

Chapter One

“Adam, I’ve got some rotten news. Your Uncle Dexter is dead.”

“That sucks, Mom.” Adam chomped off an inch of banana and chewed.

“Who’s Uncle Dexter?”

“Look, how many times do I have to – Jesus, Adam, I - you do not talk on the phone with your mouth full. It makes it difficult for people to understand you, and it’s rude. Either finish whatever you’re eating or hang up the-”

Adam clicked off his phone and swallowed down some more soft, sweet banana. Once finished, he carried the phone and peel out of his room and into the quiet, wood-paneled corridor. The house was empty; the rest of his fraternity brothers were using their physics textbooks to sled down a local hill. Adam had promised to join them after he finished studying for his physiology final. Sledding = joyous. Physiology = soporific. Life = unfair.

His phone emitted a series of farting noises.

“Hello?”

“You hung up on me.”

“Hi, Mom.” He wandered back into the hall. “So who was Uncle Dexter?”

“You know who he was.”

As his mother offered an account of nutty dead Uncle Dexter, whom he had never met and who apparently had fancied himself the exiled King of Mars, Adam jogged down the steps to the house’s first level and plopped in front of the fraternity’s 60” flat-screen TV. He hoped Garth had left the Xbox plugged in.

“-so we expect to see you there on Thursday.”

Adam sifted through the pile of discs for his MVP baseball game. On its hardest difficulty setting, his Orioles had made it into the playoffs. He was very proud of this achievement.

“Adam, are you listening to me?”

“Sure, Mom. You expect to see me there on Thursday. Where is there?”

“Rhode Island.”

“Yeah, Mom, I don’t think that’s going to happen. I’m still at school here in Michigan for another week.”

“I thought tomorrow was your last final.”

None of the twenty-three discs heaped in front of the TV were his baseball game. Adam, panicking, gazed around the room. Couches, chairs, shelves, foosball table. He paced to the foosball table and investigated its crevasses for his game.

“Adam...”

“Tomorrow is my last final, Mom, but then we have stuff here at the house for another week.” They had the end-of-semester party...and then the party to celebrate the end-of-semester-party...then the Alpha Phi Kappa annual eggnog

chug-a-thon for charity, which he was going to win this year, damn it... “After that I’m coming straight home. I promise.”

He moved aside the toys and bongos on the room’s white wooden shelves. No game disc, although he did find a soggy condom.

“Ok,” said his mother a thousand miles away, “your choice. I can’t force you to come pay your respects. I need to pack my suitcase now. Take care.”

Adam slid his phone into his sweatpants and headed for the couch cushions. If his baseball game could not be found there, he would have to start going through his brothers’ rooms. His Orioles were in the playoffs! On the highest difficulty!

The room’s two plaid polyester couches, acquired at a yard sale at the beginning of the semester, were nicknamed Lauren and Yvonne, after two freshmen who had lost their virginities (Lauren to Garth and Yvonne to Craig “Salamander” Watson) on the respective pieces of furniture. Adam ransacked Lauren first, yanking off her cushions and burying his hands into her many nooks. He found \$2.32 in change, a sodden paperback novel, a stainless steel spoon (its bottom scorched), and a blue g-string that smelled exactly like Velveeta...but no game, no Orioles.

“Fuck,” he decided.

His phone farted.

“Hello?” He heard a condescending sigh on the other end and knew it was his sister Anna. “What’s up, Anna?”

“So why aren’t you going to the funeral, Captain Caveman?”

Anna was his twin sister. Both she and Adam were blue-eyed, blond-haired, tall and athletic and tan; by most counts, a pair of Aryan wet dreams. But Adam was a pre-med (by default) frat boy at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor – population 40,583 – while Anna studied the cello at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music – population 602.

Adam plunked down on one of Lauren’s cushions. “How am I supposed to get there?”

“You have a car. Use it.”

“I’m busy this week. And anyway, we never met him. And Mom says he was a loon.”

“Maybe so,” replied Anna, “but he was Dad’s oldest brother. You don’t think Dad wouldn’t want us to go?”

“I can’t believe you’re playing the Dad card.”

“Well, I am, Adam, and I’m right, and you know I’m right. And I think we should be there. And if you leave tomorrow after your exam and pick me up we can be there in time with the service.”

He kicked the collection of Xbox discs, scattering them across the rug.

“I have plans...” he said.

“They’re flexible,” she said.

“What I do is no less important than what you do,” he said.

“I never said it was,” she said. “I had plans too, you know. I’m canceling them.”

He picked up the spoon off Lauren’s bare body, stared at his stretched,

blurry reflection in its metal bowl. All he had to do was say no. Simple word, one breath, done. He would still see most of his family next week anyway. It's not like any of them were going to withhold his Christmas gifts if he didn't attend this meaningless funeral. The worst they would be is disappointed. Just as from Anna they expected achievement and aspiration, surely by now from him they had come to expect disappointment...

The next morning, after bombing his physiology final exam, Adam stuffed his suitcase into the trunk of his 80,000+ mile green Escort, cleared out the Bud Lite empties and snack cake wrappers from the car's backseat, and hit the road. Depending on traffic – and he did not expect much on a Wednesday morning - Oberlin was a two hour drive. As he revved onto the highway, Adam reflected on his Xbox Orioles and the impossible heights he and they would reach after Christmas break.

He tapped a live Led Zeppelin album into his CD player (attached via wiring to the car's old tape deck, much as his cell phone was attached via wiring to the car's cigarette lighter; wiring: the bridge across the generation gap) and cruised south at a breezy 85 miles per hour. The Escort filled with howling guitars, gunshot drumbeats, and the occasional billowing mist of Adam's breath; ever since a minor collision last winter with an implacable moose, the car's heater had been nonfunctional (and its transmission had become crotchety). Adam's fists, encased in green mittens, pounded staccato rhythms on the steering wheel. An hour into the trip, he crossed into Ohio. He switched out Zeppelin for the Who.

Michigan in December was cold and white. Ohio in December was cold and white. The whole Midwest in the winter months became a gigantic, pale, indiscriminate corpse.

“If you hate the cold so much, Adam” his sister would often say, “why didn’t you go to school in Florida?”

“If he went to school in Florida,” his mother would reply, “he would just complain about the heat.”

Ha-ha. So funny they could be. But he put up with the teasing and the mockery. As long as they were harassing him, their minds were off of Dad.

Adam shivered inside his dark green fleece coat. Thirty minutes until Oberlin, and then a hot lunch. All he had eaten for breakfast was a 3-day old slice of pepperoni pizza (also found in the pizza box, coincidentally, was his game disc) and downed the slice with a mug of powdery hot cocoa. He had a box of Twinkies keeping him company on the passenger seat, but what he needed as the temperature reached the single digits was fire for his veins, not sugar for his nerves. Perhaps a hamburger, or a steaming bowl of chili.

Ten minutes outside Oberlin, the Escort’s engine light flashed on the dash. Adam gave it a good flick and it blinked off. He turned off the exit ramp and headed for Maple Willow Drive. Anna lived in one of two first floor apartments with her best friends Jasmine (pianist with gorgeous blue eyes and burn scars across her arms and legs from a verboten childhood trauma) and Hope (flutist).

Making sure all the doors to his Escort were locked, and keeping one watchful eye on the neighborhood crack house, Adam approached his sister’s

front door and fingered her doorbell, trilling a metallic Ode to Joy throughout her apartment.

“Anna,” yelled Hope from the other side of the door, “he’s here!”

The door remained shut.

A Canadian wind washed across the front yard, tossing dead leaves to Adam’s sneakers and biting at his bare ears. He shuffled his feet to keep warm, tucked his gloved hands in his jeans pockets.

“Have you seen my hairdryer?” bellowed Anna.

“Check the kitchen!” replied Hope.

Sick of this bullshit, Adam pressed the doorbell again.

While waiting: another icy breeze. Adam turned his back to the current.

The door opened two inches. Hope peered out at him with a mascara-circled eyeball. “She’ll be right out.”

The door shut.

“Wait!” Adam thumped the doorframe with his fist. “Can I at least wait inside?!”

“No,” she answered, “sorry. This is an asshole-free zone.”

The two inches snapped shut. Never had a human being been so ineptly named as his sister’s roommate Hope.

Two long, cold minutes passed and then the front door yawned wide. Anna was clutching the gargantuan black case for her cello. Two more bags, much smaller, sat at her feet.

“Ready?” she asked.

As expected, the cello occupied the entire backseat. They managed to squeeze one of Anna's bags into the trunk; the other she kept on her lap.

They drove in tired silence. He pulled into the Denny's parking lot.

"I'm keeping my window open," said Anna. "It will help air out your car."

"Whatever."

They were seated in a booth by a window. The outside chill penetrated the thick glass and coiled itself around their bodies. Adam ordered a bowl of chili, a hamburger, onion rings, and a hot cocoa. Anna ordered a Caesar salad and a diet Coke.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked.

"It's winter," she replied.

Adam gobbled up his chili in heaping spoonfuls. It was bland and watery, but hot. Oh so joyfully hot! When his hamburger and rings arrived a few minutes later, he launched into them too.

"Eat much, Captain Caveman?" she asked.

"Anorexic much?" he replied. In the time it took him to scarf down his chili and half his 1/4lber, she had barely attacked her hill of salad. Adam and Anna, identical and inverted.

The waitress brought their separate bills.

Adam watched his sister rifle through her tiny, kidney-shaped purse.

"Do you need any change?" he asked.

"No. Yes. Yes. Twenty cents."

Adam checked his pockets, removed a gob of lint, two pennies, and no

dimes.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Neanderthal,” she replied.

They each paid by check card and headed out to the car. A light snowfall had begun, and Anna’s open window had allowed thousands of frozen flecks to melt on the front upholstery. Adam started up the Ford, leaned forcibly across his sister’s chest, and rolled her window back up.

He slid a Black Sabbath album into his CD player, punched up the volume, and maneuvered back onto I-80E. In theory the distance from Oberlin to Newark was about five hundred miles, but Adam figured that if he gunned the accelerator, avoided all cops, and maintained an adrenalized playlist on his stereo, they could arrive by sunset without stopping.

Contrary plans, however, were being hatched by the gastric team of chili + burger + onion rings + hot cocoa. Forty minutes down the stretch of smooth highway and Adam first felt something kick inside his spleen. He frowned, wondered if he had any antacids in the glove compartment, realized he did not, frowned again, shrugged, and continued driving. In the passenger seat, Anna dozed. Fifty minutes out of Oberlin, Ohio and a spear ripped into the right side of his abdomen and wiggled about. Adam wiped the sweat from his upper lip. Sweat? At best, the inside temperature of the car was thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit. Sweat? Something was decidedly un-kosher.

Fifty-four minutes after leaving Denny’s parking lot, Adam began looking for rest stops. The next big city was Scranton and that was hours away. His

fingers clenched the steering wheel, as if intestinal relief could be obtained from a ring of aged faux leather. The spear in his belly teased his liver, poked at his appendix. Adam bit down on his lower lip then abruptly stopped – even the idea of chewing made him nauseous.

Green sign, side of the road:

REST STOP THREE MILES

Adam pounded the roof in joy.

Anna seconded with a snore. A bubble of spit formed at her mouth.

He floored the gas pedal. Providence was but a breath away.

They passed a hitchhiking clown by the side of the road. Adam waved in giddy anticipation and floored the gas. To keep himself distracted from the jagged cramps, and from any errant thoughts of food, Adam began to mutter his multiplication tables. One times one is one. One times two is two. One times three is three. Ever since primary school, he had taken comfort in the reliability of numbers. One times four is four, always. One times five is five, every time. Numbers had buoyed him through tryouts for high school baseball. Numbers had carried him week to week as he waited to hear from the admission board at U of M. Numbers had been his sole salvation in dealing with his father's...

REST STOP NEXT RIGHT

Adam took the exit a bit too abruptly, and jolted Anna from her slumber.

“What...where are...are we there yet?”

The rest stop was a pair of tubby brick huts, one labeled in black paint MENS and one labeled in black paint WOMENS. Identical and inverse. Adam

parked beside the lot's only other vehicle, a pick-up truck flaking dark red paint, and hopped out of the car.

"I'll be right back," he said, snatching the keys from the ignition, and he jogged into the MENS room.

The time on his wristwatch read 1:52pm.

The roadside latrine was decorated. A chain of red and green tinsel snaked around each of the six urinals' rusted silver handles. A knee-high fir tree, probably uprooted from nearby woodland, drooped underneath the automated hand-dryer. Mistletoe dangled from one of the ceiling light fixtures, barely obscuring the collection of dead flies accumulated at the base of the fixture's clear plastic dome. The restroom smelled strongly of myrrh and Lysol.

Adam ignored all of this and bolted straight for the corner cubicle. His jeans and boxers bunched at his ankles, his ass collapsed against the cold hard seat, and a small hot apocalypse rained into the toilet water. Relief – climactic, exhausting relief - lopsided his face with a goofy grin. The day was good. His quest was over.

"Nice sneakers," wheezed the man in the next stall.

Adam glanced to his right.

"I said nice sneakers. I like your sneakers." The man spoke in aching, breathy growls, like an aging grizzly ready for that last, long hibernation. "I see they're Nikes. I used to own a pair of Nikes but now <WHEEZE> all I have are these ugly things."

Below the flimsy wall separating the stalls, Adam spotted a pair of big

brown boots splattered with dirt. No, not dirt. Dried blood.

“My name’s Ebbets. Like the ballpark.”

Don’t respond, thought Adam, and the bozo will shut up.

“I grew up in Brooklyn and now I’m here <WHEEZE> with you. How about that.”

Adam unrolled a foot of toilet paper and cleaned himself up. It was time to leave.

“Forgive my wheezing, Nike. I’m a little cancerous. Trust me, it doesn’t sound as bad as it feels. Anyway, lean back. I want to show you something.”

BAM! Adam nearly fell off the toilet seat. The man had fired a gun, and the gun had punched a half-inch hole, about eye level, in the wall between them.

Two times one is two. Two times two is four. Two times three is six.

Adam reached for his jeans and boxers.

“Relax, Nike,” Ebbets said, “you and I just need to have a <cough> chat.”

Adam looked over at the wall. Out of the half-inch hole peered a dark brown eye. The man was staring at him, and he had a gun.

“Give me your wallet,” he wheezed, “I want to see your <WHEEZE> wallet.”

Without hesitation, Adam slid his billfold under the stall. A pale hand, stunted and trembling, wrapped around it, picked it up. Patches of dried blood mottled his flesh like lesions.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance...Adam Weiss. Let’s see what we got. You’re from New Jersey. I have a cousin who lives outside

Hoboken. She <WHEEZE> works in fashion. Her name's Crystal. You know anyone named Crystal from outside Hoboken?"

Adam swallowed his breath.

His watch ticked by another minute.

"Yeah, ok," Ebbets said, "you don't have to talk. I like your photograph. You look like a good kid. A little dumb. Are you a little dumb? Did your teacher ever pick on you at school? I'm what they call <WHEEZE> freakishly smart. My teachers sure picked on me. They used to give me stuff – books, magazines - this one teacher gave me a paperweight with $E=MC^2$ printed on it in block letters. I tracked her down to her nice house on Long Island and I used the <WHEEZE> paperweight to smash in her windshield."

The eye reappeared in the hole.

"You look scared. You don't have to be scared, not of me, not yet. Sorry I fired my gun but it was just to <WHEEZE> get your attention. Didn't want you scampering off to Newark, New Jersey without us getting to know one another."

Adam rubbed his moist palms against his bare thighs. "What do you want?"

"Could have been anyone, you know. First guy who came in. I've been hiding out here a long time and it turned out <WHEEZE> to be you. How about that. If you believe in God, you got to believe that God, for whatever reason, wanted it to be you, so let's talk, you and me, let's talk about <WHEEZE> the end of the world."

Three times one is three. Three times two is six. Three times three is

nine.

“According to the New Testament, four horsemen will come and kill all the unfaithful, but I’m not a Christian. Muslims believe that a great beast will rise up and everyone will die of blisters on their armpits. I’m not a Muslim. And Buddhists and Hindus have us all becoming rapists. All these peaceful <WHEEZE> religions and all of them have the world ending with this violent buildup. They all share that in common. How about that. Would you believe me if I told you that I knew how the world was going to end? Because I do. And there isn’t going to be any violent buildup. It’s going to be sudden. People are going to be <WHEEZE> drinking their coffee and chatting with their buddies and cheating on their spouses and then poof: the end. That’s how the <cough> world’s going to end, and I’ll tell you what else. I know when it’s going to happen.”

The brown boots started shifting around. Ebbets was agitating himself. Adam recalled learning in some physics class that the average person used more force to scratch an itch on his backside than was required to pull the trigger on the average 9mm handgun. How easy it would be for this maniac to accidentally pull the trigger of his gun and suddenly end Adam’s world.

That was when Adam thought about his sister, alone in the car, waiting for him. Probably wondering what was taking him so long. Oh God, would she come in to investigate? Would she pop her head in the restroom and call out his name?

“Next Wednesday is Christmas Eve,” Ebbets continued. “That’s when the

world is going to end. The trigger's right here in my <WHEEZE> pocket. Just in case you were wondering."

Now a rustling sound, a slight movement of feet: the man was standing up.

"I'm going to go take your car now. Mine's no good to me anymore, but you're welcome <cough> to use it, because I'm just a softie. I really am. I broke that goddamn teacher's windshield but I felt so bad about it that I wrote her a letter. I wrote her a letter. How about that. I'm going to take your car now. It's been nice chatting with you. Why don't you count to a good high number like five hundred before you get up, ok? Otherwise, we might <WHEEZE> run into each other outside and then I might have to use my gun. Count to five hundred. Don't forget the Mississippi. You have yourself a nice day."

His toilet flushed. His door squeaked open. His boots stomped across the floor tiles.

And then he was gone.

Chapter Two

Four hundred ninety-eight Mississippi.

Four hundred ninety-nine Mississippi.

Five hundred.

Adam yanked up his jeans and boxers and bounded out of the restroom.

All the time he sat in the stall counting, the only image in his mind - the only thought his brain allowed - was of Anna. His bratty overachieving sister. He rushed out into the December cold, not knowing what he would find but hoping, hoping...

But his Escort was gone. Ebbets was gone. Anna was gone.

Adam took a step back. He collided against the brick wall of the MENS building.

“Anna!” he called out. “Anna!”

Her name rolled down the Ohio highways.

“Anna!”

Quickly, he searched the old rest stop for something – a pay phone, a police callbox, anything - that might offer assistance, but all he found was garbage, and all that remained with him in the snowy lot was Ebbets’s dark red pick-up truck.

Where was he taking her? Adam tugged open the driver’s door and climbed into the cab to search for clues. Sure enough, he found them. Hundreds of them. Come Explore Historic Williamsburg! Meet Us in St. Louis! Road maps and travel brochures for every metropolitan area in the eastern United States carpeted the floor of the cab like oblong confetti. Make Cleveland Your Next Vacation Destination!

Adam again patted himself for his cell phone, but he knew he had left it in the Escort. So he waited. Two minutes. Five minutes. Eventually a traveler would have to pull into the rest stop and they would have to have a cell phone and they would have to call the police and the police would have to track down the Escort and arrest this deranged man and Anna would have to be safe. That was what had to happen.

Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. Twenty-one. Twenty-two.

Adam ripped off his wristwatch and threw it against the dashboard, where it landed in a shadow next to a small silver key. A key! He just about jammed it into the ignition. The engine barked to life. Salvation! Now where was the gear shift? Where was the...

Oh. A stick shift.

Fuck.

Adam's father had been an accountant. On the weekends he could be found in the garage, tooling with his black Harley-Davidson FLH. Adam and Anna rode on the back of a Harley long before learning how to ride a Schwinn. When he offered to teach them how to ride it themselves, however, Adam refused. He was ten years-old and believed anywhere worth going was worth going on a skateboard. By the time he and his sister were fifteen and taking driving lessons, the skateboard was cobwebbed in the basement and the Harley-Davidson sold for the Ford Escort that Adam and Anna would be sharing. Adam had insisted his father get a car with automatic transmission. Anna, having learned the basics of manual transmission on the Harley, did not care either way.

Their roles reversed, Anna would have been able to drive the pick-up truck and track him down. Yet another example of his sister's superiority and his absolute uselessness. Adam battered out his fury onto Ebbets's steering wheel.

And he realized he was being watched.

Fifty feet away, near the off-ramp for the rest stop, stood the hitchhiking clown from before, now waving at him. He wore a billowy, patchwork garment of yellows and reds and blues that seemed to swirl in slow motion across his body. His hands and feet were encased in white – tiny white mitts and long white shoes. His face, too, was painted white, like a mime's, but with a mascara grin stretching ear to ear and peculiar green circles on his cheeks that matched the green bushy wig atop his head.

Adam darted out to meet him.

“Do you have a phone?!”

The new arrival stared at him for a moment and then replied, her voice breathy and sweet, “¿Que?”

The hitchhiking clown was a woman. And Spanish. Ok...

“Do – you – have – a – phone?”

She smiled. A few snowflakes caught in her eyelashes. “¿Que?”

“PHONE!” Adam held his pinkie and thumb to his face in the universal sign for telephone (and hang-ten). “PHONE!”

She imitated his hand gesture and yelled back, “PHONE! PHONE!”

Adam began to pace. Every second which ticked by on his discarded wristwatch, his sister and that crazy son of a bitch were getting farther away.

“Look, I don’t speak Spanish. I’m sorry. I don’t even speak German and I took three years of it in high school. But I’m desperate. A psychopath has stolen my car and kidnapped my sister. Now please – please! – can you help me? Can – you – help – me?”

She opened her arms and gave Adam a gentle hug. Her body felt strange, erratically bumpy, as if she had four or five toasters taped underneath her costume.

They parted. She pointed at herself and said, slowly, “Cherry Sundae.”

“Cherry Sundae?”

She smiled and nodded. “Cherry Sundae! Si.”

Adam threw up his hands in defeat. This was going nowhere. He waved goodbye to Cherry Sundae the Spanish clown and padded up the ramp to the

highway. Perhaps if he flagged someone down, someone who spoke English, he might have a chance of saving Anna.

His feet crunched across the snow-cruled asphalt. Yes, it was the middle of the day and yes, he was in the middle of nowhere, but this still was a major interstate highway. He headed east. As he walked, his fingertips glanced across the icy guardrail. A tractor trailer drove by. Then a couple of sedans. Adam gesticulated for them to stop but no one did. Some even accelerated. Had he been one of those passersby, would he have stopped? Only an hour before, he had passed Cherry Sundae the hitchhiking clown and instead of offering her a lift he had waved at her in arrogance.

Turns out I did the right thing anyway, he mused, 'cause she's a nutjob. Adam almost smiled, and then thought about his sister.

He tried to remember the last road sign they had passed before parking at the rest stop. Where exactly in Ohio were they? Had they crossed the border into Pennsylvania? The next metropolitan area off of I-80E was Scranton and no matter how far they had traveled past the border, Scranton had to be a good two hundred miles away. Surely some of the tiny towns in between had to have police stations, but how much assistance could a sheriff/solicitor/mortician and his son/deputy provide?

He leaned back on the guardrail and for the first time since he was nine years-old and his father had sent him to his room for cheating on a spelling test, Adam wept. Thick wet tears dribbled down his face; the wind caught each tear, one by one, and crystallized them. He stared blurry-eyed down at his sneakers,

his knockoff Nikes he had found for \$20 at Target that Ebbets had so admired. If he had just taken them off and passed them under the stall, maybe-

HONK!

Adam looked up and to his left. A car had stopped mere feet from where he stood. The dark red pick-up truck.

From the driver's seat waved Cherry Sundae, the lunatic clown.

Adam hustled over to her window.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She honked the horn again and her mascara smile stretched even wider. She motioned for him to join her in the cab.

As Adam wavered between accompanying this painted woman, with whom he could not communicate, and waiting for some unknown commuter to maybe stop and help him, thick snowflakes began to tumble down from the sky, as if from a bottomless reservoir. Soon the black highway would be a white river; soon the temperature would plummet; soon Anna would be gone for good.

Adam splashed the travel brochures to the foot of the cab and buckled himself into the passenger seat. Cherry gave him a thumbs-up, shifted into first, and rumbled back onto I80E.

She clicked on the radio. Willie Nelson warbled about pot and lost love. Adam picked up a few of the pamphlets and gleaned them for Ebbets's handwriting. If anything, the man's fingerprints would be all over the pick-up truck and once the sheriff/solicitor/mortician called in the state police, they would have definite leads. And while waiting at the cop shop for the case to be solved,

he would call his mother.

“Mom,” he imagined himself saying, “I’ve got some rotten news.” That was how she had informed him about Uncle Dexter’s death. Had that only been yesterday? He wondered what she was doing now, what she was thinking. How well had she known Uncle Dexter? Had he always been delusional or at one time had he been sane? Had he danced at their wedding? Had he been the best man? Adam knew so little, mostly because he had never cared to ask, but now as he and Cherry Sundae raced across the freeway in a madman’s pick-up, his family history felt vital, and his ignorance of it absolutely foolish.

He was certain Anna knew.

They passed a tractor trailer stopped by the side of the road, the same tractor trailer that had zipped by only ten minutes ago. Now layered with snow and motionless, it resembled the flaccid, disembodied arm of a pale giant.

“Turn around,” said Adam.

Cherry glanced over in his direction.

“Turn around!” Adam pointed behind them and at the trailer fading into the flake-filled distance. “Truckers have CB radios! We can get him to radio for – look, you need to turn around!”

Cherry smiled and pressed down on the gas pedal. The speedometer crept past 80.

“No! Go back! Not forward! Back! Back! Oh, Christ. Never mind. How can you live in America and not understand English? That’s like living in Canada and not being able to understand...English. Ok, not the best example. I see you

like to speed. That's nice. Are you sure you know how to drive?"

82 MPH. 85.

"You can't understand a word I'm saying so you don't know that I'm in trouble so that means you're trying to break the sound barrier because *you're* in a hurry to get somewhere. Where are you in a hurry to get to, Cherry? What are *you* running from?"

Hearing her name, Cherry patted him on the shoulder.

Then Adam spotted a state police car up ahead in the left lane. When they whizzed past it, they had to be going at least 90.

Well, he thought, that's one way to contact the authorities.

The rear-view mirror glowed red and blue.

"Uh-oh," said Cherry.

Adam looked over at his companion. "Guess 'uh-oh' is a universal expression, huh?"

She took her time drifting into the breakdown lane, dragging angled tire marks into the fresh snow. By the time she had turned off the ignition, they had been tailed by the police car and his flashing lights for an eighth of a mile.

"I don't know how to drive a stick," mumbled Adam, "but I'm pretty sure I can do it better than you."

Officer Neal, a 22 year-old peach-fuzzed boy, rapped on Cherry's windowpane. Cherry fired up the ignition and depressed the electronic control for her window.

"¡*Hola!*"

“Please remove your key from the ignition”

Cherry replied with a frown, so Adam leaned over and complied with the request.

“Officer, I am so glad to see you. My name is Adam Weiss. My sister Anna has been kidnapped by a crazy-ass psycho with a gun and maybe something explosive in his pocket. He’s got big brown boots and he’s driving my car. I think they’re headed east. Maybe. This is his car. He left it for me. So you think you can get on the radio and report the crime and you know, stop him?”

Officer Neal nodded, exhaled a plume of cold breath, stared at Adam a moment, and then turned his attention back to the clown in the driver’s seat. “Sir, I’m going to need to see your license and registration.”

“Oh, she’s not a guy,” said Adam. “She’s a woman. I made the same mistake. And I think she only speaks Spanish.”

Officer Neal nodded, exhaled a plume of cold breath, stared at Adam a moment, and then turned his attention back to the female clown in the driver’s seat. “Ma’am, I’m going to need to see your license and registration. Now.”

“I told you, she-“

“Sir,” said Officer Neal, aiming an index finger, “you’re going need to close your mouth.”

“You’re not – look, you’re not listening to me! My sister is in danger!”

“I heard you, sir. Now please open the glove compartment and remove this vehicle’s registration.”

Adam sucked on his lower lip. Who knew what horrors a man like Ebbets

buried in his glove compartment? Definitely not gloves. In the Escort's glove compartment, Adam usually stashed a pack of Newports (menthol), a Bic pen (red), a roll of Trojans (ribbed), and a Swiss Army knife from his brief, brief days as a Boy Scout. With a deep breath, he leaned forward and clicked open the pick-up's glove compartment.

The chamber was empty. No bullets, no switchblade, no chopped-off fingernails. Not even a driver's manual.

Or an insurance card. Or a registration.

"Sir, I'm going to need to see your license right now."

"I..." Adam glanced over at the cop, whose ebbing patience was darkening his face. "See, Officer, this guy Ebbets, he made me give him my wallet and-

"Ok, both of you. Out of the vehicle."

Not one to argue with an armed man, this being his second in an hour, Adam opened his door and quietly emerged from the pick-up. Cherry Sundae, assessing the situation, did the same.

Officer Neal stuffed the pickup's key in his jacket pocket and led Adam and Cherry to the rear of their vehicle, where pulsing emergency lights colored each falling snowflake either police-blue or fire-red. "Remain here," he said, and returned to the warmth of his squad car to radio his colleagues.

"So," said Adam, fidgeting in the cold, "how long you been a clown?"

Cherry Sundae glanced at him. Her lips smiled; her eyes did not.

"When we were kids, my parents used to take me and my sister to this

traveling circus that always came by in August. They would set up in the soccer field behind Governor High School, you know, with this big tent and all these booths. We always used to do the booths first and save the tent for the end. Well, wouldn't you know it, in the tent this one summer, as the opening act, here comes out the clowns. Seven clowns stuffed in a tiny car. It's a common act. I mean, I've told people this story and they've all said, 'yeah, my circus used to do that too,' so I know it's a common act. But the first time I see those clowns crawl out of that car, I am...terrified. Give me a break - I was eight years-old, right? And fear of clowns is even more common than that little piled-in-the-car act they did. Anyway, my sister sees the look on my face – my sister Anna, the one who's missing – my twin sister - she sees the look on my face and she reaches over and tickles me in the ribs. I mean, just goes at it. And our parents are there, loving it, thinking I'm laughing about the clowns. When the clowns are done and it's time for the trapeze act, Anna leans over and whispers in my ear. 'See,' she says, 'now you don't have to be scared. Clowns only eat you if you don't laugh.'”

Officer Neal emerged from his car, blocking at the snow with his raised forearm and slowly approaching Adam and Cherry.

“What's under the tarp?” he asked.

Adam turned around. Until then, he had not even realized there was anything in the pick-up truck's flatbed but sure enough, stretched out across its dark red aft was a sheet of old green canvas and underneath the canvas lay...

“I don't know,” he replied.

“You don’t know what’s in the back of your truck.”

“I told you, Officer, it’s not my truck.”

“Please remove the tarp.”

Adam unhooked its clasps from the flatbed and peeled back the tarp. He half-expected to uncover a dead body, bloated and bullet-ridden, but instead revealed a lead crate the size of a baby grand. Stenciled letters across its hull read: WARNING RADIATION.

Jesus Christ, thought Adam, now what?

Chapter Three

The back of the squad car reeked of stale corn chips. Adam wrinkled his nose and investigated the source of the odor, but the grille separating the back seat, where he and Cherry Sundae were located, and the front seat, where Officer Neal sat sipping Styrofoam coffee, impeded adequate investigation. Then again, perhaps the smell came from the tiny old man in the gigantic leather overcoat.

This was Filbert.

Adam was planted in the middle, between Filbert and Cherry. Filbert, who was quietly asleep and possibly dead, had a tendency to lean his head on Adam's shoulder. Adam leaned forward, dislodging the head, and said to Officer Neal, "Can you at least, you know, tell other officers to be on the lookout for my Ford Escort. Put out an APD or something?"

"Sir," replied Officer Neal, peering into the rear-view, "you're going to need

to be quiet.”

Filbert had slumped down behind Adam, making it impossible for him to sit back. Cherry Sundae ran a finger across her face and traced her name in greasepaint on the upholstery. When she finished, she elbowed Adam and grinned.

Outside, the snow was really coming down. Adam estimated at least three inches on the ground already, maybe six by nightfall. He tried to check the time, but the car’s dash was obscured by CB equipment, a holiday box of Kleenex, and a 12-gauge shotgun.

“How’s your coffee? Is it good? I’ll bet it’s good. You know who likes coffee? My sister. Who’s been kidnapped.”

“Sir-“

“Adam Weiss! My name is Adam Weiss. Not ‘sir.’ Not ‘mister.’ Not ‘buddy.’ Adam Weiss. Look it up. No criminal record. No prior convictions. Well, like I said, except for that one time when I was 12. But I was 12 and all that stuff gets thrown away when you turn 18, right?”

The policeman responded with a loud sip.

“Listen. I have a lot of respect for law enforcement. My cousin Ritchie is a cop. Sort of. So I understand that you need to follow procedure. I respect that too. I’m a member of a fraternity. We have procedures too. Tradition’s important. The university is trying to outlaw hazing, but it serves an important historical purpose. Were you in a fraternity in college?”

The policeman responded with a loud sip.

Cherry Sundae, pretending her safety belt a harpsichord, plucked her fingers up and down its frayed diagonal swath.

Adam cleared his throat and said: "Did I mention my uncle just died?"

Twenty intolerable minutes later, Officer Neal's backup finally showed. She was a burly Jamaican woman with her dreadlocks bundled up inside her fedora hat. Neal spotted her in the rear-view, downed the rest of his coffee, groomed his peach fuzz, and stepped out of his vehicle.

Adam slipped his hands underneath Filbert's itty-bitty head and propped him up against the door. Goopy spit dribbled out of the old man's mouth; he was awakening. Outside, Officer Neal and his colleague were chatting very closely. Adam could imagine them trading goopy spit before the hour was up.

"Where's the john?" mumbled Filbert in cultured tones, and then he belched an 80-proof cloud.

"You're in the back of a police car."

Filbert's eyes shifted right, shifted left, then, accompanied by a moist sigh, shifted down. "I hate it back here."

"Yeah," replied Adam, "it's no toilet."

Filbert's eyes shifted left again, and fixed on Cherry Sundae. She waved at him and pleated her multicolor costume. Filbert leaned in to Adam's right ear and whispered, "There's a clown over there."

"Her name is Cherry Sundae," answered Adam.

"¡*Hola!*" echoed Cherry Sundae.

Adam grimaced. "She's a Spanish clown."

So for the next ten minutes, Filbert and Cherry conducted a gleeful, animated conversation in Spanish, trading language across Adam's lap. Adam, flabbergasted, attempted to interrupt, but was shushed twice by Filbert and then once by Cherry. Finally, when they seemed to be through, he turned to Filbert and asked:

"Are you Hispanic?"

"Me? No. But I love Taco Bell. And Cherry's not Hispanic either. She's Croatian."

"Croatian?" Adam frowned. "Then why is she speaking Spanish?"

"Do you understand Croatian?"

"No."

"Do many Americans understand Croatian?"

"No."

"That's why she learned Spanish."

"Why didn't she just learn English?"

"I don't know."

"Ask her," said Adam.

"For ten dollars," answered Filbert.

"Ten dollars?"

"My services aren't free, sport-o."

"I don't have ten dollars. My wallet was stolen. When I get it back, I'll pay you."

"Funny. My wallet was stolen too. It had ten thousand dollars. When I

get it back, I'll pay you."

"Pay me for what?"

"For the headache you gave me."

Outside, the two state troopers were fiddling with the device in the bed of the pick-up. Then Officer Neal began to fiddle with the zipper on his colleague's coat.

Filbert cleared his throat and spat on the toe of Adam's sneaker.

"Sorry," the old man said, "but I can't open the window."

"Uh-huh."

"What's that in the back of the truck?"

Adam shrugged.

"Maybe it's an atomic bomb."

Adam shrugged.

"Is it your atomic bomb?"

"No," replied Adam. "I'm just borrowing it. What makes you think it's a bomb?"

Filbert pushed his face against the grille and waited for Adam to do the same. Adam complied. Then Cherry, smiling, also pressed her face against the grille.

"Do you see the radiation warning there?" he asked.

"Yes."

Filbert smacked Adam upside the head and leaned back in the seat.

"What did you do that for, Filbert?"

“For stupid questions, sport. You see the label, lead box, and you wonder if it’s maybe possibly an atomic bomb. Do you also need to use a map to find your cock?”

Filbert then babbled several Spanish sentences to Cherry, who giggled, pointed at Adam, then giggled some more. Having had enough of this nonsense, and desperate to reunite with his sister, Adam turned around in his seat and began to pound with his fists on the car’s back window.

“Anna!” he cried. “Anna!”

But the only dents he made were on the skin of his hands.

“Who’s Anna?” asked Filbert.

“My sister,” Adam said, and then, sitting upright once again, summarized the past few hours of his life to the ancient inebriate to his right. Mulling over the tale, Filbert pursed his lips, squinted his eyes, and replied with the wisdom of his years:

“Well. You’re fucked.”

“Thanks.”

“That would explain the Nevada plates on your pick-truck. Would you like some advice?”

“Sure.”

“Take a nap. The world is always better when you’re sleeping.”

At that moment Officer Neal returned to the vehicle. He stooped into the driver’s seat, started up the car, and without a word they drove past the pick-up and the Jamaican and the atomic bomb and were on their way.

“Where are we going?” asked Adam.

“You’re going to be detained at the Buchanan Station pending arraignment for your crimes.”

“Crimes? What crimes? What did I do wrong, other than, you know, getting out of bed this morning?”

“Sir, you and your companion are being charged with driving 36 miles per hour over the posted speed limit, driving without a license, refusal to show registration or insurance, and for trafficking possible hazardous materials. You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent.”

“Great.”

“Anything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law.”

“Great.”

“You also have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you free of charge by the court.”

“How generous of them.”

“Do you understand these rights as I have explained them?”

“No,” replied Adam. “Please repeat them a couple more times. It sounds like a long drive.”

It was a long drive. Furthermore, it was a southern drive, far off the reliable path of Interstate 80. Adam could feel the distance between himself and his twin sister widen with each rural mile. If only he could use a phone, call his mother. She would rescue them both. That was her job.

As the roadway became steeper and the snowfall denser, Officer Neal

called his quarry into his radio and advised HQ he would be a few minutes late. Visibility had become guesswork, and the road had long since transformed into a slippery white sheet. Cherry and Filbert were gripping their respective door handles; Adam, not having a door handle to grip, interlocked fingers in the grille.

“Oh...the weather outside is frightful...” whispered Adam nervously, “...and the fire is so delightful...since we’ve no place to go...”

Filbert joined in: “Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.”

In unison, cautiously: “It doesn’t show signs of stopping...and I’ve bought some corn for popping...the lights are turned way down low...let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.”

The vehicle sluiced sharply to the port. Officer Neal hugged at the wheel and expertly maneuvered back on track, such as it was. They continued to ascend whatever slick mountain the asphalt circumnavigated.

“When we finally kiss good night...” murmured Adam and Filbert, “how I hate going out in the storm...but if you really hold me tight...all the way home I’ll be warm.”

The rear tires shimmied once more, this time to the starboard.

Cherry genuflected.

Officer Neal steadied their traction.

They continued on their way.

Weaker now, a prayer: “The fire is slowly dying...and my dear we’re still goodbying...but as long as you love me so...let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.”

End of prayer.

Silence.

Then the car spun again to the portside, and this time off the side of the mountain.

“Shit!” cried Adam.

“Shit!” cried Filbert.

“¡Mierda!” cried Cherry.

The front end of the squad car teetered over the cliff edge like a dizzy drunk. Officer Neal pushed open his door. Looked down. Way down. Pulled shut his door. Wiped the sweat from his fuzzy upper lip.

“Shit,” he sputtered. “Shit.”

Cherry and Filbert yanked at their door handles, pounded at their doors, but the back seat doors of police vehicles did not open from the inside, not for anyone, not ever. Adam thumped again at the rear window, but there was no escape. He felt his bladder sprinkle his pants with a few drops of pre-death pee.

The car slid an inch forward, the snow underneath it beginning to give. It would not be long before it tumbled into the ravine.

“Get out,” yelled Adam to the front seat, “and open these doors!”

Officer Neal stared at him. His eyes had gone crimson with adrenaline and fear. He shook his head and croaked, short of breath, “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok,” said Filbert, smoothing out the creases in his overcoat. “I’ve seen Paris. I’m ready to die.”

“Well I haven’t seen Paris,” replied Adam, “and I don’t want to see Paris and I do not want to die!”

Suddenly Cherry clapped her hands and blurted out: “Boom!”

All eyes aimed at her.

She smiled.

““Oh, Paris is lovely,” resumed Filbert.

“Great. You can show it to me as soon as we get out of this car.”

Cherry again clapped her hands and boomed. This time she was not smiling. She was pointing. At Neal’s shotgun in the front seat.

Then she pointed at the rear window.

Neal nodded, and reached for his weapon.

“What are you doing?” asked Adam.

“You’re going to want to get on the floor now, sport,” said Filbert, getting on the floor.

Cherry grabbed Adam by his coat and dragged him down to the floor on top of her. The distribution of weight rocked the vehicle back and forth. “Hello,” he said to her. “Hola,” she replied. Their necks were necking.

“Cover your ears!” cried Filbert.

“Why?” Adam sat back up. “Why should-“

BOOM! The shotgun spat its load against the rear windshield, raining glass shards all across the back seat and opening a nice wide hole for Adam, Cherry, and Filbert to scramble out through. Cherry and Filbert were already clawing their way toward freedom, but Adam, half-deaf from the shotgun blast and covered in shards, just glared at them all and threw up his fists and bellowed:

“WHY DO PEOPLE KEEP SHOOTING AT ME?!”

“Some men are hunters,” said Filbert, “and some men are targets. You said you don’t want to die? Get your ass into gear, sport.”

As they clambered out the back of the car, Adam looked back at Officer Neal. The trooper remained jailed behind the grille, and knew it. The red in his eyes had dimmed to blue. His cheeks were wet. He held a gloved hand against the grille as if to wave goodbye.

“Wait,” Adam said to his two fellow escapees, “don’t get off the car.”

Cherry and Filbert, perched on the vehicle’s trunk, stopped.

“I’ve changed my mind, sport. I’d rather not go down with the ship.”

“If we all get off the car, there won’t be any weight keeping it from toppling off the mountain.”

“So? We’ll still be up here.”

Adam thumbed at Officer Neal. “He won’t.”

“He’s doomed.”

“I’m not doomed!” whimpered Officer Neal. Weeping, trembling, he looked just shy of 12 years-old.

“Can you open the door and pull yourself onto the roof?”

Officer Neal opened the door and tried to pull himself onto the roof, but the snow-capped roof proved too slippery, and the drop too precarious, for him to exert much of an effort.

“What we need is a rope,” said Filbert, “and we don’t have a rope.”

“How about bunjy cords?” asked Adam. “Officer, do you have bunjy

cords?

Neal shook his head.

“Kid, why would he have bunjy cords?”

“I don’t know...”

“And anyway, we need something that’s firm. Something long that he can grip. Please insert penis joke here.”

Metal groaned as the car dipped another degree toward bottom. Filbert suddenly turned to Cherry and rattled off a few Spanish sentences. She nodded, smiled, and stuffed her right hand up her left sleeve. In seconds, she was drawing out of her sleeve a banana-yellow handkerchief, and then an apple-red one, and then a kiwi-brown one, all knotted together. Peach followed plum, orange followed peach, lime followed orange. By the time she was through, she had six feet of firm, long cloth. She whipped the yellow end to the left side of the car; Neal caught it on the first try.

“Are you sure this will hold me?”

Filbert translated the cop’s inquiry for Cherry.

She countered with a nonchalant shrug.

Adam, Filbert, and Cherry, poised on the wet trunk of the vehicle, gripped the orange end of the line. Officer Neal wound the yellow handkerchief around his left forearm, carried a brief discussion with his Maker, and launched himself out of the car. His body vanished from view and thumped into the snowy slope.

“Climb!” yelled Adam.

Hand over hand, breath on top of breath, Officer Neal ascended Cherry’s

color-coded magic trick. The three on the trunk finally spotted his head, then his shoulders, torso, waist. He was halfway to purchase.

The car angled down another inch. Despite the weight of several human beings on its backside, it would not maintain balance for long. Officer Neal saw it dip and scaled faster, legs kicking and arms yanking.

Adam heard fabric tear.

“Hurry!” he said, and just in time too. The colorful rope rent in half, right down the center of the peach handkerchief. But Officer Neal was already pressing himself horizontal on the white earth, kissing snow. He had made it. He was safe.

Adam and Cherry and Filbert cheered.

Officer Neal looked up at them, eyes alive and full of merriment.

And the white earth beneath him – not really earth at all but precariously piled snow - gave way, emptying the cop down the side of the mountain.

“No!” cried Adam, and he rushed to the side of the cliff. Cherry and Filbert joined him, and they all gazed down into the deep darkness. Where had he fallen? Was he alive?

“I’m ok,” came Neal’s voice, weak but still full of merriment. “I’m all right.”

Adam spotted Neal’s hand, waving, and he waved back. They all cheered again; they had battled death and defeated her. Then the automobile, no longer counterbalanced by weight on its trunk, tipped over the edge of the road and careened down the abyss, crashing two tons of steel into the merry state trooper.