

The Awakening

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READ UNTIL YOU BLEED!

The Awakening

A Novel by Brett McBean

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INTRODUCTION

The best coming-of-age tales are those that captured the uncertainty of youth.

Oddly enough, I can remember the exact moment when I felt it — that soul-scarring certainty of what lies just around the corner.

When I was in the fifth grade I participated in something called the Safety Patrol program. It was a team made up of volunteers who each wore an orange belt across the width of his or her body, a

cheap plastic badge, and a big cheesy grin. In a nutshell, we were officially-sanctioned goody-two-shoes, kids who helped others get to their classrooms (as if a few of them might suddenly forget where to go) or warned them not to run in the hallways when perpetrators went racing past our post.

I remember early one morning I was standing alone in the stairwell in my Safety Patrol gear, and I was overcome by an existential dread like nothing I had ever experienced before. I've felt it a few times since, but these days it's the awareness of how fast the years fly by, the understanding that the people I love won't be here forever and neither will I. An abrupt, almost smothering sadness descended upon me as I realized my childhood was nearly halfway over. It wouldn't be long before the happiest days of my life were nothing more than really cool roadside attractions left in life's rearview mirror. Keep in mind, this occurred when I was in the fifth grade—years before I had to worry about things like deciding what I wanted to do for a living, moving out of my parents' home, adulthood. And yet here I was at just ten years old, feeling sorry for myself as if I had already lost my parents, as if within just a few short days I was about to start some back-breaking nine-to-five job that I would despise until the day I dropped dead.

I do have a point to this strange little anecdote (and I should mention that it was during Mrs. Burnette's fifth-grade class when I decided I wanted to be a writer . . . just in case you were starting to think this little intro was all doom n' gloom with no happy ending). As I said, I believe that the most effective coming-of-age tales are those that capture not only the glorious, carefree days of childhood—back when our only concerns were not being the very last kid to be picked for the softball teams during P.E., or trying to decide whether to spend your last few cents on the latest issue of Batman or The Uncanny X-Men— but those stories filled with an honest pathos as well. "The future's so bright I gotta wear shades," claimed one song that was popular during my seminal years. While there is truth to that statement, it didn't tell the whole story. The future was bright, sure, insofar as anything was possible, but I remember thinking it was pretty damned scary as well. I saw my parents bust their butts day in and day out, struggling to pay the bills, and I didn't look forward to following that same path. Adulthood, from the outside looking in, resembled some cruel punishment for past transgressions. I wanted those days of climbing the tallest trees, reading the best comic books, and sneaking peeks at Playboy to last forever . . . although I knew, even at the age of ten, that's not the way life works.

Throughout the novel you're about to read, you'll meet characters who know this too. Toby and his friends know about the darker side of childhood all too well. They see it in the fathers who have abandoned their families . . . in the mothers who smoke too much, hiding their pain with strained laughter . . . they see it in the bullies who don't waste their time with wedgies and "KICK ME" signs slapped on the backs of their victims, because these guys prefer hurting the weaker kids in ways that leave scars, assuming their victims even make it out alive.

In the end, when it comes to growing up, that's what we all hope to do, isn't it? We just hope we can make it out alive despite all the meanness around us.

Brett McBean's *The Awakening* gets that.

The Awakening is the kind of coming-of-age tale I would have been unable to put down even if there was no horror element. Take out the voodoo, the zombies, and the surreal nightmare sequences, and Brett's novel would have kept my attention nonetheless because it's honest. It's real. It's a scary tale even without all the "spooky stuff."

Childhood is scary. No doubt about it, for most of us those really are the best years of our lives, but there also comes a time when we realize it will all come to an end. I'm pretty sure it comes a lot later for most kids than it did for me, but it comes. Eventually we all have an "awakening" of our

own. The good times are finite, we realize. And so we must appreciate them like the gift that they are.

Brett knows about the uncertainty of childhood. He's captured it here, the good and the bad and the everything-in-between.

You're in for a treat. Savor this one, because nothing lasts forever and stories this engaging don't come along too often.

James Newman

June 26, 2016

CHAPTER ONE

In the small Midwestern town of Belford, an old man sat gazing out the window.

Dawn had once again greeted the world with her presence, casting a glorious orange haze over the pretty two-story houses, freshly mowed lawns and imposing elms that lined the street.

The man had witnessed this scene more times than any one person had a right to, and would no doubt see many more. But that was fine by him. He loved to watch the onset of dawn; it was the one joy left in his life. He had watched the sun rise every morning, ever since first stepping foot in this country over ninety years ago, and had continued to do so in every town and city he had lived in since. It was part of his morning ritual. With only a few cups of herbal tea to keep him company, he would sit by the bedroom window and watch the arrival of a new day, and then, later, watch as the kids made their way to school.

There was nothing perverse or sinister about his window gazing. Nor was it simply the ritual of a lonely old man. The reason was deeper, more personal, and almost childlike in its simplicity.

It represented freedom. For him, to be able to sit and watch the sun rise was a gift from the gods. He felt the same way about the children. They were freer now than they would be at any other time in their lives. The old man knew what the children thought of him, and though it saddened him, he forgave their mostly harmless pranks and tactless laughter—their cruelty wasn't pure, not like those people who had robbed him of his life and driven him from the people he loved; no, their cruelty was born from fear: a fear of the unknown. He was, after all, a curious sight, what with his prominent facial scar which started on the left side of his forehead and cut a path all the way down to the tip of his chin, and his crooked neck which made him see the world sideways. Yet, for all their finger-pointing and snickering, the old man still thought of the children as the true miracles of this world. Their smiling faces and songs of laughter held only trust and purity and freedom.

Freedom.

Most people didn't understand the true meaning of the word. They took it for granted, didn't appreciate the little things in life, the simple pleasures—to simply be alive.

He knew all too well what it was like to live without freedom. To be shackled both in body and mind. Visions of his past constantly filled his head, but they no longer evoked anger or hatred in him. Such venom had died years ago. Now, if he felt anything at all, he felt sorrow. What kept him going was the hope that one day he would be reacquainted with those he had left behind.

Which could very well be soon.

For the past week, he'd had a sense that an old friend was near. This gut feeling, a tingling, like two magnets being slowly drawn together, was faint at first, but had grown stronger as the week ticked by. He thought maybe he was imagining things, but over the last couple of days the sense that his friend was close had grown too strong to ignore. Now, as he sat by the window on the last day before the kids of Belford began their summer vacation, he was sure the man for whom he had been waiting for ninety years had finally arrived.

Soon, he would be reacquainted with his past, soon he would be returning home.

Soon, it will be over.

The old man raised a gnarled finger to the ancient scar that served as a permanent reminder of a past filled with pain and loss. But the moment he touched the rough surface, he drew his hand back as if the scar was red hot.

He picked up the cup of tea with one wrinkled hand. Wisps of steam curled from the drink. Taking a moment to savor the delicate peppermint fragrance, the man placed the cup to his lips and took a sip. The warmth soothed his tired old body.

He never used to drink tea; always coffee. But ever since leaving Haiti a long time ago, he could no longer stand the taste of coffee—too many memories associated with the drink, he supposed.

He took another sip of tea and, nestling back in his chair, he watched the sky turn from orange to pink, light purple and finally to pale blue.

A new day had arrived.

Soon the old man heard the familiar din of kids' laughter.

Gazing out the window, he watched.

"Man you should've seen her. Tits out to here." Cupping his hands, Frankie extended his arms to almost their full length.

"I can't believe you actually saw Debbie naked," Toby said, munching on a frosted strawberry Pop Tart as they left Toby's house.

Frankie nodded, a proud grin blooming across his plump face.

There was a strong possibility that Frankie was lying, but Toby didn't care. He was more than happy to go along with Frankie's story. It was more fun to believe that Frankie had in fact seen Debbie Mayfour's breasts than it was to try and catch him in a lie—Debbie Mayfour was one of the hottest girls in town.

Toby Fairchild and Frankie Wilmont were best friends, had been their whole lives—a full fourteen years. Being that their parents were longtime friends, it was only natural, then, that the two boys (who were born only two months apart—Toby was the older of the two) also became good friends.

They had only walked a short distance up Pineview Road when Frankie tapped Toby on the arm.

Toby, mouth full of sweet pastry, mumbled, "What?" He was still thinking about Debbie and her generous assets.

Frankie nodded towards the old single-story house across the street. "He's watching us again."

Toby glanced over at the old man sitting by the window. "Yeah, so what else is new?"

Old Mr. Joseph had been sitting watching them every morning for as long as Toby could remember, so though he should be used to it by now, seeing him there never failed to give Toby the creeps. The weathered wood clapboard siding, dirty and flaking, cracked window panes, mossy roof tiles, garden hose lying on the brown and green patchwork grass like some giant sleeping worm, and shed out back that was always closed: it all reeked of normality. But what was living inside—a reclusive freak with a strange accent and even stranger features, who liked to watch the children go by every morning—was anything but normal.

Jack Joseph's neck was bowed to one side, like his head had been pulled as far as it could possibly go. And he had a jagged scar that ran down the left side of his face. Coupled with his blank, almost glassy eyes, he gave most kids in town the creeps, and there were more rumors floating around about Mr. Joseph than there were days in the year. Most concerned the origin of his neck and scar. One rumor had it that he got his bent neck from spying on all the kids—a sort of punishment from above. Another was that his crooked neck was due to a spell by an angry witch. The scar on his face generated just as much wild speculation, from a gunshot wound, to the mark of the devil. With each passing year, more rumors surfaced, while a whole new generation of kids elaborated on the

old ones.

It was also said that he could be seen walking around town late at night. Toby had never seen him, he had never been outside that late, but other people supposedly had, and Toby often wondered what the old man did on those walks. Did he go somewhere specific? Did he have some hiding place where he performed his devil worshipping? Some people thought he walked around peeping into windows while everyone was asleep. This rumor in particular unnerved Toby, and he was glad he slept on the second floor.

"I don't know how you sleep living so close to that weirdo," Frankie said, and kicked at a pebble on the ground. The tiny stone skipped along the sidewalk before veering onto the road, where it rolled to a stop. "One of these days I'm gonna throw a rock through his window," Frankie said once they were safely past Mr. Joseph's house. "Teach that old freak a lesson."

"You're too much of a wimp to do that," Toby said, eying Frankie with an impish grin.

"Eat cow turds and die."

Toby punched Frankie on one doughy shoulder; not hard, but enough to make a point.

"Owww!" Frankie cried.

"See," Toby said. "You are a wimp."

"I could beat you anytime of the week," Frankie said, rubbing his shoulder.

Toby laughed. The two had play-wrestled many times during their fourteen-year friendship; not once had Frankie won, despite his considerable size advantage.

Despite being good at sports—he was a slugger in baseball, and was surprisingly good at basketball—when it came to fighting and wrestling, Frankie's lack of ability was mystifying.

"Well you'll have plenty of chances to demonstrate your superior fighting skills this weekend," Toby said.

"Yeah, I guess," Frankie said, sounding none too confident.

Today was the last day of school before summer vacation started—the best day one could possibly have at school. No homework, no assignments, and the teachers had nothing left to teach, most just as eager to leave school behind for a few months as the kids were. And in celebration of the start of summer vacation, Frankie was staying over at Toby's place tomorrow night—they were camping out in his backyard. Toby had wanted to camp out tonight as well as tomorrow, but his parents said no, they thought two nights was one night too many of not sleeping and eating too much junk food. Still, it was going to be great, just him and Frankie lazing up in Toby's tree house, gorging themselves on mountains of junk food; and afterwards, bunking down in the tent for the night—it would be almost like camping for real.

The tree house was legendary, at least in Toby and Frankie's mind. It's where they spent most of their time (when they weren't playing basketball or the Xbox, that is). Toby and his dad had built it three years ago. It had taken them months, working mostly on weekends, to finish the job, his mother standing by the back door shouting: "You be careful up there, Toby," and "Don't let him fall, David." They built the tree house about fifteen feet off the ground, in the V of a massive elm tree, and it was big enough for five people to sleep in. Not that Toby's mother would ever let

anyone sleep up there.

“Hey, I just remembered,” Frankie said. “There’s a new rumor going around about Mr. Joseph. I heard from Paul Rodriguez that the old freak keeps live chickens in his shed and every full moon he bites one of their heads off. And tonight is supposed to be a full moon—and it’s Friday the 13th, so it’s a double whammy.”

“Paul Rodriguez is full of shit,” Toby scoffed. “How would he know that?”

“Well, apparently, Paul’s dad knows someone who works with a woman who one day overheard Mr. Joseph telling Mrs. Stein that he had to buy frozen chickens that day because there weren’t any live ones left in his chicken coop. Or something like that.”

Toby resisted the urge to peek over his shoulder at Mr. Joseph’s house for fear that if he did, he would see the old man sitting by his window, munching on a live chicken. With a sudden bad taste in his mouth, Toby threw what little there was left of the Pop-Tart to the ground. “Yeah, well, I don’t believe it. No one bites the heads off chickens. That’s disgusting.”

“Just because you choose not to believe it,” Frankie said, “doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

“Believe what you want. I think Paul’s full of shit.”

They crossed over Bracher Road and continued along Pineview. Up ahead, other seventh and eighth graders were heading off to their final day of school (the elementary school was way over the other side of town, and there was no high school in Belford; instead, a total of five communities in the area combined to form Holt Middle School and Holt High School, the former located in Belford, the latter in Polkville, the second biggest town in the group, with a population of around 2,500). Toby’s heart-rate quickened when he saw Gloria Mayfour in the group closest to him and Frankie—only a block away. Gloria was, in Toby’s eyes, the prettiest girl he had ever seen, prettier even than her older sister. She haunted Toby’s dreams, day and night; those sparkling emerald eyes, smooth tanned skin, hair like golden silk, and for a fourteen-year-old, she had one hell of a mature body.

Of course, Toby had never actually talked to Gloria, other than a few brief exchanges over the years. He simply didn’t have the guts. He and Frankie often talked about Gloria, mostly crude, adolescent male talk, but sometimes, mostly late at night during a sleepover, when they had stopped all the fooling around and were both in a more serious, reflective mood, they would talk about what they would say to her if either of them had the courage to talk to her.

But until he turned those late-night chats into reality, he had to be content with admiring Gloria Mayfour from afar.

“Hey dorks. Drooling over Gorgeous Gloria I see.”

Such a harsh, irritating voice could only belong to Warrick Coleman.

Frankie rolled his eyes at Toby.

Toby grinned and said, “Hey, Warrick.”

“I would sure like to stick it to Gloria,” Warrick said, forcing his skinny body between Toby and Frankie.

"You wouldn't even know where to stick it," Frankie said.

"Wrong Tubby. It just so happens I've done it before."

Toby cackled, blurted, "Liar, liar, pants on fire!" and immediately regretted doing so; wondered why he had even thought of the saying in the first place. He hadn't used that juvenile taunt since the fifth grade. And to make matters worse, it seemed Gloria and her friends had heard. They turned around and stared at Toby before turning back, giggling.

Toby's face burned with embarrassment.

"Nice one, Fairchild," Warrick laughed. "Way to make an idiot of yourself."

"Stick a knife up your hole, Warrick," Toby grumbled.

"Now now, lover boy. You're gonna have to control that temper of yours if you want to impress Gloria."

"Well at least Toby doesn't lie about having done it," Frankie said in Toby's defense. "You're so full of shit, Warrick."

"Well of course I've done it."

Frankie huffed. "As if. Who with?"

"With some girl you don't know. She doesn't go to our school. She's a friend of the family."

"Yeah, right," Frankie said. "What was her name?"

"Patricia," Warrick said. "Yeah, Patricia. Real hottie. Titties as big as balloons."

Frankie laughed and again said, "You're so full of shit."

Toby barely cracked a smile. He was still fuming over his embarrassing outburst—and it was all because of Warrick and his stupid lies.

You're the one who blurted it out, he reminded himself.

Toby glanced at Warrick, at his stringy hair that looked in need of a wash, face spotted with pimples and ears too big for his angular face.

Though he was a pest most of the time and had all the tact of a sledgehammer (he was crude even by fourteen-year-old boys' standards), Toby felt kind of sorry for this unkempt beanpole of a kid. Even though most of the kids enjoyed his goofiness and penchant for exaggerated stories, he had no real friends. Toby saw Warrick not as Holt Middle School's answer to John Belushi, but as a lonely kid, someone who felt the need to make up stories about himself and others, no matter how absurd, just so people would notice him. And he was certainly successful in that department. One time after school, in front of a hundred or so curious onlookers, Warrick attempted to eat a whole carton of raw eggs. He claimed that doing so would make him super strong, like Rocky Balboa. Warrick had downed half a dozen eggs before throwing up. Annoyed that all his super powers were gone, Warrick vowed to finish the rest, but one of the kids dared him to eat his vomit instead. Warrick probably would've accepted the dare and gone through with it if Mr. Hoshire, the science teacher, hadn't come and broken up the whole thing. Toby heard later that Warrick got pounded

by his father that night—not for the stupid stunt, but for taking the carton of eggs without asking.

“So have you?”

Toby was pulled from his thoughts when he realized Warrick was talking to him. “Huh?”

“I said, have you ever stuck it to a girl before?”

Toby hesitated, unsure of what to say, for fear of looking like a fool.

They turned right into Dorsett Street, the final leg on their journey to school.

“Come on Fairchild, be honest. Tubby here reckons he once touched a chick’s beaver.”

Toby frowned. “You have not. That’s crap.”

Frankie shrugged. “I have too.”

Toby knew it was a bald faced lie. Frankie was just trying to make himself look good in front of Warrick. Because in school, reputation was everything, and word spread like a forest fire around Holt Middle School, which would then ignite throughout the town, and Warrick was the spark.

“Well, then what did your hand smell like afterwards?” Toby said, curious to hear Frankie’s answer.

Frankie didn’t answer straightaway. “Fish,” he said.

“Ha!” Warrick laughed. “You’re the one who’s full of shit, Wilmont.”

Toby turned to Warrick. “You can talk. I bet you never did it with... what was her name? Patricia?”

“Did so,” Warrick said.

“Okay, what did it feel like?”

Warrick pinched his face—he did the same thing in math class when asked to solve a calculus problem. “Mushy. It felt all warm and mushy,” he finally answered.

“What was Patricia made of, mashed potatoes?” Toby said.

Toby and Frankie laughed, despite the look of indignity on Warrick’s face. When the laughter died a natural death, Toby looked at Warrick and said, “Hey, relax. We weren’t laughing with you; we were laughing at you.”

Frankie chuckled.

“Yeah, well, I don’t care what you guys think. I did do it with her.” A grin split Warrick’s face. “Hey, did you guys hear the latest about Mr. Joseph?”

“You mean about the chickens?” Frankie said.

"Yeah. Disgusting, huh? Bites their heads clean off. Bet you he drinks their blood, too. A regular Dracula. And he probably sticks it to 'em, you know, after they're dead."

Toby groaned. "Trust you to think of that."

Warrick grinned again, bigger this time, revealing uneven rows of horribly-stained teeth. "Well, I've gotta run. I'm teaching Mikey Porter how to fart Happy Birthday before school starts. See you dorks in class. Be on the lookout for big guys in hockey masks. And don't think I've forgotten, Fairchild."

"Forgotten what?"

"You still haven't told us how far you've gotten with a girl. Last day of school. Hell yeah!"

Without exchanging goodbyes, Warrick left, jogging off down Dorsett Street.

"What an asshole," Frankie said.

"I can't believe you said you have touched a girl's beaver."

"What else was I supposed to say? Tell the truth and say I haven't even kissed a girl? Yeah, I bet Warrick would have a real good time with that."

"Warrick's going to be at me about it now. He won't rest until I've answered him."

"Just lie and say you've felt some girl's tits. No big deal."

Toby shrugged and watched as Warrick bounded towards school, which was now visible in the distance.

When Warrick caught up with Gloria and her friends, he stopped.

Most of the time, Toby didn't think much of Warrick and his antics, but he had to admit, he did admire Warrick's fearlessness at being able to waltz up to anyone—guy or girl—and talk to them. Toby was even a little jealous of Warrick in this regard.

Watching Warrick, Toby wondered what he was saying to the girls. Were they talking about Mr. Joseph? School? Him?

Christ I hope not. Nerves started pecking at Toby's gut.

It wasn't long before cries of disgust rang out from the group of girls. Warrick cackled and then continued on his way.

"What a weirdo," Frankie said. "I wouldn't be surprised if he sticks it to chickens."

"Yeah," Toby said, gazing at Gloria up ahead, wondering what she thought of him now after this morning's episode. "Wouldn't surprise me in the least."

And they neared the final obstacle that stood between them and three months of freedom.

The bell rang. Every student started gathering their books and papers together with breakneck speed, like the bell was the starter's gun and all the kids were runners.

"I hope everyone has a great vacation," Miss Wilson, their eighth grade English teacher, hollered over the racket.

Sure will, Toby thought as he stood, flung his bag over one shoulder and waited for Frankie. "Hurry up, Frankie."

"Yeah, yeah, hold your horses."

Up ahead, Miss Wilson had moved over by the door and was saying goodbye to each student as they left the classroom, giving most of the girls hugs.

Once Frankie was ready, he and Toby headed for the door, where freedom awaited them: three glorious months of lazy summer days; of sleep-ins, sleepovers, playing baseball till the sun faded and they could no longer see the ball, and staying up late watching monster movies.

At the door, they shuffled past Miss Wilson, who had a smile on her young, pretty face, though Toby noticed that her eyes were a little teary.

"Have a great summer, boys."

"You too, Miss Wilson," Toby said, admiring her tall, slender body, and taking one last whiff of her perfume—which was fresh, honey-sweet, like a flower in spring.

"Yeah, thanks for being such a cool teacher," Frankie said, and together they stepped out into the hall. "Free at last!" Frankie exclaimed.

"Thanks for being such a cool teacher?" Toby said, smiling at Frankie.

"What? She is cool. She's easily the best teacher at this crummy place."

Along with a bunch of other kids, they swarmed out of the squat red-brick building, their home away from home for the past two years, and once outside, made their way across the front lawn.

"I wonder if we'll get a teacher as nice as her in high school," Toby said as they left the school grounds and headed up Dorsett Road, the afternoon sun forcing Toby to squint.

"What makes you think you're graduating from middle school?" Frankie said and he stopped to pick up a stick from the pavement. He continued walking, tapping the stick on the concrete, occasionally striking at the leaves of low-hanging branches.

"Because, I'm a genius. I have my doubts about you, though. You ain't smart enough for high school."

"It's you're not smart enough."

Whack! Brown and yellow leaves were knocked from their perch and fluttered to the ground.

“No shit, Sherlock. I was just testing ya. Here, give me the stick.”

Frankie shook his head. “Uh-uh. This stick has special powers. No one but me can use it. I’m the stick master.”

“You jerk-off,” Toby said and he lunged for the stick.

Frankie snatched it away before Toby was able to grab it. “Too slow,” Frankie said, grinning.

“I’ll sock you in the stomach if you don’t give it to me.”

“Ha! You couldn’t hurt me even if you tried.”

With more swiftness and cunning, Toby again grabbed for the stick. This time he managed to yank it out of Frankie’s grasp. “Too slow,” Toby taunted, waving the stick above his head like a trophy. “Too slow.”

“Big deal,” Frankie huffed. “I didn’t even want the stupid thing.”

Toby continued where Frankie left off, swinging the stick at any leaves unlucky enough to be within reach.

As they walked, the afternoon sun pressing down on them like a giant’s foot, Toby’s mind drifted to Gloria, as it had done all day. The few classes he’d had with her were an adolescent boy’s worst nightmare—a case of too much of a good thing. He found himself constantly staring at her, dreaming about what it would be like to kiss her, to touch her, to talk to her, glances that sometimes spilled over into longing gazes. He feared getting caught—either by a teacher, another student or, God forbid, by Gloria herself—but he couldn’t help it. She was the headlights, he the poor defenseless deer.

It was during 4th period math when the inevitable happened.

He had been staring at Gloria, imagining them kissing, an erection pushing against his jeans, when Gloria turned and looked at him. He froze, unable to look away. His heart started thumping; his mind screamed, Look away! Dammit, look away! But rather than laughing at him like she and her friends had done this morning, or frowning in disgust, Gloria had just smiled the sweetest smile, then turned back to the front. That was the first time Gloria had smiled at him (well, the first time since the second grade when Toby had given her his last Strawberry Twizzler during lunch, but that didn’t really count), and it caused his head to spin. He wondered—did she like him? Could it be possible?

It was Gloria’s smile, and what it meant, that Toby was reflecting on when they came up to the intersection of Dorsett and Main.

“I’m hungry,” Frankie said. “Let’s stop off at Barb’s.”

“Yeah, let’s stop off at Barb’s for a change,” Toby quipped.

Frankie always wanted to stop off at Barb’s on their way home from school. Toby wondered why he even bothered mentioning it anymore.

But as they turned left and headed down Main Street, which led into the heart of Belford, Toby had a sudden hankering for a Butterfinger and can of Coke, so maybe stopping off at Barb’s wasn’t

such a bad idea after all.

Barb's Convenience Store was located on the corner of Main and Belford. It had been owned and run by Barbara Stein and her husband, Alex, for thirty years—from its opening in 1967 until 1997, during which time it was known as Stein's Corner Store. Then, in early 1998, Alex Stein had dropped dead of a massive heart attack.

Toby had been four years old at the time, so he only had vague recollections of going to Mr. Stein's funeral. Two things he specifically remembered were: lots of crying, mostly from Mrs. Stein, and he and tubby little Frankie Wilmont conducting a covert farting contest (well, maybe Pastor Wakefield knew—Toby recalled the Reverend glancing briefly at the two boys during his prayer, but otherwise, no one, including their parents, seemed to know). In hindsight, it was a horribly disrespectful thing to have done, but death meant about as much to a four-year-old as the theory of evolution. Toby had won the contest, but how the winner was decided, neither boy could remember.

After the death of her husband, Barbara Stein decided to keep the business going, but she changed the name—too many memories associated with the old one, Toby supposed. Mrs. Stein was a strong-minded woman, with a burly body to match, but her touch was as soft as a kitten's fur. Toby and Frankie loved going to her store, because most of the time she would give the boys free candy. The only time he disliked being in there was when Mr. Joseph was working. Though fortunately, he usually worked weekdays, while they were at school, never weekends, so Toby and the other kids hardly had to see him in there stacking the shelves or lazily pricing stock.

By the time they reached the intersection of Main and Belford—the only two roads that ran all the way through the town, Belford going east/west, Main north/south—Toby had thrown the stick away and was aching to taste the sweet chocolate bar and sugary soft drink.

It was a typical Friday afternoon in Belford, with more people on foot than in cars; those who did prefer to drive cruised through town at a leisurely pace. Toby had spent his whole life in Belford, and though he hoped to one day break free and move to a bigger, more exciting city, like Cleveland or New York, his mother never failed to remind him how clean and safe the town was. The streets were tidy, the lawns well maintained, crime was practically nonexistent, and the sky was the color God intended it to be. Toby took his mom at her word, and as he and Frankie crossed over onto the other side of Main, he took a moment to admire his town's simple beauty.

Located in southern Redina County and surrounded by rolling farmland, Belford was a town with a population of around 3,200—large enough to have all amenities, but small enough for everyone to be on first name basis with each other. It was a pretty town, with wide tree-lined streets, lots of attractive single and double-story houses, most with a smiling face and an American flag to greet you on the front porch. But the main attraction was the centre square, a quaint, picturesque park with pine trees, towering maples and buckeyes, and a white gazebo situated squarely in the middle. It's what most of the stores lining Belford Road looked onto, including Barb's.

The bell jingled when they entered the corner store. Mrs. Stein looked up from behind the counter and smiling said, "Well, hello there, boys. How are we today?" Mrs. Stein had short gray hair and her wrinkly face was kind, familiar. Draped over a long-sleeved candy-striped shirt was the light blue shawl she always wore.

"Great," Frankie said. "It was the last day of school."

"Last day of middle school," Toby added.

“Which means summer vacation has begun.”

“My, my,” Mrs. Stein said with a click of her tongue. “You boys certainly are growing up fast. It seems like just yesterday your moms came in with you two in prams, crying your little hearts out.”

Toby and Frankie smiled politely, and then headed for the confectionary aisle—their favorite and most visited aisle. Toby grabbed a Butterfinger, Frankie a packet of Twinkies and a Reese’s Giant Peanut Butter Cup, and then they wandered over to the drinks fridge, where Toby grabbed a can of Coke, Frankie a Dr. Pepper.

They paid for their stuff (receiving a complimentary bag of Gummi Bears each), said goodbye to Mrs. Stein (“So fast,” she said again as they left the store), and outside, sat on the curb and munched on their food and slurped at their drinks.

Toby was lost in thought, enjoying the junk food, when Frankie nudged him on the shoulder. “Hey, what did ya do...?”

“Look,” Frankie said, voice low, nodding.

Toby looked down the street, to where Frankie was gazing, and saw a man ambling towards them.

Ordinarily seeing a man walking down the street wasn’t a big deal, it certainly didn’t call for a nudge on the shoulder. Even when that person was a stranger. Though fairly uncommon, it wasn’t unheard of for someone from out of town to pass through. But this was no ordinary stranger.

The man walking in their direction was tall, at least six feet, and was as dark as the night. He was as thin as old Mr. Joseph, and had similar white wiry hair. But what was most striking about him wasn’t that he was black, or that he resembled Mr. Joseph; he looked like a homeless man. His clothes were dirty and crinkled—they were barely one step up from rags—and he carried a bag in his hand, a large, soiled gym bag that Toby figured contained the old man’s clothes and quite possibly every meager possession he owned. And it occurred to Toby then, as he sat staring at the man drawing closer, that he had never seen a homeless person before, not in real life.

“A bum,” Frankie whispered. “A bum right here in Belford.”

“Ssshhh, he’ll hear you,” Toby said.

The stranger walked with unhurried steps, and as he passed the boys, he turned his head and looked at Toby.

Toby froze. The gaze was piercing in its nothingness. The stranger frowned ever so slightly, like he saw something in Toby, then he nodded, turned his head back to face the front and kept on walking.

Toby eased out his breath.

Then flinched when Frankie said, “Creepy looking dude. What do you reckon he has in that bag?”

Toby’s mouth was dry, so he sipped some Coke. “Dunno. Clothes, I guess.”

"Maybe a machete, or an axe," Frankie said. "Or a severed head."

"As if," Toby said.

Toby turned and watched the stranger shuffle down the street. He noticed others watching the disheveled man; or rather, trying not to appear to be staring while looking at him.

"I'm surprised he didn't ask us for some change," Frankie said. "I bet he goes into Patterson's and tries to bum a burger and some fries."

When the stranger was a small blob in the distance, Toby turned back and continued eating his chocolate bar.

"Patterson will probably throw him out if he does," Frankie said, slurping his Dr. Pepper. "I can't imagine Patterson giving away food to some bum. Wonder what he's doing in Belford?"

Toby shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Maybe he's Mr. Joseph's long lost brother," Frankie laughed.

"Yeah, maybe."

When both had finished their afternoon sugar rush, they disposed of the garbage and crossed over the wide, empty street and started up Belford Road.

"You know what we should do," Frankie said as they meandered along. "We should play a prank on Mr. Joseph this weekend. Sneak over to his house late at night, like midnight, when your parents are asleep."

"And do what?"

"I dunno. Go up to his house and knock on the front door?"

Toby grinned. "He'd probably bite our heads off, then drink our blood if we did that."

"Then cook and eat us."

"Yeah," Toby said, and they both chuckled.

When they came up to Hanny Street—a short, narrow, unpaved thoroughfare—they turned left.

"Come inside, little boy," Frankie said, in a screechy old-witch type of voice. He angled his head, in a bad impression of Mr. Joseph's severely crooked posture. "I won't hurt you, my little chicken," he continued. "I just want to drink your blood." He was now starting to sound like Count Dracula.

"Very funny," Toby said. "You know if the wind changes, you'll stay like that forever."

Straightening up, Frankie said, "That's bullshit. It's kid's stuff."

"Then why did you straighten?"

"It was starting to hurt. Anyway, it's your expression that stays the same, not your posture."

Hanny Street ended. They came out onto Bracher Road and crossed over. The moment they were back walking on the sidewalk, Frankie said, "Wanna race?"

Toby nodded. "To my house?"

"To your house."

The two boys stopped. They often held short, spontaneous races. Most of the time Toby won, but Frankie was getting faster and stronger.

Toby got into position: body bent forward, arms poised like pistons about to fire, eyes staring dead ahead.

"On my count," Frankie said.

Toby glanced at his best friend; now his competitor—his body was tense, his eyes determined.

"One...Two..."

Frankie bolted. Toby, taken by surprise, watched in disbelief as his portly friend bounded down the street, arms pumping wildly, backpack jostling on his back like Pamela Anderson jogging without a bra.

"Three!" Came the distant, breathy final count.

"Hey!" Toby shouted, and took off after him.

Frankie had gotten a good head start, he was almost at Toby's street, but by the time Frankie turned left into Pineview (which had no pine trees at all—though Toby liked to think that once upon a time, when Belford was founded in 1818 by William S. Holt, who also founded Polkville, the area was littered with them), Toby was less than ten feet behind him.

Toby flew around the corner, his own backpack slapping against his back as he ran.

He saw her the moment he rounded the corner—she was standing looking back at Frankie jogging up the street—but there was no chance of stopping in time, nor dodging her. She faced Toby, her eyes widened, she drew in breath, and then Gloria Mayfour was knocked to the pavement. Toby followed her down. He felt the impact of Gloria hitting the concrete, heard her grunt and then smelled the familiar sweetness of Bazooka gum as her breath whooshed against his face.

Toby lay on top of Gloria for a few stunned moments, his face buried in her peach-scented hair. He knew he should get off, she might be hurt, yet he couldn't help liking the feel of her body underneath. But when he realized his right hand was clutching her left breast, he immediately rolled off her, hoping she either hadn't noticed where his hand had fallen, or if she had, assumed it had fallen there by accident.

Frankie came running over as Toby got to his feet.

"Are you guys okay?" Frankie said, panting loudly.

Ignoring Frankie, Toby said, "I'm really sorry, Gloria. Are you hurt?"

Gloria sat up. She looked pale and a little shaken. "I'm okay. Just a bit winded." She reached

around to the back of her head.

Toby drew in breath. "Did you hit your head?"

She brought her hand back. Thankfully her fingers were clean.

"Not hard," she said. "My head's not bleeding. I'll probably have a nice bump, but I'll live."

Gloria started to rise from her sitting position.

Toby twitched. He wanted to help her, knew that's what they would do in the movies—the hero taking the beauty by the hand and drawing her up close, holding her in his arms—but he was no hero; he was just some bumbling fourteen-year-old kid. So he stood there feeling useless as Gloria got to her feet.

"God, I'm so sorry," Toby said again. "Really, I am."

Brushing leaves and dirt off her clothes, Gloria said, "Don't worry, it was an accident." She smiled shyly.

Is she talking about the collision, the accidental grope, or both?

Standing face-to-face with Gloria, having just knocked her down, having accidentally felt her up, all of Toby's adolescent insecurities came flooding to the surface. He was rendered speechless, his face burned and his hands went all clammy.

There was an awkward silence.

Say something! Toby told himself. He looked at Frankie; Frankie looked just as lost as he was.

"You're bleeding," Gloria said, breaking the tension. She pointed to his knees.

Toby gazed down and saw, through a tear in his jeans, blood seeping from a graze on his right knee.

"Oh yeah," Toby said, shrugging. "It's nothing."

"Well," Gloria said, looking self-consciously between Toby and Frankie. "I guess I'd better get going. I was on my way to the store. I wasn't home for two minutes when my mom says we're out of milk and asks if I could go down to Barb's and get some."

"Parents, huh?" Toby said, mouth feeling thick and dry, like it was full of sawdust.

"Yeah. Well, see you guys around."

"Yeah," Toby said. "See you around."

"Bye," Frankie said.

Gloria walked away, soon vanishing around the corner.

A few moments ticked by before Frankie muttered, "Holy shit."

Toby faced Frankie.

"I can't believe it," Frankie said, sporting a goofy grin. "You talked to Gloria Mayfour. You ran into Gloria Mayfour. You actually fell on top of Gloria Ma..."

"I get the picture," Toby said.

Toby couldn't share his friend's excitement. Sure, he had finally talked to Gloria, brief and uncomfortable as it may have been, had felt one of her breasts, even though he hadn't meant to and there was a fabric barrier between his hand and her flesh, but he was embarrassed—both for Gloria and for himself.

"Why so touchy? She wasn't hurt, it's all good."

"She was hurt a little, she hit her head. But that's not the problem. I'm embarrassed."

Frankie frowned. "Embarrassed, why?"

Toby told him about the accidental grope. "She had to have noticed. She must've been so humiliated."

"Screw that. You felt up Gloria Mayfour! Man, wait till I tell the guys about this."

"Don't you dare," Toby told Frankie. "I don't want anyone to know about this."

"Why? You talked to Gorgeous Gloria. Christ, you fell on top of her and touched one of her breasts! Every teenage guy in town would give their right nut for that privilege."

"I don't give a shit about every guy." Toby stepped up to Frankie; stood so close he could smell the sourness of his sweat, feel the hotness of his breath. "Don't...tell...anyone," Toby said through gritted teeth.

Frankie's brown moon-shaped eyes widened. He swallowed. "Sure. I won't tell a soul."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

With one hand, Frankie made the sign of the cross on his chest. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

"If you tell even one person, I'll tell the whole town that you cried like a girl at the end of Titanic."

"Hey, I promised, didn't I? Jeez!"

Satisfied, Toby stepped away from Frankie and started walking towards his house.

Frankie caught up to him. "You aren't mad at me, are you, Toby? I mean, I was only joking around. I won't tell anyone. I promise."

Toby nodded. He fought hard to suppress a grin, but he lost the battle. "Yeah, I know."

They arrived at Toby's house—a charming two-story structure, the imitation wood vinyl siding painted a light pink with brown trim. The house sat proudly in the middle of a neatly trimmed lawn, which matched the neatly trimmed hedges that flanked both sides of the property.

Stopping at the edge of the front lawn, Toby turned to Frankie. "Go on, I'll meet you at your house, okay?"

"Why? I always come inside and wait for you."

"I have to clean my knee. It may take a while. I'll be around at your place in about half an hour."

Frankie sighed. "Okay, whatever. You're still staying for dinner and then watching the horror movie marathon later, though, right?"

"Of course," Toby said.

"Mom's working tonight, Leah will probably be out, and I don't want to watch Psycho all by myself."

"Don't worry, I'll be there to hold your hand."

With a nod, Frankie turned and started up the street, but stopped and looked back at Toby. He was frowning. "Hey, why was Gloria walking down Pineview? She lives on Cooper Avenue. She doesn't need to cut down Pineview to get to Barb's."

Toby hadn't given the matter much thought, but Frankie was right. Why was she walking down Pineview?

"Who knows?" Toby said, trying to act like he couldn't care less, but really he was churning inside with nervous excitement. "Maybe she was taking the long way to Barb's, or she was just out taking a walk, enjoying the sunshine."

Or coming to see me? Yeah right, in your dreams.

With a shrug, Frankie turned back around and continued meandering up the street.

Toby cut across the lawn and hurried up the porch steps, to the front door, where he pulled the keychain from his pocket. Though they lived in a small town, one with an almost zero percent crime rate, his parents still insisted on locking all doors and windows whenever the house was empty, so he singled out the front door key, unlocked the deadlock, and stepped inside.

It wasn't quite three o'clock and both his parents were still at work, so the house was quiet. The only sound was that low, almost undetectable hum he heard people refer to as white noise.

As Toby headed for the staircase, he wondered if Frankie had any inkling of the real reason he didn't want him coming into the house.

Most days after school, Toby and Frankie headed straight to Frankie's house, where they played basketball, computer games, or lazed around watching TV. And since Toby's house was on the way, it made sense for Frankie to wait if Toby needed to stop off at home first for any reason.

But not today.

It was true, he did want to clean the blood and dirt from the small wound on his knee and put a bandage over the graze, but that would only take a moment.

The real reason he didn't want Frankie coming inside had to do with Gloria Mayfour, how it had felt lying on top of her, and the softness of her breast.

For that, he needed privacy.

Toby bounded up the stairs, and into his bedroom.

CHAPTER TWO

Toby was feeling nice and relaxed as he rode his Rampit Red Schwinn BMX towards Frankie's house; the warm wind that fluttered his hair carried with it the glorious scent of flowers and freshly-cut grass, heightening his joy and sense of freedom (he usually only rode his bike when he was by himself—Frankie's old BMX died last year, and his mom didn't have the money to buy him a new one, so Toby preferred to leave his bike at home whenever he was traveling with Frankie).

Replacing his torn jeans was a long pair of shorts, and instead of a polo shirt he now wore an old Nike T-shirt. Completing the outfit was a pair of Nike sneakers, so Toby was all set for a sweaty afternoon of one-on-one basketball, finishing off with a lazy night of watching Psycho, Frankenstein and, depending on the time, Bride of Frankenstein.

When Toby arrived at Frankie's, he dumped his bike on the front lawn and headed towards the front door.

The Wilmonts lived in an unremarkable house. The single-story wasn't rundown, but the clapboard siding could do with a repaint and some of the boards on the porch were loose. Still, Frankie kept the front and back lawns short, and they did have a colorful and healthy array of flowers, thanks to Suzie's green thumb.

Frankie lived with his mother and older sister, Leah, who was a senior at Holt High. Frankie's dad had left before Frankie was born, so he had never known his father, had never even seen a picture of him because, apparently, Frankie's mom had burnt all photos of him when he left. Toby had trouble picturing Suzie acting in such a way—he knew her as a sweet and gentle person—but then Toby had never experienced such loss and hurt before.

Frankie hardly ever spoke about his father, and Toby couldn't recall the subject ever being brought up by either Suzie or Leah. All Toby knew of Frankie's dad was that his name was Brian and that he used to work as a laborer. If Frankie knew more, he had never told Toby.

Toby flung open the screen door, which, as usual, wasn't locked, and stepped into the house—practically his second home—and called out, "It's Jack the Ripper!"

"In the kitchen," came the reply.

Toby strolled down the hall, through the family room and entered the bright, modest-sized kitchen. Suzie was relaxing back in a chair at the kitchen table, arms folded, smoking her favorite brand of cigarettes, Camel Lights.

There was always the smell of cigarette smoke in the Wilmont house, and it never failed to catch in Toby's throat, even after all these years. He didn't hate it—it was a familiar smell now—but he didn't love it, either.

"Hey there Tobes," Suzie said, drawing on the cigarette in that casual, oh-so-cool way of hers.

"Hey Suzie." Usually, Toby found calling an adult by their first name strange. But Suzie, who worked as a home care aide, wasn't like most adults. Toby thought of her more as a big kid. She had a round face that always seemed to be smiling, and her body jiggled every time she laughed, just like Frankie's.

"How was the last day of school?" she said, blowing out smoke.

"It was all right. Glad to be on vacation. School's boring as hell." Suzie didn't mind people swearing. If he were to swear at home, even something as innocuous as crap, he would get a stern lecture from his parents on how swearing was wrong. As if he was some ten-year-old. Toby didn't see what the big deal was; his father swore all the time. Strange cusses like: "Son-of-a-cock's head," or "Damn monkey fuck."

Toby wished his parents were more like Suzie—relaxed, not so uptight. Also, Suzie treated him like an adult, unlike his parents, who still thought of him as a kid.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Sure. Thanks. I'll have a smoke, too."

Stubbing out the cigarette in the ashtray that was sitting on the table, Suzie smiled. "That'll be the day. I've already told Franklin that if I ever catch him smoking, I'll pound his ass raw. It's a disgusting habit." She hopped up and wandered over to the refrigerator. "What'll you have? Coke, Sprite, or Dr. Pepper?"

"Well, now that's a tough one."

"Let me guess. Sprite? Hmmm, no. Dr. Pepper? Nah, that's Franklin's favorite. I know, Coke!"

Toby grinned. "Yep, how'd you guess?"

Suzie chuckled, and Toby could see her whole body wobble, even though she was wearing a large, billowy dress, one so colorful it was like a rainbow had puked all over it. "Just lucky, I guess." She took out a bottle of Coke and poured him a glass, then handed the glass to Toby. "There ya go,

Tobes.”

Coke was his favorite drink. He had at least one glass every day. Suzie knew this, but she still asked him what he wanted to drink whenever he came over. It was a silly game they always played.

“Thanks.” He took a long drink, following it up with a deep, gassy burp.

“Charming,” Suzie said. “You’ve been spending too much time around Franklin.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. Speaking of which, where is Frankie?”

“He’s in his room, apparently getting ready to beat your ass in basketball.”

“Well, he has got a much bigger ass than me.”

Suzie patted him lightly on the behind. “Go on, get going. You’ve wasted enough time speaking to an old fart like me.”

Toby nodded. “Yeah, but you’re a sweet old fart.” Leaving the kitchen and Suzie Wilmont’s infectious laughter behind, Toby headed down the hall towards Frankie’s room, towards the hard rock music thumping from inside. When Toby opened the door, the pounding sounds of Linkin Park grew to an ear-bleeding level. Toby stepped into the bedroom and closed the door.

“About time,” Frankie shouted over the music. He was lying on his bed, reading one of his mom’s old Maxim’s—the one with Jessica Alba on the cover. Toby noticed he hadn’t bothered taking off his shoes; at the ends of his stocky legs he wore the same smelly Reeboks he had been wearing all day. He slapped the magazine down on the bed, reached over and turned down the music.

“I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything,” Toby said, grinning, but probably blushing as well, considering what he had done only a short time ago.

“You wish,” Frankie said, swinging his legs off the bed and onto the floor.

“Yeah right,” Toby said. “I pray every day that when I come over to your house, I’ll catch you stroking your monkey.”

Frankie stood, raised his arms to the ceiling and emitted one of those unintelligible noises that always accompanied a satisfying stretch. As he did, the South Park T-shirt he was wearing was raised, exposing his round, hairless belly. “Speaking of which, what took you so long?” he asked once he had finished stretching.

“I told you, I had to clean my knee. Look.” Toby nodded to his right leg. There was a small bandage plastered over his bony knee.

“Oh, poor Toby,” Frankie said, feigning pity. “Are you sure you don’t need a doctor? An ambulance?”

“It didn’t hurt, numb-nuts. I just didn’t want it to get infected.”

The sides of Frankie’s mouth curled. “But even if it did and you had to get your leg cut off, it would have been worth it. Hell, it would have been worth it if you had cracked your head open and your brains were oozing all over the pavement, just to be able to lie on top of Gorgeous Gloria.”

"I wouldn't go that far."

"I would," Frankie chuckled.

"Anyway, are we gonna get this game started? Or are you too scared you're going to lose?"

"In your dreams, man. And when you lose, don't blame it on your knee." Turning towards his desk, which was crowded with items such as old Matchbox cars, toy plastic dinosaurs and Star Wars action figures, as well as an assortment of baseball cards, half-eaten chocolate bars and empty chip packets, Frankie opened the top drawer and pulled out a bag of balloons. He turned around and held up the bag. "For when we get hot."

They were the water bombs he and Frankie had bought last weekend. The bag was all but full; the weather had been unusually cool last weekend.

"Now you're talking," Toby said. "You're going down, Franklin."

"You shouldn't have called me that. You're gonna pay big time, Tobias."

"We'll see." Toby picked up the basketball from the rubbish tip that was Frankie's floor, and cradled it under one arm.

"First stop, the bathroom," Frankie said and together, they left Frankie's bedroom.

By late afternoon the boys were exhausted, having played basketball non-stop for almost two hours, though the last hour was mostly spent shooting hoops rather than playing one-on-one matches. The bucket of water bombs was almost empty. Only two small balloons remained. The rest were littered about the back lawn like hundreds of tiny, multicolored bird droppings.

Frankie and Toby were sitting with their backs against a wall, their hair and clothes still slightly damp, but drying rapidly in the heat. They were about to head inside to see what Suzie was making for dinner, when they heard a car pull up nearby. It grumbled to a stop and then idled, a growling tiger rather than a purring pussycat like his parents' Honda.

"Sounds like Dwayne's car," Frankie said. He pushed the basketball he'd been lazily rolling on the ground away, and stood up. He moved to the front of the house and peered around the corner. When Frankie came back, he had a look of distaste on his face. "It is Dwayne, and by the looks of it, the rest of his idiot friends are with him. They're dropping Leah off. Debbie, too."

By 'idiot friends' Frankie had to have meant Sam Bickley, Rusty Helm, and Scotty Hammond. None of them were as tough as Dwayne, but bundle the three of them together, and you had a pack of sometimes very cruel thugs, with the cruelest thug of all as their leader.

Dwayne Marcos was a senior at Holt High, and a complete asshole, someone who reveled in humiliating anyone who was, in his eyes, below him: which meant pretty much everyone.

Toby and Frankie were no exception; they hadn't been spared Dwayne's wrath over the years. One

time when Toby was sitting in Belford Library, working on an assignment, Dwayne and his goons had come over to Toby and yanked his chair out from under him. Toby had fallen to the floor, smashing his butt on the carpet. With tears stinging his eyes, Toby was as much humiliated as he was hurt (his butt was sore for a full week afterwards). As for Frankie, they had chased him home on numerous occasions, usually catching him, sometimes forcing him to do embarrassing stunts like running around the neighborhood in nothing but his underpants; usually they just took any money he had on him.

Toby had even heard of Dwayne and his gang dunking one poor kid's head in the school toilet—after it had been used by the four of them (depending on which version of the story you believed, the toilet was filled with either just urine, just shit, or a combination of the two).

But Dwayne was tough, good-looking and athletic, so even though he treated most people like they were nothing more than something stuck to the bottom of his shoe. Guys still looked up to him, girls still adored him, and anyone younger or smaller feared him. Which was precisely why he was going out with one of the best looking girls in town. Not that Debbie Mayfour was a sweetheart—sure she was hot, but personality wise she was a no-show. She wasn't overly bright, and could be a right bitch at times. It was a mystery how two girls, so totally opposite in personalities, could be sisters. Gloria was shy, sweet, and intelligent, whereas Debbie was dull and boring. So really, Debbie was the perfect match for Dwayne.

"God I hate that guy," Frankie said. "I heard Debbie and Leah talking about him last night. What a jerk."

Frankie's sister, Leah, was best friends with Debbie Mayfour, so not only did Frankie get to see a lot of Debbie, he also got to hear a lot of gossip. Toby knew Leah and Debbie would kill Frankie if they ever found out he eavesdropped, but so far they had yet to catch him. Sometimes Toby got lucky and Debbie would come to visit when he was staying over at Frankie's. Then he and Frankie would spend the night sneaking around, trying to listen in on the girls' conversations, hoping to catch a glimpse of Debbie in any state of undress. Unfortunately, he had yet to see her naked.

"Get this," Frankie said. "I heard Debbie tell Leah that Dwayne sleeps around with other girls. That he takes them up to Taylor's Hill, screws them, and then leaves them up there to find their own way home."

Behind Belford Cemetery, which was located on the outskirts of town, was Taylor's Woods. A paved road running behind the cemetery thinned out into a narrow dirt road as it entered the woods, which then narrowed even further into a tiny dirt track that snaked deep into Taylor's woods for a mile or so, before coming out at a large clearing—Taylor's Hill. It overlooked the cemetery and the west side of town—which was mostly farmland—and during the day it was a cool place for kids to hang out, go exploring through the woods, or lie on the hill under the sun and just relax and day-dream. But come night it was a popular place for teenagers to make out and do other teenage type things. One would often find empty beer cans and not so empty condoms scattered around.

"No shit?" Toby said.

"Yeah. But get this, Debbie was actually laughing about it, saying she doesn't mind because it's Dwayne, saying how hot he is, and what a great lover he is. And what a huge..."

"Yeah, I get the picture," Toby said. He looked up at Frankie and smirking, said, "So was this before or after you saw Debbie's tits?"

“Screw you. I did see them. Now hand me a water bomb.”

“Huh?”

“On second thought, give me both of them.”

Toby reached into the bucket and pulled out the last of the jelly-like balloons. He hesitated. “I hope you’re not doing what I think you are.”

“Dwayne and his gang have been giving us shit for years. About time we got some payback.”

“He loves that Chevy more than he loves himself. And that’s really saying something.”

Dwayne’s one true love was his 1969 Chevy Camaro. His parents bought it second-hand for his sixteenth birthday and he had spent a year fixing it up to pristine condition, complete with original LeMans blue paint-job and white Z stripes. He had named it ‘Bruce’ after the shark in *Jaws*—not only was the paint-job reminiscent of a shark’s color, but apparently Dwayne thought sharks were badass, the ultimate hunters.

“I know. That’s the beauty of it. Quick, give me the water bombs before Dwayne leaves.”

Toby sighed, considered hurling the balloons away and letting them splash safely on the lawn. But he finally relented. He handed the water bombs to Frankie. “What if they see you?”

“They won’t. I’ll make sure of that.” Frankie took the water bombs, handling them like they were made from glass.

“But what if Dwayne finds out who it was? He’ll probably run us over with Bruce.”

“Nearly every house on this street has kids, and they’ve all been picked on by Dwayne or one of his gang. Sure he’ll be angry at first, but he’ll have too many suspects to bother doing any real investigating. Besides, it’s only water. Imagine if we had these bad-boys filled with shaving cream?”

With a balloon gently cupped in each hand, Frankie again crept up to the front of the house.

Deciding this was too important to miss—it was sure to be all over town come morning—Toby got to his feet and followed, his gut clenched in a tight knot. He stopped behind Frankie.

“I’ll wait till he starts driving away and is a little ways down the street before I strike,” Frankie whispered.

“I hope you’re a good shot,” Toby said.

“Hey, you know I am. I didn’t beat you today for nothing.”

Soon the car revved, Toby heard voices, a female saying: “See you guys later,” then a horn honked. When the car pulled away, engine roaring like something out of *Jurassic Park*, Frankie said, “Okay, I’m going for it.”

Frankie drew back his right arm, then sent one of the round balloons sailing. He quickly followed it up with the second. “Come on,” Frankie whispered and as they hurried around to the back of the house, they heard the car screech to a halt and then Dwayne shouted: “Who did that! Who the

fuck did that!"

Their backs pressed up against the wall, safely hidden from view, Toby and Frankie fought bravely not to laugh. Their laughter ceased, however, when the car, instead of continuing up the street, seemed to turn around.

"We're gonna get you!" Rusty Helm bellowed, as the Chevy's engine grew louder.

"Yeah, you're dead meat!" Sam Bickley screamed. The car sounded like it was cruising past the Wilmont house.

"Come on, let's go inside," Frankie said. "Dinner's probably ready soon."

"Yeah, good idea."

With Dwayne still shouting obscenities and the car dangerously close, Toby and Frankie hurried through the back door. The aroma of ham, cheese, pepperoni and onion sizzling in the oven hit them the moment they were inside.

"You guys must have an amazing sense of smell," Suzie said, closing the oven door. "Pizza's almost ready." Her face was flushed and thin beads of sweat dribbled down her forehead.

"Smells fantastic," Toby said.

"Thanks. Say, what was all that yelling just now?" Suzie slipped a cigarette from the packet lying on the table and popped it into her mouth. With the lighter, she fired up the smoke.

Frankie and Toby exchanged knowing looks, which thankfully Suzie didn't see. "Dunno," Frankie said. "Just some teenagers playing around, I guess."

Just then Leah walked in with Debbie, who hung back in the hallway, twirling her hair.

"Some jerks just water bombed Dwayne's car," Leah said, and then her eyes fell on the boys and she huffed. "You again," she said and smiled thinly at Toby.

Leah Wilmont wasn't a beauty queen, not like the surly, but model-perfect cheerleader behind her. She had an earthier quality, bordering on Tom-boyish, and though some guys found her attractive enough, Toby only saw her as the big sister he never had.

Toby smiled back, and then he looked past Leah, to the tall blonde hovering in the background. When Debbie noticed Toby staring at her, she winked at him, and Toby quickly looked to the floor. He heard Debbie giggle.

"I've just come to tell you that I'm staying at Debbie's tonight," Leah said.

"And miss out on my famous pizza?"

"Yeah, well, I think we'll live."

"So what have you two got planned for tonight?"

"Probably going up to Taylor's Hill with some guys," Frankie said, puckering his lips and making kissing noises.

"Pervert," Leah huffed. Then to her mom: "I dunno, nothing much, just hang around, watch some movies. Nothing major."

"Well, have fun doing nothing major," Suzie said. "Remember, I'm working tonight, so if you need me..."

"I know. You'll be at Mrs. McGregor's." Rolling her eyes, Leah turned around. "Come on, Deb. Let's go pack my bag and get the hell outta here."

As the girls left, Debbie said, "Hey, Toby. Gloria says hi," and the sound of two seventeen-year-old girls giggling was like nails down a chalkboard to Toby.

Frankie chuckled beside him. Suzie drew on her cigarette, the hint of a grin on her face.

"Now Toby, does your mother know you're staying over for dinner?" Suzie said.

Toby sighed. "No."

"Go on, give her a call. You know how she worries."

"Where else does she think I am?" he muttered as he stomped over to the wall phone near the kitchen bench.

"After that, you boys go and get washed up," Suzie said, and took a deep puff of her Camel Light.

It was nine-thirty when Psycho ended.

Frankie blew out a long breath, picked up the bits of popcorn that had fallen on his shirt and into his lap, popped the morsels into his mouth and said, "Dude, that was a creepy movie. You see that corpse at the end?"

Toby nodded. "And that shower scene, very cool."

"Yeah. Wish they had used more blood, but still, pretty damn creepy." Frankie picked up the remote, turned down the volume on the TV.

"How you holding up?" Toby asked Frankie. "Think you can manage Frankenstein?"

Frankie huffed. "Of course. It's even older than Psycho. I won't be scared."

"Just like you weren't scared when that old woman came out of the room and sliced that cop's face? You jumped a mile."

Frankie shrugged. "So, you about shit yourself when the lady was getting slashed in the shower." Frankie smiled.

“As if.” Truth was, Toby had been more than a little spooked by the movie. For an old black and white horror movie, it was eerily effective.

Frankie got to his feet. “Well, I’m getting some Dr. Pepper and some M&Ms. Gotta stock up for Frankenstein. You want anything?”

“A can of Coke. And I’ll share your M&Ms. Unless they’re peanut. You know how I hate nuts.”

“Let me go check.”

Frankie left the family room.

Toby remained sitting on the sofa, feet resting on the coffee table. If Suzie was home, she’d yell at him for having his feet up on the table—she hated the thought of dirty, smelly feet on any place where you put food and drink.

Without Suzie and Leah, the house was quiet. No wonder Frankie wanted Toby to stay for the horror movie marathon. These movies were creepy enough watching them with friends. He could only imagine what it would be like watching them alone.

And Toby knew that Frankie disliked being home alone. He would never admit it, but he hated it when his mom worked the night shift. Those nights, he was always extra persistent that Toby stay the night, or until as late as Toby’s mom would allow him to stay.

“Bad news,” Frankie said, poking his head around the corner. “We’re all out of Coke and there’s only peanut M&Ms. And it’s a small packet of peanut M&Ms.”

Toby pulled his feet off the table, placed them on the carpet and turned around. “What else do you have to drink and eat?”

Frankie made a face. “There’s one can of Dr. Pepper, some grape juice, cherry Kool-Aid, and a bag of pretzels.”

Toby groaned. “I hate cherry Kool-Aid. And pretzels. Man, we can’t watch another movie without proper food and drink.”

“We could always go to the Circle K. You got any money?”

“Yeah, a little. But Circle K’s over on the other side of town. It’ll take ages to walk there and back. We’ll miss half the movie if we go.”

“Yeah you’re right.” Frankie stood by the kitchen entrance, deep in thought. A grin broke across his face. “It’d be a lot quicker by bike.”

Toby sighed. “Yeah, but you haven’t got…” He stopped, noting the look on Frankie’s face. “Oh, I see. You want me to do all the work? Typical.”

“Hey, this way it should take you no more than half an hour to get back. And don’t worry, I’ll fill you in on the movie.”

“How thoughtful of you.” With a groan Toby got to his feet. “Well you’d better give me some dough. I haven’t got much. I’m saving most of it for tomorrow.” He slipped on his Nikes.

“Hey, me too. So I can only spare five.”

Toby made a face. “Five bucks? That’s all you can spare?”

“Hey, tomorrow’s the main event, bro. We’re gonna go nuts for our campout. I want us to have as much junk food as we can carry. And since, well, you know, I’m not exactly rolling in cash, I can only spare five bucks right now.”

Toby sighed. “All right. But you had better come through with the goods tomorrow.”

“I will, I will,” Frankie said. He turned and disappeared. When he came back, he handed Toby five ones. “Get me another can of Dr. Pepper and a big bag of peanut M&Ms.”

“Yes, Sir!” Toby took the money and stuffed the notes into his pocket. He started for the front door.

“I’ll be sitting here in front of the TV, waiting for you, watching Frankenstein.”

Toby stuck his finger up at Frankie. “Uck Fou,” he said, and with the sound of Frankie chortling, headed outside.

Belford’s one and only 24-hour convenience store was located on Redina Street, one of the three main roads leading out of town.

It took Toby ten minutes to reach the Circle K, its luminous red and white lights a startling contrast to the dark, sparsely populated farmland which surrounded the store.

Parking his bike out the front, he stepped into the bright interior and bought a can of Coke, a can of Dr. Pepper, and two packets of M&Ms—plain and peanut.

The Circle K was surprisingly empty for a Friday night, and when he stepped outside, bag in hand, he discovered the reason why.

As he walked over to his bike, he heard the end of a cell phone conversation.

“...Jinks Field? Fuck, this I gotta see,” some older teenager said, standing by his car.

Instead of hopping on his bike and riding away, Toby hesitated, taking longer than was necessary to hang the bag over the handlebars.

What was going on at Jinks Field? he wondered.

The older teenager hung up, then speed-dialed a number. “Shaun, hey, it’s Paul. You heard about what’s going down at Jinks Field? You are? Yeah, I’m on my way there now. I know, apparently the old bum was perving on them. Fuckin’ old perv. Okay, okay, see ya soon.” Paul hung up, jumped into his car and sped away from the Circle K.

Old bum? Are they talking about that drifter me and Frankie saw today?

Toby knew he should just get on his bike and ride straight back to Frankie's.

But he was curious. What exactly was happening at Jinks Field?

And what was that about the old bum perverting on some people?

With nerves tingling in his gut, Toby hopped onto his Schwinn and started pedaling towards Jinks Field.

Man, Frankie's gonna be spewing when he finds out he missed this.

Not that Toby knew what 'this' was.

The night grew dark as he left the lights of the Circle K behind.

He pedaled hard, legs pumping, sucking in the sultry night air through his nostrils.

By the time he turned onto Longview Road, he could hear the distant sounds of cars' engines and shouting.

What the hell's going on?

He reached Jinks Field, puffing and sweating. He skidded to a halt, stopping at the outer edge of the gathering, mostly teenagers standing around the large car park, or sitting and standing on the hoods of cars, shouting, drinking, egging on whatever was at the center of this show. Some of the spectators were throwing beer or soda bottles along with the cries of "Get him!" and "Give the pervert a welcome to remember!" A few were even throwing stones. At what, Toby couldn't see. His view was blocked by bodies and parked cars, their headlights pointing in all directions, giving light to the otherwise lightless area. He could just see movement through the throng of onlookers and stationary cars, could hear the roar of engines, and it looked to him like cars were going in circles, kicking up gravel and clouds of dust as they went.

Spotting Warrick standing on the hood of someone's car, Toby rode over to him. When Warrick saw Toby, he smiled and jumped off the car. "Hey Fairchild," he shouted. "I'm surprised to see you here."

Head starting to hurt from all the noise, the dust starting to scratch his throat, Toby said, "What's going on?"

Warrick motioned with his head and Toby followed on his bike.

They stopped a little way up Longview, where the noise wasn't so deafening.

"Man, is this crazy or what?" Warrick said, face dripping with sweat. His eyes held a wildness that was unnerving. And his breath smelled of beer.

"Yeah, I guess so. But what's it all for?"

Warrick ran a hand through his greasy hair. "Some of us are just... well, let's say giving that bum a nice Belford welcome."

With feet resting on the ground, Toby said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, apparently the old hobo was caught perving on Nate and Val. They were parked by Jinks Field, making out, when Val sees this face appear at the window. She screams, so Nate jumps out and, seeing it's that nigger bum, starts beating on him..."

Nate Jenkins was a senior in High School. Val, a junior, was his long-time girlfriend.

"...Anyway, he calls some of his friends, tells them what happened. They come right on over and get in on the action. Word quickly spread, and now..." Warrick turned and waved a hand. "Now it's a party."

Toby gazed at the wild scene below. "So those cars in the middle of the crowd, what are they doing?"

Warrick chuckled. "Circling the hobo, what else?"

"You mean he's in the middle of all that?"

"Of course Fairchild, what do you think I've been telling you?"

Toby watched some high school senior pelt a bottle into the middle of the circle.

Toby swallowed, tasted grit. "Jesus Christ," he breathed.

"I just can't believe Dwayne's missing all this. I called him before, told him what was going down, but he said he was busy, or some shit. Man, it's not like him to miss out on a scene like this. If he was here, he'd be throwing bottles the hardest. Nah, on second thought, he'd be in Bruce, circling that motherfucker like a... a..."

"Shark?" Toby said.

"Yeah, like a shark. Say, come down with me. You can see better standing on a car. If you're lucky, you can see the hobo through the dust, cowering like a baby."

Toby looked at Warrick, at his thin face glowing with bloody excitement.

"Well..."

Torn between curiosity and fear, Toby didn't know what to do.

"Come on Fairchild. Help us give this nigger pervert a proper welcome—and a proper sendoff."

"Okay," Toby said, and he immediately felt bad for wanting to watch this mob hurt and humiliate a complete stranger.

He was perving on some teenagers...

Toby rode back behind Warrick. Resting his bike and the bag of food and drink on the ground, he followed Warrick onto the hood of some guy's car. It buckled slightly under the weight. Once Toby was steady on his feet, he stood and looked out. He saw a ring of kids screaming and hollering with delight, raising their bottles to the night like flaming torches, while three cars raced 'round and 'round. The dust was thick, so Toby only caught glimpses of the man huddled in the middle.

Someone in the inner circle shook up a beer can and then sprayed the contents over the bum. Everyone laughed and cheered.

“What if the cars get too close and lose control?” Toby shouted in Warrick’s ear.

Warrick didn’t answer straightaway. “I dunno,” he said. “We’ll just have to wait and see.” Then he screamed, “Get out of town, pervert!” Then he cackled.

The choking dust, the smell of sweat, exhaust and beer—it was too much for Toby. Starting to feel queasy, he nudged Warrick on the arm. “I’ve seen enough. I’m outta here.”

Warrick said, “You don’t want to stick around?”

“For what?”

“For whatever happens once everyone gets tired of this.”

Toby shook his head. “No, I think I’ll...”

A police siren cut through the mob’s bloodlust and the cars’ engines.

“Shit, the cops!” Warrick cried, and he jumped down to the ground, Toby following.

With the sound of car doors slamming and tires squealing, Toby hurried over to his bike, snatched it off the ground and hopped on.

Toby didn’t even bother to look for Warrick; he just started pedaling up Longview, then across the street and into a patch of woods. There he stayed, hidden behind an elm, watching as two cruisers, lights blinking, sirens blaring, tore down the road, swerving to miss cars driving in the opposite direction.

Once they were past him, screeching to a halt at the parking lot below, Toby left, but not before scanning the area for any sign of the hobo.

He looked through the settling dust, through the cars and teenagers that hadn’t been quick enough to make a getaway before the cops arrived, but saw no sign of the stranger. He gazed over to the field, the scene of countless baseball games, town picnics and Fourth of July fireworks. He looked to the bleachers, dark and shadowy. There was no trace of the hobo.

Must’ve made a getaway, Toby thought and then he rode away from Jinks Field.

“What took you so long?” Frankie said.

Toby walked around to the front of the sofa and fell into it. He placed the bag on the table, then proceeded to tell Frankie about what he had seen.

“No way,” Frankie said afterwards. “Man, I always miss out on the fun.”

“Serves you right for being lazy,” Toby said.

Frankie reached into the bag and took out the can of Dr. Pepper. An empty can of the same drink sat on the table, along with the half-empty packet of pretzels. “Hey, this is warm.”

“Sorry, want me to go down to the store and get you another one?”

“Would you?”

“Sure, right after I fly to the moon.”

Frankie popped open the can and took a sip. “Ah well, warm Dr. Pepper is still better than no Dr. Pepper.” He faced Toby. “So this bum was really in the middle, with cars driving all around him?”

Toby nodded.

“Wow.”

Toby opened his can of Coke and took a sip of the lukewarm soda. On the television screen Frankenstein’s Monster was reaching up towards a stream of sunlight which was shining through the roof of some old castle. “So, what’d I miss?”

“Oh, yeah, cool movie. Not as exciting as what you saw tonight, but still, for an old movie, it’s all right.”

Once Toby was up to date with the story, once both boys had their respective packets of M&Ms open and were happily munching away, Toby relaxed back and watched the rest of Frankenstein—his thoughts occasionally turning to what he had witnessed tonight, and wondering what had become of the stranger.

When Toby arrived home that night at eleven o’clock, he found his parents in the family room, watching TV—some war documentary, judging by the grainy black and white images of tanks on the screen.

“Hi hon,” his mom said, turning around and smiling.

“Have a good time?” his dad said without averting his gaze from the screen.

Standing just outside the family room, feeling the breeze from the air-conditioner, Toby muttered, “I guess.”

“Hey kiddo, come and sit with your old ma and pa for a bit. We haven’t seen you all day.”

Toby rolled his eyes and thought, Great, a talk, then shuffled over to the old wicker chair that sat adjacent to the couch his parents were on.

All Toby wanted to do was go up to his room and listen to some music, perhaps get started on the

book he had borrowed from the library—a Stephen King novel called *The Shining*, which, according to some kids at school, was supposed to be super scary.

“So how was the last day of school?” his dad said, finally turning his attention to Toby when a commercial break came on. “Kiss any girls, beat up any guys?”

“It was all right. Though I did kiss some guys and beat up a few girls.”

His dad laughed. His mom just shook her head.

“That’s my boy. Got a sharp wit, just like his old man.”

“You’ve got wit,” his mom said, “but I don’t think it’s very sharp.”

“Hey, you’re getting funnier in your old age, my dear. I guess spending too much time around me has finally paid off.”

“So my mother was right,” his mom said. “You are a bad influence.”

His dad leaned over and kissed his mom on the cheek. “You bet I am.”

This was typical Fairchild conversation; most of the time it was about nothing, with the odd sprinkling of meaningful discussion thrown in for good measure.

His dad worked as a bank clerk at Belford Community Bank, a job he’d had since he was seventeen and which was, according to the man himself, as tedious as listening to their neighbor across the street, Mr. Klein, prattle on about how everything was so expensive these days, not like back when he was a youngster. But the job paid well, even if he didn’t always get along with his boss, Rudy Mayfour.

His dad often bitched about Mr. Mayfour, calling him all sorts of colorful names, the worst of which he waited until he thought Toby was out of the room (but in reality, Toby was just out of view, not out of earshot).

Toby had occasionally heard people refer to David Fairchild as crude, even obnoxious, but Toby, who got along well enough with his dad, as well as any of his friends got along with their fathers, simply saw his dad as a bit of a comedian, someone who had no qualms about speaking his mind.

By contrast, his mom, who worked at Belford Library, was quiet, introverted—she and Toby were a lot alike in many ways. How she put up with his dad’s crude humor baffled Toby, but they seemed to get along well. They hardly ever fought, or if they did, it was behind closed doors.

“But seriously,” his mom said, “how does it feel finishing middle school?”

“Feels okay, I guess. I’m glad it’s over and that it’s summer vacation.”

“We’re very proud of you, you know.”

“Just because I finished middle school? It’s no big deal, Mom.”

“My word it is,” his dad said. “Our little man is growing up.”

Toby shifted in the chair. He hated it when his parents talked this way. Why couldn't they be more like Suzie?

"Well anyway, we just wanted to say how proud we are of you. So what did you and Frankie get up to tonight?" his mom said, probably sensing Toby's discomfort.

"The usual," Toby sighed. "Why?"

"I only want to find out what my son's been up to, that's all."

"He's in a mood because we wouldn't let him camp out tonight as well," his dad said.

Toby sighed again. He hated it when his dad was right; or at least, partially right, in this case. "We played some basketball, then had dinner, then watched a horror movie marathon on TV. Happy? Am I free to go?" He decided to leave out the part about watching a mob of teenagers torment a hobo.

"Hey, don't speak to your mother like that," his dad said, deepening his voice. "She's only asking because she cares."

Toby really wasn't in the mood for a lecture or an argument, so he said, "I'm sorry. I'm just tired."

"Too much basketball," his mom said with a kind smile.

Toby shrugged. "Yeah."

"You do look tired," his dad said. "Okay, you're free to go."

Thank you!

Toby stood up from the chair.

"Good night," his mom said.

"Night, champ," his dad said, turning back to the TV. The commercial break was over. "Get a good rest. Big day tomorrow. Have to set up the tent."

"See you guys in the morning," Toby muttered and he shuffled out of the icy-cool family room, up the stairs and into his stuffy bedroom (while the family room, living room and kitchen benefited from air conditioning, the upstairs relied on the old fashioned method of cooling—opening the window).

It was true; he was tired, but he wasn't sure how much sleep he would be getting tonight—he had a lot on his mind, aside from the campout tomorrow. There was Dwayne and the water bombing incident, Mr. Joseph and his blood-drinking, chicken eating ways, and of course the unsettling events at Jinks Field; but mostly it was Gloria who occupied his mind. He knew he would lie awake in bed daydreaming about the events of today, wondering what, if anything, might happen during the next three months of summer vacation.

Toby jerked awake, momentarily confused. It didn't take him long to realize that he was in his bedroom. He lay in the darkness, heart pounding, until he was orientated enough to sit up.

What woke me up? The dream?

In the dream he had been in darkness. He had felt around—cold, hard wood. He realized he was in a box of some sort; a box that was as narrow as it was high. He had pushed, tried kicking, but he had little room for movement, and nothing gave way. He had screamed, but no sound came out. He was trapped, and then someone grabbed his hand, and that's when he woke.

Toby wiped his brow. His forearm came away wet.

He turned and the red numbers on his digital clock told him it was 2:28.

He was about to lay back down and try and get back to sleep, when he heard the sound of an engine outside; a deep, familiar growl.

Toby drew in breath. His genitals shriveled and his brain screamed one word: Dwayne!

Toby hopped out of bed and, dressed only in a pair of boxer shorts, stood at the bedroom window and peeled away the curtains.

Moonlight shone in the clear, starry sky, a pearly orb that streaked light into Toby's room. Any other night and he would've thought it a beautiful sight, but it wasn't the moon Toby was interested in. It was the car, cruising up and down Pineview, like a shark stalking its prey.

A blue Chevy, the white stripes that ran along its hood and trunk dull gray in the moonlit night.

Bruce.

Toby's insides went all squirmy, perspiration rained down his face and body—there was no air drifting in through the open window to cool him.

Shit, Toby thought. Dwayne found out I was involved in the water bombing, and now he's come to pay me back!

Should I wake up Dad? Call the police?

But when the Chevy stopped a few houses down, on the other side of the street in front of Mr. Joseph's, Toby's worries eased and he remained by the window, still cautious, but curious.

The Chevy's passenger door opened. Scotty Hammond hopped out, then three more figures followed.

One was Sam Bickley. The scrawny, buck-toothed high school senior was wearing dark shirt and pants, similar to Scotty, and in one hand he was holding a cage, which contained a clearly distraught chicken. The bird was savagely flapping its wings and hopping around inside the cage. In his other hand, Sam was carrying an axe. *

Welcome to the small Midwestern town of Belford, Ohio. It's a quiet, friendly town. On one corner of Main Street you'll find Barb's Corner Store. Opposite you'll see the town square, with its neatly trimmed lawn and statuesque gazebo. There's everything you need here. There's even a local bogeyman. You know the type: reclusive, looks a little strange. The person all the kids are afraid of. Every town has one. Except this one is stranger than most.

Meet Mr. Joseph. With his severely crooked neck and nasty facial scar, the old man from Haiti is the one resident all the kids whisper about and are scared to go near. But there are things about Mr. Joseph no one knows about. He has no heartbeat. No breath passes by his lips. And he has been dead for over ninety years.

It's summer vacation and fourteen-year-old Toby Fairchild is looking forward to spending a lazy, carefree summer playing basketball, staying up late watching monster movies, and camping out in his backyard with his best friend, Frankie.

But then tragedy strikes. And out of this tragedy an unlikely friendship develops between Toby and the strange old man across the street, Mr. Joseph. Over the course of a tumultuous summer, Toby will be faced with pain and death, the excitement of his first love, and the underlying racism of the townsfolk, all while learning about the value of freedom at the hands of a kind but cursed old man.

Every town has a dark side. And in Belford, the local bogeyman has a story to tell.

“A story that raises itself above a simple horror tale, *THE AWAKENING* resonates with heart while applying just the right amount of chills. Highly recommended!” - Ronald Malfi, author of *THE NIGHT PARADE*

“*THE AWAKENING* is a riveting and fascinating novel that really grabs readers. I loved that it's a coming of age novel that thrusts readers into the story and won't let them go. Brett McBean was already one of my favorite authors but *The Awakening* is one of the best books I've read in years, and I can't recommend it highly enough!” - John R. Little, author of *THE MEMORY TREE*, *MIRANDA*, and *URSA MAJOR*

“A coming-of-age tale that hit me in the gut, *THE AWAKENING* ranks up there with James Newman's *MIDNIGHT RAIN*, *SUMMER OF NIGHT* by Dan Simmons, and *THE BODY* by the grand master of them all, Stephen King. This is one that you'll recommend to your friends for years to come.” - Pete Kahle, author of *THE SPECIMEN*

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