloway. From my psychology class. What was it the other day? Maslow’s Heirarchy of Needs?*”

Hailey laughed. “You remembered.” Wednesday rolled her eyes. She resumed twirling the cigarette between her fingers.

“*Oh, I’ll NEVER forget old Maslow. Not after hearing YOU talk about him. So, what’s up? Taking me up on that date, eh?*”

Hailey squinted. “Actually, it’s the other thing.”

There was another pause. “*The ass-kicking?*” Lloyd asked. “*Seriously?*”

Hailey swallowed in apprehension. “Look, I’m in some serious shit, Lloyd. These guys I’m dealing with– They’re...really, really bad.” She cleared her throat. “I mean...REALLY

bad. It's probably going to be worse than that."

There was another pause. "*Oh, my GOD!*" Lloyd exclaimed. Hailey could hear music being switched off in the background. "*You mean...*" There was a fourth pause. "*You're telling me...*" Hailey felt her intestines tying themselves into knots. "*You're the Glory High SLASHER!*" Lloyd shrieked.

Hailey cleared her throat. "Um, yeah..." She rubbed the back of her head. Her eyes crinkled in dread of his response.

"*You know, I always hated those guys,*" Lloyd told her.

Hailey's mouth twisted to one side of her face. "Really?"

"*Yeah. That damn Joe and Tommy...Gary and Tate– Who're the other ones?*"

"Travis, Jennifer, Paul, and Vicky," Hailey told him. "And Vicky's father, Martin."

"*Her father, eh? That's– That's...*"

"Creepy?" Hailey suggested.

"Well, yeah," Lloyd replied. "*Yeah, that's pretty creepy alright. Of course, so is killing a bunch of your classmates.*"

"Lloyd, you don't understand..."

"*No, not YOU!*" Lloyd told her. "*I was actually talking about...my brother.*"

"Your brother?"

"*Yeah. They killed him.*" Lloyd cleared his throat. "*Um, at least I think they did. My God! What did those bastards DO to you?*" Hailey smiled. She cupped her hand over the receiver and turned to Wednesday.

"*Man, you're not going to believe this,*" she whispered. Wednesday threw her hands out at her sides. Hailey removed her hand from the receiver. "Look, never mind all that, okay? Just

meet me over here at my friend Wednesday's house. It's..." She paused for a moment to recall the numbers. She was tossing them around in her head the other day when she was at the park. "6456 Linda Street."

"*Linda Street?*" Lloyd asked. "*That across from the park over there?*"

"Yep."

There was a pause. "*I'll be there in a few,*" Lloyd replied. He hung up. Hailey pressed the talk button and dropped the phone on the coffee table.

"What is it?" Wednesday inquired. She leaned forward in eager anticipation. Hailey looked at her.

"Looks like we're not the only ones with a score to settle." Lloyd wasn't kidding. Within a few minutes, he was parking next to the curb at the edge of Wednesday's lawn. Hailey had her backpack sitting beside the recliner. She scooped it off the floor, threw it over her shoulders, and turned to Wednesday. "Let's go," she remarked. Wednesday hopped to her feet. They walked through the door and latched it behind them before Lloyd was even sure he was at the right place. Lloyd narrowed his brown eyes. Then, he bobbed his head up at them. Hailey ripped open the passenger door, leaned in, and greeted him with a smile.

Lloyd looked kind of intimidating in the fading light of the day. Hailey sensed a dark aura emanating from him. She had sensed it before, too. Perhaps it was his clothes. He wore a black jacket, all rough looking and grey from multiple washes, an old, worn out pair of blue jeans, a YKC shirt, and a pair of haggard, black sneakers. Hailey looked at the floor. She noticed that one of his laces was untied. There was just...something about him. Something about the way his sideburns dipped down from his head of shaggy, dark brown hair. They stopped at the bottom of his chin. Wednesday flipped the passenger seat forward and climbed

into the back seat. Hailey pointed at the floor. “Shoe’s untied,” she remarked. Lloyd looked down. He shrugged at the sight of his unkempt shoelaces and turned around.

“Wednesday?” he inquired. “Wednesday Williams, right?” Wednesday nodded. Lloyd offered her his hand. Hailey climbed in and shut the door behind her. Wednesday pressed her lips together then timidly held out her hand. Lloyd shook it bad boy style. He hooked his thumb around hers and rocked his hand from side to side. “Lloyd Freeman.”

“*Hi...*” Wednesday squeaked. Hailey leaned across and snagged a hold of Lloyd’s untied shoelaces. They were driving her crazy. She pulled them tight, knotted them off, and eased into her seat with a sigh.

“Sorry,” she remarked. “I was having a moment.”

Lloyd stared at his shoelaces. “I’m glad you called, Hailey.”

“Me too,” Hailey replied. “I guess we have more in common than I thought. Look, if I’d known that those guys...”

Lloyd fired up the engine. “Forget about it.” He skidded away from the curb. Hailey threw her seatbelt over her shoulder. Wednesday leaned forward. She rested her elbows against the backs of their seats and dropped her chin on her hands.

“So, you two going steady, or what?” she demanded.

Lloyd and Hailey looked at each other. “You’ll have to excuse my friend, Wednesday,” Hailey remarked. She glared at her with disdain. “She lives to embarrass me, you see.”

Wednesday’s face became defensive. “I’m sorry! It’s not every day my little Hailey brings a *boy* home, you know.” Lloyd uttered a single laugh. He shot Hailey a glance then returned his eyes to the road.

“That surprises me,” he told her. “I figured you’d have to beat the guys off with a stick

every morning on your way out the door.” Wednesday’s face lit up with excitement. She slugged Hailey in the shoulder.

“Oh, come on!” Hailey shouted.

“No, I’m serious,” Lloyd continued. “I’ve wanted to ask you out like a million times.” He turned and rubbed the back of his neck. “I just never could bring myself to do it.”

Hailey smiled at him. “Do you know where we’re going?” Lloyd shook his head. “Just get on the Patrick Peterson. I think I remember where it’s at.” Hailey led him to the Church. Well, not right to it. Rather, she had Lloyd pull off the freeway and park in the grass at the end of Refugee Drive. The Church was about a mile’s walk from there. Fortunately, it was not raining like it was the night Lloyd had picked Hailey up. So, they opted to leave the Cammy behind and go the rest of the way on foot. “It’ll be like a sneak attack,” Hailey remarked. They slithered out and eased the doors shut behind them. The sun cast a block of blue and a line of orange at the edge of the horizon. Most of the stars were already out. They could just make out the church. It was recessed the length of half a football field from where the road sloped down. Lloyd narrowed his eyes and scanned the area around the church.

“I don’t see any cars.”

“They park them inside,” Hailey told him. “That way nobody can tell they’re in there.” Lloyd nodded. He fumbled through his keys and headed towards the rear of the car. He popped the trunk open and rummaged around. “What’re you looking for?” Hailey asked. She wandered over to join him. Lloyd reached up and slammed the trunk shut. He held up a wooden baseball bat to show her. He had drilled a bunch of long screws into the end. They were sticking out every which way.

“Holy crap!” Wednesday shouted. “You weren’t kidding.” She turned to Hailey,

throwing her hands out at her sides. “Hey, when do *I* get something, already? I want a damn knife or something.” Hailey set her backpack on the ground. Next, she ripped it open and looked inside. She pulled out a claw hammer and handed it to her.

“Here, use this.”

Wednesday looked the hammer up and down. “Oh, come on!” she shouted. “Give me that damn...gun you had yesterday.”

Hailey sighed. “It’s a two-shooter, and it’s going to blow your damn hand off the first time you shoot it.”

Wednesday shrugged. “I don’t care. I want the gun. Give me the gun!” Hailey glared at her from the ground. She unzipped a side pocket on her backpack in hesitation.

“Don’t make me regret this,” she warned. She handed Wednesday her father’s pistol. Wednesday held the gun in front of her and winked one eye closed. She stared across the top of the barrel and lined up a telephone pole in her sights. Then, she dropped the gun in her pocket and looked at Hailey.

“What’re *you* carrying?” she asked. Hailey picked up the bottle of lighter fluid and a lighter. She showed them to her then dropped them in her pockets. She took out something else as well. “A staple gun?” Wednesday inquired. “You want this to take all night?”

Hailey looked up. “Maybe I *do*.” A grin slid across her face. “May-be...”

Lloyd fired up a cigarette with a red plastic lighter. “You guys ready?”

“Uh-oh!” Wednesday shouted. “He’s a smoker, Hailey.” Hailey glared at her. She stood and threw her backpack on. She looked annoyed. Wednesday turned to Lloyd. “She *hates* smoking! This– There’s just no way this is going to work out.” Hailey turned to see Lloyd’s response. He didn’t really have much of one. He shrugged, dropped his smoke on the ground,

and stomped it out.

“Disgusting habit,” he remarked. “Let’s roll.” He and Hailey began to head out.

Wednesday nipped at their heels.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Wednesday shrieked. “What are you...just going to quit smoking, now?”

Hailey turned to her with a smile. “*Be quiet, Wednesday!*” she whispered. “*Do you even realize what we’re doing right now?*”

Wednesday glared back. “*Yes, I REALIZE.*” She exhaled an annoyed sigh. She turned to Lloyd. “*So, you’re just going to quit smoking? Just like that?*”

Lloyd turned to her with a sly smirk. “*I can TRY.*”

“*You don’t have to quit smoking,*” Hailey whispered.

“*Thank God,*” Lloyd replied. He popped another cancer stick in his mouth and sparked it up with his red lighter.

“*So, what about your brother?*” Hailey inquired. Lloyd uttered a single laugh through closed lips. He took a drag of his cigarette and turned to her.

“*I can’t tell you two how many times I’ve thought about killing these guys.*” He glanced at Wednesday then turned back to Hailey. “*I just– I never was quite sure, you know? Until YOU called...*” He pointed at Hailey, narrowing his eyes. “*You weren’t bullshitting me, were you?*” Hailey lifted the bottom of her pale, yellow sweater. She showed him what was left of the baseball bat welts. “*Yeah, I didn’t think so. I saw the cuts on your face Thursday night.*”

Hailey sighed. “*And, what about your brother?*”

“*Sal– They found him in a dumpster. His throat had been cut.*” Lloyd had a drag of his cigarette. He sucked through his teeth and exhaled. “*He was ALSO covered in welts, like from a*

baseball bat. I always knew they did it."

"How did you know?" Wednesday inquired.

"It's what they do," Lloyd told her. *"Well, it's what they DID, I guess."* He turned to Hailey. *"Ask anybody at the high school."* He sighed and had a drag of his cigarette. *"Anyway, Sal got to hanging around with those guys, and something happened. He wouldn't tell me what, but I knew something was up. Then...things got bad. I was watching him from the window of our house one day when he was walking home. All eight of them came running up behind him and jumped him."*

"When was THIS?" Hailey asked.

"Couple years ago. I heard them yelling something about a robbery or something. When they finished beating him, Travis pointed down at him on the ground. I heard him tell him that he was a dead man." Lloyd took a drag of his smoke. *"It was a few days later when they found him. It's that robbery. I think that's why they killed him. He was involved, somehow. I think..."* He stopped and had a drag of his smoke. *"I think he was going to turn himself in."* He met Hailey's eyes. *"What did YOU do?"*

Hailey shook her head. *"I-I..."* Her eyes began to tear up. Lloyd placed a hand on her shoulder. *"I don't know,"* Hailey gasped. *"I stood up to them. Him and his little girlfriend. Travis and Jennifer."*

Lysergic acid diethylamide is more than a hallucinogen. It is a mood enhancer. When taken internally, it enhances a person's mood. Whatever they are feeling is amplified and intense. That is the magical spell L.S.D. casts on its users more than anything. The hallucinations it produces are just a bonus. Acid does not produce true hallucinations like schizophrenia. For those types of hallucinations, a person must ingest high levels of a tropane

alkaloid such as atropine. Atropine is a major constituent of certain species of nightshade. One of the more commonly used drugs of this type is the fruiting body of *Datura stramonium*. They are referred to as “spiny apples” in some circles. With acid and psilocybin, the compound found in magic mushrooms, the hallucinations are merely distortions of reality. They are an event which the user knows is not actually occurring.

For example, a person may experience solid surfaces that “breathe” or ripple like water. They may also experience auditory hallucinations. They may experience hallucinations on any of the other three senses, although these are not as common. A more typical phenomenon is what is known as synesthesia, a combination of two or more senses. An example of synesthesia would be hearing the color red or seeing music. So, what about “bad trips?” Well, it was previously mentioned that L.S.D. is a mood enhancer. Given this characteristic, it is obvious that hallucinogens would amplify a depressed, angry, or overall foul mood to the extreme. This would create the worst experience the person has ever been through. To avoid these bad trips, acid should never be taken when in a bad mood. The user should also take care during the trip to stay in a positive state of mind, avoiding sinister or paranoid thoughts whenever possible.

Another common phenomenon reported by users of L.S.D. is seeing “tracers.” For example, a person may wave their hand in front of their face. A trail of hands remains in their field of vision for some time afterwards. They are pictures frozen in the mind from frames observed by the eyes. Travis, Jennifer, Paul, and Vicky were putting that hallucinatory effect to use. They sat on the floor of the church. They were gathered around a box filled with sparkler firecrackers. Each of them had four sparklers going at once. They weaved them to and fro in front of their ecstatic faces. Martin sat on the floor a few feet away. He observed their erratic behavior with a shaky headed grin. He sipped a bottle of whiskey from time to time.

“This some good fry, Pauley-Pauley!” Travis remarked. Paul’s eyes were uncovered for once. They were mismatched and open wide, pupil’s dilated. He whirled his sparklers in the shape of an infinity sign, burning it into his vision.

“Man, Vicky, check this shit out, Vicky. This’ll mess with your head, Vicky. Watch this, Vicky.” He traced an infinity sign in front of her eyes, so that she could see what *he* saw. She turned to him with pupils like dinner plates.

“Whoa, Paul, that’s out there Paul. How do you do that, Paul? Do you feel good like I do, Paul? I feel good, Paul. Now what, Paul?”

Jennifer reeled her head back and filled the church with a spine tingling, other worldly cackle. “Was that you, Jen?!” Travis shrieked. “You’re really *freaking* me out over there! You sound like a wicked, wicked witch!” Jennifer got right in his face with a sinister grin. She widened her eyes and did the wicked witch cackle again. Travis flipped his head back and screeched.

“My God,” Paul remarked, “what’re you two doing over there? You’re wiggling me out. Cut that out. What’s wrong with you guys?”

“*Jeez...*” Martin groaned. He set his drink on the floor, pushed himself to his feet, and made a quick exit. He stumbled to the side of the building, faced the tin wall, and ripped open his fly. He widened his eyes, trying to make sense of the rusty tin in front of him. He’d gotten a little carried away with the whiskey. Martin grinned. The notion to screw the cap back on the bottle crept across his dizzied mind. “*Yep,*” he whispered, throwing garments out of the way. “*I’d better hang it up when I get back in there. Them damn kids’ll end up killing eesh other.*”

He looked down and realized he was peeing. He had forgotten. He watched urine spatter the wall then grinned at a sudden realization. “*I thing– I...think I better hang it up when I get*

back in there.” He narrowed his eyes, staring into space. That sounded familiar, those words, that phrasing. He pinched his eyes shut and smirked. He rubbed his eyes with his free hand. “*Oh, yeah...*” he whispered, recalling what he had just said. He finished urinating and looked down. His brain shrieked. Somebody’s shadow was blacking out the wall next to him. His eyes popped open. There was a sudden sensation of jagged spikes in his lower back. He half-groaned, half-gagged. Another sensation quickly followed. This one was sporadic and noisy.

He snatched desperately at his drunken thoughts. The only thing he could think to do was fumble with his britches. He tried to zip them up. He didn’t know what else to do. His mind was on auto-pilot. The noises at the side of his face continued. They were a series of metallic, spring loaded cracks. They cried out in the empty surroundings like echoes of gunshots. With each metallic crack, a barb shot into the side of his neck. Each barb was accompanied by a tingling pain. He shrugged his shoulders and screamed from the back of his throat. The sharp pains in his neck began to burn. He felt blood trickling out. The spikes in his back withdrew then pierced his spine a little lower. Martin moaned and fell to his knees. The spring loaded barbs began to pierce the back of his scalp. There was a smash to the top of the head. It felt like the claw of a hammer. Martin fell face first on the grass.

“*Hit him again, Wednesday,*” Hailey whispered. Wednesday exhaled through her nose then reeled back with her hammer. “*Do it!*” Wednesday narrowed her eyes. She stared at Martin’s limp, lifeless body. Then, she turned to Hailey with a shaking head.

“*It’s alright, Wednesday,*” Lloyd whispered. He whipped his spiked bat over his head. Afterwards, he smashed it into Martin’s thick skull with a satisfying thump. Wednesday wrapped her arms around her stomach. She turned around and stared at the grass. Hailey tossed her staple gun on the ground and took Wednesday in her arms.

“Him or us...” she whispered in her ear. Wednesday moaned. She went limp in Hailey’s grasp. *“Hey, you can leave at any time. I’ll understand.”*

Wednesday let out a shaky breath. *“No, they tried to kill us.”* She and Hailey turned to Lloyd. He was rolling the tip of his screw garnished club through the grass. He was attempting to wipe Martin’s blood off.

“I’ll try to draw them out,” he whispered. He looked up. *“You two stay over here for a second.”* He headed for the door. Hailey recovered her staple gun. Then, she and Wednesday crept over and peeked around the corner. Lloyd smashed the door with three quick raps from his baseball bat. He quickly snuck back. Paul heard three sudden smacks on the door. His wide eyed head jerked to the right. Then, he turned to the others.

“What was that? Did you hear that? What was that?”

Travis pointed at him. “You heard that, too?” Paul nodded. “Those three cracks?”

“Yeah,” Vicky whispered. She turned to Paul, and her eyes popped open. Terrifying thoughts began to race through her mind. *“What WAS that, Paul?”* she whispered. She wrapped her arms around Paul’s arm and turned to the door with a look of terror. Her eyes flew back and forth across the dark, dreadful warehouse surrounding her. *“Where’s my father? Where IS he?”* Travis cackled. He stopped immediately and cupped his hand over his mouth. Then, he leaned towards her.

“I think your old man’s playing a trick on us!” he whispered. Vicky was overwhelmed with relief. She giggled uncontrollably. *“Tell you what, me and Jennifer’ll sneak over to the door, and on the count of three we’ll throw it open in his face...knock his ass to the ground!”*

“Yeah!” Jennifer whispered. She became euphoric. Her eyes popped open. *“Yeah, let’s get him!”* They quietly hopped to their feet and slithered towards the door. Paul and Vicky

turned around to watch. They slapped their hands over their lips. They didn't want to laugh too loud and give them away. Travis placed one hand against the door. He curled the other around the knob. Jennifer planted both of her hands against the door next to Travis'. She was getting ready to ram it open. The pounding came again, three earth shattering slams against the outside of the door. Travis turned to his girlfriend with a wicked grin. He whispered the countdown.

"*One...two...THREE!*" They shoved the door through empty air. It swung open and slammed into the side of the building. Travis and Jennifer tumbled out, landing in a heap on the grass. Jennifer lay on her back, staring at a starry sky. She roared with laughter. The stars began to swirl around and interweave with one another. It was the last thing she saw. The spikes of Lloyd's bat crashed into the top of her head. He struck her as if he were teeing off for a game of golf.

"Fore..." Lloyd remarked. He glared at Travis. Travis stared back. He filled with terror. His eyes bugged out of his head. He opened his mouth to scream. But, he was so overwhelmed with fear that nothing came out. He looked at the door. Wednesday slowly slid it shut. She stared at him, coldly. Then, his eyes met a rippling set of jade green eyes. Hailey towered over him, lighter fluid in one hand, plastic lighter in the other. Wednesday and Lloyd joined her. Travis cringed. "You killed someone I loved," Lloyd remarked. "Now, I've killed someone *you* loved." Travis gasped. He choked on his own spit and began to cough. His eyes began to tear up. He never turned away from Hailey's maniacal, dispassionate gaze. Travis was a pretty good read. He could *see* the hatred in her. Her soul had turned to black. Her entire body was filled with anger and a lust for blood. Or, perhaps it was just the acid.

Hailey had spent little bits of time over the past few days thinking of all the things she might say to Travis if she ever got the better of him. She had contemplated it time and time

again. She had fumbled through her brain for the right words to mark the occasion. She hadn't managed to come up with anything good. Now that the moment had arrived, she was struck with a better idea. Everyone always goes out with a zinger. They bust off some elaborate, once in a lifetime one-liner to top all zingers before it. Looming over Travis now, his body going limp with hesitation, fear, and confusion, his mind all tweaked out on L.S.D., she remembered something, something simple. She wasn't everyone.

She struck the lighter to life and gave him a simple inquiry. "If you add all the numbers together from one to one hundred, do you know what you get?" Travis stared at her. He was puzzled by her completely pointless question. He thought for a minute then nervously shook his head. "Of *course* you don't, you MORON!" she screeched. "It's five thousand and fifty!" She held the lighter above his face. "Do you think you can remember that?!" She poured the lighter fluid over the flame and lit Travis on fire. He shrieked in absolute horror. He tossed, turned, and rolled across the grass. He hopelessly attempted to beat the flames out. Hailey danced around as he rolled. She squirted lighter fluid everywhere she saw flame. She tried as best as she could to keep the fire alive long enough for him to pass out and burn to death. After half a minute, he lay still on the ground. Hailey didn't stop. She doused his lifeless body with lighter fluid. She coated it until lighter fluid pooled on the grass. Flames shot higher than the roof of the church. It took Lloyd kicking the bottle from her shaking hands to get her to stop.

"That'll do," he told her, patting her on the shoulder.

"*He's dead...*" she gasped, letting out a fifty pound sigh. "Thank *God!*" Wednesday crinkled her eyes. She turned away and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I told you he was a dick," she remarked. Lloyd took Hailey in his arms. She tore her eyes away from the charred corpse on the ground. Then, she shuddered against his chest.

"It's alright, Hailey," he whispered. He ran his fingers through her fire orange hair.

"Calm down. You're going to stroke out." Hailey uttered the slightest whisper of a laugh. She stood on her tip-toes to whisper in his ear. Lloyd lowered his head to listen.

"There's still two more inside."

"I know," he replied. *"Paul and the other girl."*

"Vicky."

"Right." Vicky smashed through the door. Wednesday dropped the hammer and drew Hailey's gun. Vicky didn't think. She smacked the piece out of Wednesday's hands. Next, she tucked and rolled across the grass and snatched it out of the air. She turned around and waved it at everyone.

"D-Don't come any closer, you freaks!" she screamed. Hailey and Wednesday threw their hands over their heads. Lloyd crossed his arms over his chest. He grinned at her with a nod of his head. Vicky caught a whiff of Travis' burnt flesh. She threw her free hand over her mouth and nostrils. There was a gagging sensation on the back of her throat. She stopped just short of tripping over the bat that was sticking out of Jennifer's head. She peered into Jennifer's elated eyes with a cringe. Then, she saw her father. She stared at his wilted, lifeless body. She filled with horror. Her eyes began to tear up. *"Buh..."* she gasped. Her grip loosened on Hailey's pistol. She noticed Hailey approaching her out of the corner of her eye. She clutched the gun in her fist, flipped it up, and aimed it right at her forehead. "Stay back!" she shrieked.

"Wh- Vicky, I didn't move!" Hailey shouted back.

Vicky turned the gun sideways, holding it gangster style. "SHUT-UP!" she howled. Her shoulders tightened with anger. Their little faces were all twisted and melting. Vicky grimaced. There was a flurry of movement by the door. She turned and shot at it. Just when it seemed like

things couldn't get any worse, they did. "*Oh, God...*" Vicky moaned. She watched Paul fall to his knees, clutching his chest. She was filled with cold terror. "Oh, GOD!" She ran to him and scooped up his limp body. He melted in her arms. Tears dripped from her eyes and fell on Paul's forehead. She stared pleadingly into his different colored eyes. His hand was clamped over his blood gushing heart. She planted her hand on top of his. Vicky could feel the warmth of Paul's wet blood against the coolness of the night. It pooled beneath her shaking palm. Paul forced his mouth open to speak.

"D-Don't cry, school girl..." Vicky felt the life drain out of him. She sobbed.

"Damn..." she whispered. She laid Paul's body gently on the grass. Then, she reached into the pocket of her jeans, retrieved his blue shades, and placed them over his eyes with a wobbly hand. She breathed heavily, psyching herself up. She wasn't sure if she would be able to do it. She didn't worry about that. She just went for it. Vicky screeched at the top of her lungs. She hopped up and whirled around to face Hailey, Wednesday, and Lloyd. Then, she pressed the barrel of Hailey's pistol against her temple and pulled the trigger.

Chapter 23: "Ceasefire"

Now the *real* work began, getting rid of the evidence. Hailey's revenge was complete. With any luck, no one but she, Wednesday, and Lloyd would ever know about it. They were left with seven items to dispose of, Travis' truck, Martin's Cutler, and five bodies. This was the part Hailey had been dreading. She'd hoped to get everyone at the school, leaving no trace evidence behind. Fate had not been so fortunate. Now, she had a mess on her hands. It wasn't so bad, Hailey decided. She was good at cleaning up messes. That's what she kept telling herself, anyway. She tried to picture things as just another mess, another list of things to do. She just needed the appropriate tools to deal with each of the seven items. Then, she could cross them each off the list. The trio stood in the church. They were figuring out what they had to work with. Wednesday got a general feel for the place. She threw her hands up at her sides.

"Anybody got any ideas?" Hailey curled her index finger over her chin. She stared at a group of unmarked barrels. They were sealed shut, so she couldn't tell what was inside of them.

"I don't know," she replied. "I'm not sure exactly what we have to work with around here."

"Well, won't the police run forensics on all that blood on the grass outside?" Wednesday inquired. "We should take care of that right away."

Hailey faced her. "Not necessarily. Blood is circumstantial."

Wednesday narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?" Hailey turned to the barrels. She spotted a flathead screwdriver on the concrete floor.

"I mean you can't prove murder without a body." She bent over and picked up the screwdriver. "Well, you *can*, but it's very difficult to do."

"Oh," Wednesday remarked. "So, we don't need to worry about that."

Hailey began prying a lid off one of the barrels with the screwdriver. “Not if we can get rid of these bodies,” she explained. “And, these two cars.” The top of the barrel popped off and clattered to the floor.

“What’re you thinking?” Lloyd asked. He stood near the open door with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I’m not sure,” Hailey told him. The barrel was filled with an amber dust, metallic in nature. She pressed the palm of her hand into it and held it up for Lloyd to see. “That look like rust to you?”

Lloyd narrowed his eyes, staring at her hand. “Is *that* what’s in there? It’s a barrel full of rust?”

Hailey popped the tops off a couple more barrels. “I think so,” she remarked. “These are all rust.” She turned to Wednesday. “Wednesday!” she called, tossing her the screwdriver. “What do you got over there?” Wednesday turned to a gathering of barrels behind her. She popped the top off the nearest one.

“Some kind of...metal...dust,” she replied.

“Kind of light?” Hailey inquired.

Wednesday looked it over. “It’s shiny.”

“No, the WEIGHT, Wednesday,” Hailey explained. “Is it light in weight?” Wednesday pushed the barrel with her fingertips. It easily tipped to one side. She looked at her over her shoulder.

“Yeah, it’s *really* light.”

Hailey grinned. “So, we’ve got aluminum powder and iron oxide.” She turned to Lloyd. “Sounds like the makings of an exothermic reaction to me.”

Lloyd narrowed his eyes. “Do what?”

“Thermite,” she told him. She turned to Wednesday. “Like...rocket fuel.”

“So?” Wednesday requisitioned.

“So, we’ve got...” She glanced at the barrels behind Wednesday then turned and looked at hers. “Eight barrels of aluminum powder and eight barrels of iron oxide. We could get rid of them with that.”

“Really?” Lloyd demanded. “Just...burn their bodies up?”

Hailey turned to him. “Cars too. We could probably burn this whole *place* down with that.” She looked around the church. “I just need something to ignite...” She noticed the box of sparklers, and a smirk slid across her face. “They bought sparklers...” She picked one up and showed them. “I guess they bought these so they could wig out on ‘em while they were on acid. Yeah, five bodies, two cars– I don’t think that’ll be a problem.” Hailey knelt down and pocketed a handful of the sparklers.

Wednesday looked puzzled. “So, this stuff...”

“Thermite,” Hailey repeated.

“This thermite stuff– It’ll burn that hot? Hot enough to cremate a body?”

Hailey shook a sparkler from side to side to show her. “You have to have something highly reactive like *magnesium* just to light it. Yeah, it’ll burn so hot that the fire department won’t be able to put it out. The hydrogen and oxygen from their water hoses will just ignite on contact.”

Lloyd widened his eyes. “Wow. Well, what’re we waiting for?”

“Yeah,” Hailey agreed. “We need shovels...and a wheelbarrow, probably. What *was* this place, anyway?” Lloyd wandered across the room. He flipped over an old, rusty

wheelbarrow.

“I’m pretty sure they used to mix paints here or something.” He rolled the wheelbarrow back and forth to test its wheel. “If memory serves.”

“Ah,” Hailey replied. She wrapped her arms around a barrel of rust and tilted it at an angle. “Yeah, *that* makes sense. They must’ve used this stuff for pigmentation.” Wednesday watched Hailey walk the barrel towards the middle of the floor. She nodded then walked a barrel of aluminum powder towards the middle as well.

“Like, to color the paints with?” Wednesday inquired. She and Hailey met in the middle with each of their ingredients. Lloyd arrived with the wheelbarrow.

“Do you have any idea what the proper...?” Lloyd held up his hands as if to illustrate. “...mixture is supposed to be?”

“It should be about fifty-fifty,” Hailey replied. “It couldn’t be simpler, one barrel aluminum for one barrel of rust.” Lloyd handed her a spade tipped shovel. Hailey squinted. She held the blade up and examined it. It had a bit of mud caked on.

“What is it?” Lloyd asked, handing Wednesday another.

Hailey turned to him. “These are the *ones*,” she told him. “The ones they used to bury me with.”

“Really?” Lloyd inquired. He retrieved a third from the wheelbarrow. “How do you know that?” Hailey smashed the blade of her shovel into the concrete floor. She knocked off most of the dried mud.

“Where did you find these?”

Lloyd dumped the barrel of rust onto the floor. “I found them in a corner over there.” Wednesday dumped *her* barrel of aluminum powder on top. The three of them swirled it

together. “Is that going to work?” Lloyd inquired. Hailey stared at their work and let out a short laugh.

“It’ll work perfectly.”

“Well, alright then,” Lloyd remarked. He wandered across the room and retrieved the next barrel of oxidized iron. “Next.” Lloyd began walking another barrel of rust towards the pile. Wednesday went for another barrel of aluminum powder.

“Um...guys,” Hailey remarked. Wednesday and Lloyd dumped their barrels next to the first pile.

“What is it, Hailey?” Lloyd asked. He and Wednesday began to mix the second pile.

“Someone has to go back and get the car.”

Lloyd’s head dropped to one side. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. We might get caught just starting this fire, huh? Like, the fire department might come along while we’re all scrambling back to the car.”

“No, you don’t know the half of it,” Hailey explained. “Once this stuff goes, it’ll burn bright white, like the surface of the sun.”

“Yeah...” Wednesday moaned. “That’s not exactly...inconspicuous, is it?”

“What’s to stop the fire department from putting it out?” Lloyd asked.

“No, I just *told* you,” Hailey repeated, “they won’t be able to put it out. It’ll burn. It just...might have an audience.”

Lloyd recalled what she had said earlier. “Oh...right. Well, I’ll go get my car then.” He ripped his keys out of his pocket and twirled them around his finger.

“No *way!*” Wednesday shouted. “How do we know you’ll come back?” Hailey glared at her. She threw her hands out at her sides.

“Of course I’ll come back,” Lloyd assured her with a confused smirk. “Two of those bodies out there are *mine*, remember?”

Wednesday shook her head. “I-I dunno.” She turned to Hailey. “How well do you know this guy?”

“Wednesday!” Hailey shouted.

“No, I understand,” Lloyd told her. “I guess– Yeah, I suppose I might be worried about the same thing if I were you. Here...” He tossed Wednesday his keys. “*You* go get it.”

“Me?” Wednesday timidly inquired. “You mean...out *there*? In-In the DARK?”

“Oh-kay...” Lloyd groaned. His voice contained a hint of impatience. “How about if me and Hailey go?”

“And-And leave me HERE? Um, alone?”

“Jesus, Wednesday!” Hailey shouted. She bowed her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. Afterwards, she looked up. “Fine, we’ll ALL go. That way *everybody’s* miserable.”

“You’re right– You’re right...” Wednesday rubbed exhaustion from her eyes. Her eyelids felt hot and clammy. “That’s just silly. You two go.”

“No, *you’re* coming with us,” Hailey told her. “But, if we come back and like...Travis’ body has wandered away or something, I’m holding you personally responsible.” Wednesday turned to Lloyd. She squinted, begging for his forgiveness.

“I’m sorry.”

Lloyd shrugged. “I understand,” he assured her. He began to mix more thermite. “I don’t know, maybe– I mean I *did* just smash in a couple of skulls with a ball bat.”

“Yeah...” Wednesday trailed off. “You see what I mean?” Hailey began to work her shovel. She turned to Lloyd.

“Yeah...thanks for helping me,” she remarked. Lloyd smiled at her.

“Hey, what about *me*?!” Wednesday demanded.

“Wen...” Hailey began. She faced her. “I’m going to smack you over the head with this damn shovel!”

“Well, if you’re going to thank HIM, you should at least thank *me*.” Hailey narrowed her eyes. She suddenly grinned.

“What...? Are you jealous?” Lloyd uttered a single laugh from the other side of the room. He had gone to get the next barrel of rust. Wednesday crossed her arms over her chest.

“No.”

“You’re...jealous of Lloyd?” Hailey inquired. Lloyd arrived with the third barrel of iron oxide. Wednesday stared at her, blankly. Hailey’s grin intensified. She turned and took Lloyd’s hand. She looked Wednesday over to gauge her reaction. Wednesday stared at their hands and blinked a few times. “Why does that bother you so much, Wednesday?”

“It– It doesn’t.”

“Yeah?” Hailey turned to Lloyd. She gazed into his brown eyes. Then, she stood on her tip-toes. Lloyd got the idea. He lowered his head and kissed her. It was one of those short, nervous kisses with a hint of humor and no passion. It was just enough to reveal Wednesday’s jealousy of her friend’s new acquaintance, however slight it may have been. “You ARE!” Hailey shrieked. “You’re jealous of Lloyd. How funny is that?” Hailey threw her hands out at her sides. “Why?” Wednesday smiled. She pointed at the barrels behind her.

“I’m...going to go get this next barrel of aluminum or whatever. I don’t have to listen to this.” She turned and headed for the next barrel. Lloyd still held Hailey’s hand. He tugged at it.

“Um, Hailey? I don’t know. I mean...” He rubbed the back of his head. Hailey looked

into his eyes. “I’m not so sure she’s really *jealous*, per se.” He placed a hand at the side of Hailey’s face. “Maybe we should...again? Yeah?”

“Oh, Lloyd...” Hailey groaned. She timidly removed his hand from her cheek. “It’s only our first date, though.”

“Hailey, come on. Just one more kiss. I-I didn’t even do the *thing* I wanted to do.”

“Yuck,” Wednesday remarked. She returned with the next barrel of powdered aluminum. Hailey turned to Wednesday.

“Awe, you’re still jealous? Would you like a kissy-wissy?”

“Shut-up!” Wednesday screeched. She turned away, feeling flush. Hailey looked from Wednesday to Lloyd then down at her shovel.

“We have to finish mixing this up, guys.” She sighed and began to work again. “Then, we’ll go for the car, okay?” They finished mixing the thermite. Then, they began to gather the bodies. It took all three of them working together. They hauled each of the five corpses across the cool grass and through the church. They dropped each of them on top of the thermite. They stacked them side by side like sardines. Travis was the worst, and the lightest. The stench of his burnt flesh was hideously foul. He smelled like a combination of vinegar, chicken broth, and hot tar. Lloyd, Wednesday, and Hailey gagged the whole way to the thermite pile. As soon as he was on top, Hailey ran outside. She threw up right on Jennifer’s cold, grinning face. Lloyd walked up about the time she had finished. He bent over, yanked the baseball bat out of Jennifer’s skull, and laid it on top of her.

“You alright?” he asked.

“Yeah...” Hailey groaned. “Sorry.”

Lloyd removed a clear, plastic container of mints from his pocket. “Mint?” he offered

with a shake of the tiny box. Hailey held out her hand, and Lloyd dropped one in her palm. He took one for himself then offered the box to Wednesday.

“Damn Hailey, that’s *gross!*” Wednesday shrieked. She took a mint and popped it in her mouth.

“I know, Wednesday,” she replied. “Can we hurry up and get this dead bitch inside, please? I’m worried someone’s going to drive by and see us.” Wednesday threw her hands up at either side of her face and shook her head.

“I’m not TOUCHING that girl. I’m going to get your damn vomit all over me.”

“I’ll get the head,” Hailey told her. She grabbed a fistful of Jennifer’s bloody hair. She lifted her grinning head off the ground. “You can get her feet or something. I didn’t throw up over *there*.” Wednesday stared at Hailey’s puke. It slid down Jennifer’s face and dripped onto the grass. She turned away and nearly threw up. It sounded like there were a couple of hummingbirds in her ears.

“Hailey, I’m never forgiving you for this,” Wednesday remarked. She touched her fingers to her ruby red lips.

“I’m sorry!” Hailey repeated. “Now, grab her ankles. Let’s get this knocked out, already.” Wednesday reluctantly knelt down and grabbed Jennifer’s ankles. The three of them dragged her corpse into the church. The aroma of Hailey’s wretch wafted through the air. It burrowed into Wednesday’s nostrils as they walked through the door. It felt like there was a pair of hands clamped around her throat. Hailey grinned at her squinty eyed, twisted face. “Come on, Wednesday,” she remarked. “Let’s get this done, and I’ll make us some more scrambled eggs and bacon.” Wednesday turned her head with a gag. Hailey looked at her puke on Jennifer’s grinning face. She narrowed her eyes. “Is that a French fry?”

“Hailey, shut-up!” Wednesday cried. Hailey turned to Lloyd. He was cringing at the side of Jennifer’s body, struggling for fresh air. Hailey pressed her lips together.

“I’m...really sorry, Lloyd.”

“You know, when I asked you to call me,” he replied, “I was thinking maybe...dinner? A movie?”

“Maybe some other time,” Hailey replied. “Tomorrow, I was hoping you could take me by my house. See what we can scrounge up.”

Lloyd looked at her. “What?” They arrived at the pile of thermite and tossed Jennifer’s body up on top.

“It burned down last night,” Hailey told him. Lloyd shook a disapproving, smiling head at her. “THEY did it!” she shouted. She pointed at the five bodies laid on top of the thermite.

“Cars,” Wednesday remarked. She backed away with her arms crossed over her chest. Hailey hopped into Martin’s Cutler, and Lloyd took Travis’ truck. Travis and Martin had pulled their cars inside through the large, overhead door. They were parked right next to their bodies. Hailey eased the Cutler on top of the five bodies. She took care to position it just right for the upcoming event. Lloyd followed suit, parking Travis’ obnoxiously loud pickup right next to it. Everyone had to plug their ears for that. Wednesday, Hailey, and Lloyd packed in the area between the cars and bodies with as much thermite as they could fit. They filled the cabins of the cars as well. They piled it on the floorboards and seats. Lloyd got the bright idea of removing the V.I.N. numbers and license plates. Between the flathead screwdriver they’d used to pry the lids off the barrels and the claw hammers Hailey had purchased, they removed the two damning pieces of evidence. They mixed them in with the rest of the thermite. Then, they opened the overhead door a foot off the ground to get a better draw of oxygen.

Hailey took the wheelbarrow and made a trail of thermite from the mountain of cars and bodies to the door. Then, they flipped off the lights and began the long journey back to the car. The night was ominous and wary. It cloaked them in a blanket of pitch blackness. Lloyd could barely make out his hand in front of his face. He popped a cigarette in his mouth and struck his lighter to life. It radiated like a road flare in the black of dusk. He pulled the stogie from his lips between his first and second fingers. He inhaled a soothing fog and blew it out. It appeared as a black mist against the faint light of the moon and stars.

“What did you mean, before?”

“What?” Wednesday asked.

“No, not *you*,” Lloyd replied.

“What do you mean?” Hailey inquired.

Lloyd sighed. “Well, the uh...” He fumbled for words. The orange glow from the tip of his cigarette whirled in front of them. “Something about adding all the numbers from one to a hundred?”

“Oh, ‘one to a hundred’?” Hailey repeated. “Five thousand, fifty.”

“Right!” Lloyd shouted. “That’s what you said. How do you know that?”

“I can give you the sum of *any* series of numbers starting at one and increasing to a positive integer by increments of one.”

“Uh...” Lloyd trailed off, having another drag of his cigarette.

Hailey laughed. “Just...pick a number, okay?” She could hear Lloyd exhaling cigarette smoke.

“Well, I don’t know,” he replied.

“Thirty-seven,” Wednesday requested.

“‘Thirty-seven’...” Hailey repeated. “Two-ten plus forty-nine...and two-ten plus nine hundred, which is eleven-ten. So, thirteen-sixty-nine plus thirty which is thirteen-ninety-nine, plus seven comes to fourteen-oh-six.”

“What?” Wednesday demanded.

“One thousand, four hundred six divided by two,” Hailey continued. She turned to Lloyd. “Seven hundred three.”

“Seven-oh-three?” Lloyd repeated. “That’s one to thirty-seven?”

“Yeah,” Hailey replied. She narrowed her eyes and double-checked her answer. Lloyd had a drag of his smoke.

“Do that again. Do...seventy-eight.”

“‘Seventy-eight’...” Hailey repeated. “Five-sixty plus sixty-four– Then, forty-nine-hundred plus five-sixty...fifty-four-sixty plus six-twenty-four, so... sixty-eighty-four plus seventy-eight.” Hailey added that up in her head real quick. “Six thousand, one hundred sixty-two divided by two,” she replied. “Three thousand, eighty-one.”

“How are you doing that?” Lloyd asked.

“Summation series,” Hailey told him. “Theoretically, there’s a formula for all of them.” She patted him on the arm. “I’ll show you, sometime.”

“I guess,” Lloyd blew through a laugh.

“If we ever go walking at nighttime again...” Wednesday began. A cigarette bounced up and down between her lips. “...remind me to bring a flashlight.” She flipped open her lighter and sparked it to life. It illuminated them with a flickering ambiance of orange light. Hailey, Wednesday, and Lloyd were exhausted when they arrived at the Cammy. It was a pretty good walk from the side of the freeway to the church. It was even worse coming back. Wednesday

sighed. She stretched her arms over her head and collapsed on the hood of Lloyd's blue car. Then, she crossed her arms behind her head and stared at the stars. "Awe, Jeez," she gasped. "Can we go home, now?" Lloyd unlocked the driver's side door and ripped it open. He took a long, drawn out seat. He groaned, rolled his head around, and reached across to unlock the passenger door for Hailey.

"You can ride on the hood if you like," he told Wednesday. "I'll try to keep it under fifty."

Hailey stared at her friend. "Get up!" she yelled. Wednesday moaned and stretched her arms over her head again. Hailey and Lloyd looked at each other. Lloyd shrugged then fired up the engine. Wednesday hopped up with a shriek.

"Okay, okay! I'm going!" Hailey shoved her into the back seat. She slid in next to Lloyd, slammed the door, and threw on her seatbelt. Lloyd threw his stick-shifter into reverse and backed onto Refugee Drive. He flicked on the headlights, shifted into first, and took off.

"So, all we have to do is light one of those sparklers and ignite the..." He turned to Hailey. "What do you call that stuff?"

"Thermite," Hailey blew through a laugh. "Um...yep, that's it. Then, we'd better be getting out of here double quick." Walking from the church to the car took twenty minutes. Driving back took less than two. Lloyd skidded off the road, drove down the grass, and stopped next to the door of the old warehouse. "Give me your lighter, Wednesday," Hailey demanded. She threw her arm over the back of her seat and held out her hand. Wednesday dropped her lighter into Hailey's outstretched hand. Afterwards, Hailey threw her door open and stepped out. She removed the sparklers she had grabbed earlier from her pocket. She turned to her friends. "Don't watch this, guys," she told them. "Don't look directly at it." She flipped open

Wednesday's lighter, fired up all the sparklers at once, and walked to the end of the trail by the door. Hailey held the sparklers upside down above the thermite. Hot, white sparks of burning magnesium trickled down. She looked away. It wasn't long before the thermite took a light. Once she felt the heat of it against her knuckles, she tossed the firecrackers into the church. Then, she jogged back to Lloyd's car and hopped inside.

"Alright, let's get the hell out of here!" she shouted. Lloyd gunned it back to the road.

"My God..." Wednesday remarked. "That stuff is bright!" She threw her arms over her eyes.

"I said don't LOOK at it, you dork!" Hailey shouted.

Chapter 24: "Sunday"

Detective Moore arrived at the scene. He was driving a brown, unmarked vehicle. He parked it next to the curb behind a black and white and killed the engine. He stared at the burnt out shell of an S.U.V. in the driveway. He could tell right away that something was not right about this particular crime scene. There was something about the peeling screen on the storm door. The door had been removed from its hinges and laid against the wall beside the front entrance. He had a sip of coffee from a cup in his cup-holder. Then, he stepped out of the car and shut the door. He was immediately approached by a rough looking girl. He had no way to prove it. But, he could tell by her wardrobe, haggard appearance, and antsy demeanor that she was probably a crack-head. He smiled down at her. She looked up at him. He was nearly a foot taller than she was.

"Y'all got any cash?" she demanded.

"Left my billfold at the house," Moore replied, patting his tan trench coat.

"Come on," she begged. "Not even...fiddy cent?" Detective Moore pointed through the window of his car. He showed her the cup of coffee sitting in his cup-holder.

"Spent the last bit of change I had on that cup of coffee right there."

"Damn," she muttered. She turned and went about her merry little way. Moore wandered around the front of his vehicle. He padded through the front yard of the crime scene and approached a uniformed officer. He stood in front of the door with his arms crossed over his chest. The doorway was wide open. The front door was laid against the wall next to the storm door. An "X" of police tape lay across the entrance.

"You Moore?" he remarked. Moore patted his trench coat and removed his billfold. Then, he flipped it open and showed him his badge. He had a peek at the inside of the house

behind the officer.

“Am I working arson now?” he inquired.

The uniformed officer shrugged. “I just go where they tell me to.” He stepped out of the way and let Moore pass. Detective Moore threw his hands on his hips. He looked around the room. Another uniformed officer approached him from the hallway.

“Some mess, huh?” the inside officer remarked.

“Mm,” Moore replied. “Who’s house is this?”

The officer looked at a clipboard he had with him. “Helen and Hailey Holloway,” he told him. “Mother and daughter.”

“And where are *they*?” Moore inquired.

“No one knows.” Moore nodded his head. He looked at the roof. The majority of the ceiling had burned away. He could see scorched leftovers of the rafters.

“Well, I want to talk to her.”

“Helen or Hailey?” the uniformed officer asked.

“Hailey,” he replied. “The daughter. I’ve got a feeling she’ll be dropping by here shortly.” The officer walked to their guy out front. He told him to be on the lookout for the daughter. He turned to Moore.

“And the mother?”

“Oh, I don’t think you’ll have to worry about *her* showing up,” Detective Moore assured him. The officer shot him a narrow eyed glance. He turned to the officer outside.

It was just before noon. The sun was shining. A puffy white cloud here and there broke up the bright blue sky. Lloyd, Hailey, and Wednesday sat in the Cammy. They stared across the street at Hailey’s burnt out shell of a house. There was a black and white police car parked at the

edge of the sidewalk. A brown, undercover car was parked behind that. A cop stood in front of the entrance. His arms were crossed over his chest. Behind him, an “X” of police tape was stretched across the doorway. The remains of Hailey’s mother’s S.U.V. stood in the driveway. Today, Hailey had on some of her new clothes. She had chosen a black shirt, skinny blue jeans, leather boots that went halfway up her calves, and a maroon sweater-jacket. Lloyd sat across from her in the driver’s seat. He was cloaked in his typical rough styling of a faded black shirt with two white stripes across the front, a pair of blue jeans with a hole in one knee, a plaid jacket, red and white, and his usual black sneakers. Wednesday sat in the back seat. She wore a black turtleneck, a red skirt with horizontal black lines, and a pair of black leggings. They led to a pair of black boots with white fur at the tops. Wednesday leaned forward. She placed her hands on the corners of Lloyd and Hailey’s seats.

“So, are we going in there or what?” she demanded.

“I don’t know,” Hailey replied. “Maybe we should come back when these guys are gone.”

Lloyd turned to her. “It’s *your* house. Let’s just go talk to their guy out front, there.” Hailey looked at the cop in front of the door. He was giving them quite a stare.

“Looks kind of scary,” she remarked. He was a pudgy fellow. Two fat cheeks crept from either side of a handlebar mustache beneath a pair of dark, beady eyes. Lloyd chuckled. He hopped out and walked to Hailey’s side. He ripped her door open and offered her his hand.

“Come on, Hailey. We got your back.” Hailey looked into Lloyd’s brown eyes. She reluctantly took his hand. Lloyd dragged her to her feet. “I like that outfit by the way,” he told her. He flipped Hailey’s seat forward so Wednesday could get out. “Looks nice on you.”

“Thanks,” Hailey replied. Wednesday climbed out and slammed the door. Hailey stood

between her two friends. They gazed at her, waiting for her to take off. Lloyd sighed. Then, he and Wednesday hooked an arm through each of hers. They dragged her across Cherry Lane and through her front yard. Everyone stopped and unhooked their arms once they got to the guard out front.

“Let me guess,” the officer remarked. “Hailey Holloway?”

“Y-Yes, sir,” she timidly replied.

“Detective Moore is waiting for you, inside,” he told her. “He’s got a few questions. We’re...really wondering where your mother is. Do *you* know?”

Hailey shrugged. “Not sure.” Wednesday looked at the grass then back up.

“Well, he wants to talk to you. Maybe you should go inside.” He turned and let them walk by. They ducked below the police tape and stepped inside. It was horrid. Everything in sight was black and charred, from the ugly coffee table in the middle of the living room, to the chairs at the dining room table, to the kitty cat clock in the kitchen. Hailey looked up. The roof was mostly gone. Smoldered rafters were all that remained. The whole house had a sooty, burnt smell to it. The floor was creaky and thin in places, about to give way. Just walking through was dangerous. A large man stood, speaking to another officer. He was stooped over the couch, taking notes. Hailey figured he was probably Detective Moore. He was tall and stout. He wore the cliché, brown trench coat, dress shirt with black tie, and dark slacks. She looked at his shoes. They were black dress shoes. They were all scuffed up and dilapidated from serious wear. He finished saying what he was saying to the officer in a hushed voice. Then, he faced Hailey, Lloyd, and Wednesday.

“Which one of you’s Hailey?” he inquired. Hailey reluctantly raised her hand. “Ms. Holloway,” he remarked. He stepped over a pile of burnt veneer and held out his hand. Hailey

slowly shook it. It was large and overworked. Hailey looked over the rims of her glasses into his dark brown eyes.

“Detective Moore, I presume.”

“Yes, that’s me,” he replied.

“You don’t *look* like an arson cop,” Hailey remarked. “More like a homicide detective.”

“I *am* with homicide,” he replied. Hailey smirked, letting go of his hand. She knew something was up.

“These are my friends,” she continued, turning to introduce them. “This is Lloyd Freeman and Wednesday Williams.” She faced him again. “We were hoping we could come in and pick up some of my stuff.”

“Where’s your mother, Hailey?” Moore demanded.

“Is that why you’re here?” Moore narrowed his eyes, staring down at her. She was tiny, about a foot and a half shorter than he was.

“Um, I have a *few* questions, actually. Do you know where your mother’s at?” Hailey shook her head.

“What about these missing kids?” the other officer asked. He crossed his arms over his chest. Hailey shrugged.

“Missing kids?”

“Friends of Tommy Keel, Joe Eaves, Gary Dodson, and Tate Hewitt,” Moore explained. “You know, the kids that were dissected at your high school the other day.”

Hailey scoffed. “Yeah. I heard tell of such a thing.”

“They were friends of...” Detective Moore patted around on his trench coat. He whipped out a small notepad and flipped through it. “...Travis Griffin and Jennifer Rogers.” He

looked up, putting the notepad back up. “You know, that girl you beat up the other day.” Hailey sighed. She bowed her head and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Look, I really don’t feel like talking about this right now.” She looked into his eyes. “Can we do this...some other time? I really just came to see if I could pick up some of my stuff.”

“Where are you going?” the uniformed officer asked.

Hailey turned to him. “Wednesday’s parents said I could stay with them for a while. You know, until I can figure out where my mother’s gotten off to.”

“I see,” Moore remarked. He flipped through his notepad and made a few notes. “And, you have no idea where your mother is?”

“There’s no telling with her,” Hailey replied.

“Hmm,” Moore remarked. “What’s that mean?”

“It means she’s a drunk.” Hailey looked at the scorched carpet then up again. “Can we go?” she asked. She pointed towards her bedroom with her thumb. Moore and the other officer looked at one another. They shrugged then looked back.

“Yeah, sure,” Moore told her. “I guess that’s alright.” Hailey turned and shoved her friends towards the hallway. “Oh, Ms. Holloway!” Moore shouted. They stopped dead in their tracks and turned to face him.

“What?” Hailey demanded, impatiently.

“Just one more question I have,” he replied. He looked over his notes. “Uh, how did you know that your house had burned down?”

“Read it in the paper.”

“I see,” Moore said, waving her off. The three of them turned. They continued down the

hallway to Hailey's room.

"Boy, that sucked," Wednesday remarked. Hailey put her index finger to her lips to shush her. She looked around. The wooden walls, checkerboard floor, and roof were scorched and ruined. So were her bookcase, all her books, and her desk. Hailey threw her hands on her hips. She stared at what was left of her bed. A burnt out shell of the wooden frame and the springy frames of the mattresses were all that remained. Somehow, amidst all that, was her kitty, stuffed animal. It lay on the floor beside the bed. It had escaped the scorching flames and survived pretty much intact. She scurried to it like a little kid. Then, she fell to her knees and scooped it in her arms.

"*Kitty cat*," she whispered. She snuggled it next to her face. It was very important to her. Her father had given it to her. She looked the stuffed animal over. The side of its face was a little scorched, and the right ear was burnt off. Wednesday knelt down and placed her hands on her shoulders. She caught Hailey by surprise.

"That everything?" she asked. Hailey turned to her. Then, she looked around a little more. The top half of her Einstein poster was tacked to the wall above her bed. The rest had burned away. Her clock was all charred up and melted. There was nothing left of any of her clothes. A corner of her yellow and black, plaid blanket clung to the end of what was left of her bed. "Hey..." Wednesday remarked, wandering towards the closet. "You *owe* me by the way." Hailey turned and watched. Wednesday pointed at what was left of her leather jacket. Scraps of ashy leather clinging to a wire hanger were all that remained.

"Oh, I'm so sorry about that, Wednesday," Hailey replied. "I'll buy you a new one."

"It's okay, man," Wednesday assured her with a smile. She walked back and offered her hand. "Let's get out of here, Hailey. My parents are rich. They'll buy you some new stuff."

Hailey took her hand and hopped to her feet. “No, they’re not,” she replied. “They really don’t mind if I stay over there for a while?” Wednesday stood behind her. She dropped her hands on her shoulders.

“Come on, Hailey,” she told her. “Let’s go home.” She shoved her towards the doorway.

“Thanks, Wednesday,” she replied. They exited the bedroom.

“It’ll be alright, man,” Lloyd assured her. He patted her on top of the head as she walked by. Hailey waved good-bye to Detective Moore. Then, she ducked beneath the police tape across the entrance.

“Oh, Hailey?” Moore remarked. She stopped and glared at him. She was still bent over. “I’ll see you around.” Hailey let out a nervous sigh. She, Lloyd, and Wednesday made their way past the officer out front. Then, they walked to Lloyd’s Cammy across the street.

Chapter 25: “Monday”

Wednesday’s mother pulled next to the sidewalk at the edge of Glory High. She arrived in her red compact at the usual time. Today, she had *two* passengers. Wednesday was in the front seat. Hailey was in the back. The forecast for Monday called for warmer weather. So, there were no long sleeves of any kind. The passenger door opened. Wednesday hopped out in a short sleeved, black blouse, a red and black, plaid skirt, and a pair of black wedges. The wedges had wooden soles. The back of Wednesday’s seat slid forward. Hailey hopped out in a white blouse, a knee length, black skirt decorated with circles of white lines, and the black flats she had borrowed from her buddy’s closet the other morning. She had purchased the white blouse and black skirt at C.J. Nickell Saturday. Hailey had her red backpack over her shoulders. Wednesday had her denim backpack over her shoulders. Hailey returned the seat to its proper position and waved to Wednesday’s mother.

“Thanks, Mrs. Williams,” she remarked.

“You’re welcome, dear,” she replied. She pointed at them. “Are you girls *sure* you want to go to school today? I mean, with some nut going around– Oh, I can’t even say it.”

Hailey smiled. “I’ll chance it. I have to talk to Ms. Gord about making up that test I missed, and I need to try to replace the books I lost.” Wednesday’s mother turned to her daughter. She shook her head.

“Wednesday, I’m not so sure about this.”

“Mom, we’ll be okay,” Wednesday assured her.

Her mother faced forward. “Well, *I* think they should’ve closed down the school, today.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Williams,” Hailey replied. “If anyone tries anything, *I’ll* take care of them.” She put up her little dukes and threw out a couple of jabs. Mrs. Williams raised her

eyebrows.

“That’s very reassuring.” She turned to Wednesday. “If you girls have any problems, I mean *any* problems, you go down to the office and call me at work, okay?”

Wednesday held up her hand and waved. “Bye, Mom,” she remarked. She smacked the door shut, her mother drove away, and the girls had a seat at the end of the sidewalk. They watched Wednesday’s mother drive out of sight. “Yeah, I’m not expecting too many problems,” Wednesday remarked. She popped a cigarette in her mouth. “Are *you*?” She turned to Hailey and flipped her lighter open.

“I don’t anticipate any,” Hailey replied. “Not if no one else pisses me off.” She turned to Wednesday with a smirk. It was a bit intimidating. Wednesday second guessed herself. She sat motionless for a good ten seconds. She held her lighter in front of the cigarette dangling from her lips. She timidly sparked her smoke to life. It took her three flicks of the flint spool to get her lighter going. Hailey uttered a single laugh. “Still got it.”

Wednesday plucked the cigarette from her lips and blew out a drag. “You really are a creep, Hailey. You know that?” Hailey faced forward. She continued to smile.

“Yes, I know.” She turned to Wednesday. “I’m sorry about all this, Wednesday. This weekend has been, well...quite the little mess.”

Wednesday shrugged. “It’s over now, right?”

“My good golly,” a voice cut in. Hailey and Wednesday’s heads twisted around like tops. They found Lloyd standing behind them. “What on *Earth* are you two talking about?” Hailey smiled. Today, he had on a plain white t-shirt tucked into a pair of light khakis, a pair of aviator sunglasses with tan lenses, and his dingy, black sneakers. The left one was untied. He stared at them, arms crossed over his chest. Then, he wandered over and had a seat next to

Hailey.

“And what are *you* doing here so early?” Hailey inquired. She leaned over and tied Lloyd’s shoelaces. Lloyd stared at her with narrow eyes. He shook his head.

“Oh, I heard a rumor you two might be showing up here this morning.” He looked at Wednesday.

“Always,” Wednesday told him. She exhaled a drag from her cigarette. Lloyd waved her cigarette smoke away. “What?” Wednesday demanded. “You got something against my cigarette smoke?” Hailey sat up. She had finished tying his sneaker.

“It’s too early,” he explained. “I never smoke in the morning.” He turned to Hailey. “So...Ms. Hailey.”

Hailey met his eyes with a curious grin. “Yes, Lloyd?”

“Oh, I was just thinking. Like, maybe me and you could go see this movie tonight? You know, perhaps...I don’t know...maybe we could go get a bite to eat after that.” Hailey squinted. She stared at him for a moment.

“Oh, you mean on a date!” she shrieked. Lloyd turned and rubbed the back of his head. He slowly nodded. “Um, of course Lloyd. I’d love to.” She placed her hand on his shoulder, and he faced her. “What time?”

“The movie starts at six-thirty,” he told her. “I was thinking I could pick you up around six?”

“That sounds great,” Hailey replied. She pointed a thumb at her friend Wednesday. “At *her* house.”

“Great,” Lloyd gasped. He let out a sigh of relief.

“So, how long have you been working on *that* one?” Wednesday inquired.

“About three weeks,” Lloyd replied. Wednesday and Hailey laughed. “Seriously,” he continued, “I’ve been looking at movie times in the morning paper for like three weeks, now...just so I’d have it all planned out.”

Hailey patted the side of his face. “That’s cute,” she told him

“It’s *creepy*,” Wednesday remarked through a puff of cigarette smoke.

“Yeah, it’s also kind of creepy,” Hailey admitted.

“I know,” Lloyd replied. He stretched his arms over his head and yawned. “It’s...too early. How do you girls do this every day?”

Hailey shrugged. “That night, the night you picked me up on the side of the road...” Lloyd nodded. “What made you stop, then?”

“Oh, I almost didn’t,” he admitted. “I was so nervous.” Hailey let out a single laugh. “I-I didn’t want to leave you there. I just couldn’t.” He placed his hand on top of hers on the sidewalk. “You looked so cold...and alone.”

Their eyes met. “Well, thanks for stopping,” Hailey told him.

“You’re welcome.” Lloyd took his hand off Hailey’s and placed it on her shoulder. “You don’t feel lonely *now*, do you?” She put her left hand on top of Lloyd’s. Then, she turned and took Wednesday’s hand in her right.

“Not anymore.” Wednesday smiled. She threw her arms around her. Hailey winced and hugged her back. “Okay, Wednesday...” she groaned. “I can hear my ribs cracking.” Lloyd joined in. He hugged her from the other side as hard as he could. “Okay, guys!” Hailey begged. “This is not exactly what I meant.” Lloyd let her go. He patted her on the back of the head with a cackle. Hailey turned to Wednesday. She still held her tightly in her arms. She was grinning at her. Smoke wafted into Hailey’s eyes from the end of the cigarette between her ruby lips.

Hailey yanked the cigarette from her mouth. Afterwards, she held it out where Wednesday couldn't reach it. Wednesday immediately let go, reaching for her stogie.

"Hey, give it *back!*" she screamed.

"I *thought* that might get your attention," Hailey remarked. Lloyd snatched Wednesday's cigarette from Hailey and hopped to his feet. He held it high in the air.

"LLOYD!" Wednesday yelled, hopping up. "Give it to me!" She jumped and swatted at it a couple of times. She teetered off balance on her wooden wedges. Wednesday looked across the parking lot towards the school. "Lloyd, you're gonna get me in trouble!" She grabbed a hold of his arm and pulled down with all her might. "If someone sees that..." Hailey hopped up and jumped on Lloyd's back. She threw an arm around his throat and reached for Wednesday's smoke.

"Oh, come on, Hailey," Lloyd remarked. "I'll bet I could bench press *two* of you."

"Tickle him!" Hailey shouted. Wednesday immediately went on the offensive, arms wriggling, fingers spread and tense. Lloyd fought her off with his free arm.

"Nuh-uh!" he shouted. "Get BACK! Hell no!" Wednesday got him. She was the queen of tickling. With a few simple nudges in the armpits, Lloyd was on the ground at her mercy. He grinned. He squashed his arms against his ribs. His eyes began to tear up. "Stop it!" he yelled. "No!" Hailey snatched the cigarette from his trembling fingers and took off down the sidewalk.

"Hai-ley!" Wednesday screamed. She darted after her. She tackled her a few yards down. Then, it was on. Wednesday tickled the cigarette right out of her buddy's hands. Then, she repositioned it between her satisfied lips. "Yeah, real funny," she remarked, digging into Hailey's armpits. Hailey wriggled on the sidewalk. "Think you're so damn funny, huh?"

"Wednesday, stop!" Hailey begged. "I was just KIDDING!" Wednesday let her go.

Then, she stood and took a nice, soothing drag.

“Ah...” she sighed.

Lloyd offered Hailey his hand and helped her to her feet. “Bitch,” she remarked, dusting herself off.

“Skank,” Wednesday replied. She flicked ash from the end of her cigarette. Wednesday sat down on the sidewalk. Hailey timidly sat beside her. Lloyd took up residence to the left of her.

“Oh, by the way,” Hailey asked, “did you remember to do those other questions Mr. Tinney assigned last time?”

“Awe...” Wednesday groaned. She smacked the side of her leg. “Damn, I forgot all about those.” She tore off her denim backpack, dropped it next to her, and ripped it open.

“Which ones was it again?”

Aside from the flag being flown half staff on the pole at the front entrance, the hallways being overrun with extra security guards until the security cameras were up and running again, and no one getting screamed at by Ms. Goodwin, it was business as usual at Glory High. At 7:50, the bell rang. Everyone piled through the front entrance and to their various classes. There were a few somber faces. But, there was a general feeling in the air that all was good and normal with the world again. Hailey may have been under suspicion by Detective Moore, but no one else suspected a thing. Wednesday, despite having forgotten to do her psychology homework yet again, managed to scratch down all the answers to the assigned questions. Hailey and Lloyd helped her out. She was so proud of her accomplishment, she handed her finished assignment to Mr. Tinney as soon as she arrived. He stood in the hallway next to the door as usual.

“Here you go, Mr. Tinney!” she squealed. She shook her assignment in front of his face.

Mr. Tinney snatched it from her. He glanced at it then looked up.

“Ah, you’ve finished your homework for once,” he remarked.

“Got *that* right,” Wednesday replied. She smacked the top of her paper with the tips of her fingers. Mr. Tinney had another glance. He looked up, this time with a look of pity.

“Wait a minute. These are the wrong questions.”

“What?!” Wednesday screamed. She snatched her homework from him and looked it over.

“I’m *kidding!*” Mr. Tinney told her. He slid her assignment out of her nervous fingers. “This looks fine.” Wednesday walked into the classroom. She looked over her shoulder along the way.

“That’s not funny.” Mr. Tinney uttered a single laugh. Wednesday moseyed over to Hailey and Lloyd. They had already taken a seat in the corner at the back of the room. The eight o’clock bell rang, and Mr. Tinney wandered in and closed the door.

“Well, guys,” Mr. Tinney began, “for those of you who haven’t heard, Mr. Dodson will not be joining us today.”

“Who?” Gwen asked from the front row.

Mr. Tinney sighed. “Gary,” he told her. “He was murdered here Friday along with three other students.” He narrowed his eyes and scanned the room for Travis. Everyone whispered amongst one another. “Looks like Mr. Griffin won’t be joining us, either.” Mr. Tinney laid eyes on Wednesday, Hailey, and Lloyd. Hailey turned to Wednesday then back to Lloyd.

“Guys,” she whispered, “*pretend like we’re talking to each other so we don’t look suspicious.*”

“Oh, good idea,” Lloyd agreed.

“Yeah!” Wednesday added.

“So,” Hailey remarked, “*that Travis and Gary sure were of couple of DICKS, wouldn’t you guys agree?*”

“Indeed,” Lloyd replied. Wednesday nodded. Mr. Tinney finished scanning the room then continued.

“Um, so anyway, they’ll be interrupting class sometime today for a moment of silence and probably some other stuff. Uh...” He sighed. “I uh– I guess go ahead and pass your homework assignments in, and we’ll get started.” Hailey, Lloyd, and the rest of the class got out their assignments. They handed them to the person in front of them. Mr. Tinney came by the desk at the head of each row and took them up. He stacked them neatly on his desk. Then, he wandered to the blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk. Today, he wrote the word “Schizophrenia” on the board.

“So,” Mr. Tinney inquired. He dropped the stick of chalk on a railing at the bottom of the blackboard, “who can tell me what schizophrenia is?” Gwen was the first to raise her hand. Mr. Tinney pointed her out. “Gwen?”

“Isn’t that like...where someone has more than one personality?”

Mr. Tinney looked around the room. “Does everyone agree with that statement?” Hailey raised her hand immediately. Mr. Tinney grinned.

“Yes, Ms. Holloway?” he asked.

“That’s a common misconception,” Hailey replied. “People often confuse schizophrenia with Dissociative Identity Disorder. Actually, schizophrenia is a mental disorder in which a person may experience delusions and hallucinations, disorganized thinking, and hyper manic states. Or, they may lose cognitive function such as memory and speech.”

Mr. Tinney turned to Gwen. “Sorry, Gwen,” he told her, “the girl knows her stuff.” The class erupted into laughter. Hailey smiled. She opened her binder to the Psychology section. Then, she dug through her backpack and found a pencil. Lloyd patted her on the back as she came back up. She happened to glance at Gwen. She was turned around in her seat. She was glaring at her through a pair of angry eyes. Hailey smiled. She waved at her, sarcastically. Gwen bobbed her head up at her. Then, she flipped her off. She mouthed the word “bitch.” She swirled around in her seat, faced the front, and got ready to take notes. Hailey looked around the room. No one else had noticed Gwen’s outburst. Wednesday turned to her little buddy. She noticed some distress in her face.

“Hailey?” she asked. “Is everything okay?” Hailey thought a moment. She remembered what Wednesday had told her the other night, about how Hailey would be the first person she’d turn to if anything was wrong. Hailey nodded then turned to her.

“No,” she replied. “It’s not.”