

The Rome Record

by

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PART I: CRIMES

Stories aren't always about what they seem. The media represents slices of society: books, the literate, politics, the rich, movies, the glamorous. Cameras and computers shape the way we look at life, but there's always something beneath the narrative they construct for us. Stories are like pyramids: for each block, there are many more underneath it, supporting it, being crushed by it.

* * *

"Just couldn't resist coming back to home to Rome, could you?" asked Principal Collins, shaking my hand vigorously and adding with a laugh, "Rome, Connecticut, of course!" The buttons on his suit jacket jingled together.

Couldn't resist it? Couldn't resist it like sticking my balls in an oven. God knows I wouldn't have come back to this dump if I could have found a job anywhere else besides this hygienic-towelette-of-a-paper *The Rome Record*. Why I decided to become a journalist when the economy was about as productive as nailing your fingers to a wall is beyond me.

"Well, you know, I just love it here!" I smiled and shook his hand back even harder. I sounded so sincere.

“Did I just hear my buddy Tony, uh, um,” stuttered my old guidance counselor, Mr. Jenkins, emerging from the shadows of the mostly empty high school.

Oh no. I knew my former advisor needed help remembering my last name, but I let him squirm. He reassessed his strategy and switched to a man hug, homophobia at its best. That’s right, Jenkins. If the back pat doesn’t hurt, it means you’re gay.

“Nice to see you, bro!” he said. His hair was slicked back à la douche bag.

“You too!” If Claus had been here, he might have convinced me to tell Jenkins the truth about his job performance. Claus, with his wolfish grin and unforgiving icy blue stare, eyebrows furrowed and arms crossed, could make me do almost anything.

As for Jenkins, imagine having a frat boy for a guidance counselor. He knew nothing about financial aid or post-secondary education. Careers didn’t fall within his realm of expertise, either. Was it my responsibility to tell Jenkins that he was a waste of space, that he really should spend some time doing his job instead of screwing up generations of students’ lives with bad advice? Too awkward. But Jenkins had discouraged me from applying to my alma mater, and not even because I couldn’t afford it. He just didn’t think I could get in.

But maybe he had had the right idea. I didn’t have the money. The only way someone could afford to go to school these days without a complimentary ass ton of student loans — if you didn’t live off your parents’ unfathomable wealth like the kids on Chicory Hill did — was to deal drugs, plain and simple. That’s the American Lesson; the American Dream is bullshit.

An awkward silence settled as the three of us – Principal Collins, Jenkins and I – realized we had nothing in common except four years of mutual torture. The rain pattered noisily on the roof. But Jenkins, “the cool guidance counselor,” the one who reassured me that you could still get your drink on at Catholic universities, came to the rescue and asked, “So, still hang out with Claus a lot?”

“You and Mr. Clayton were quite the dynamic duo in high school, weren’t you?” asked Collins nasally.

“I’m actually on my way to his house tonight,” I said, dodging the question – artfully, in my opinion. I didn’t want to say that Claus and I basically had stopped hanging out after his accident during our grad party or that I had been in town for a year and was too afraid to call him. In college, I hated coming home and being with my dad. When I was a freshman, Claus and I had had a terrible argument. I stopped leaving campus. He had been my only reason for returning home from school, so I avoided Rome until I graduated.

Oh Claus, Claus, Claus. Claus was the one diamond of sincerity in this coal mine. Claus was the catcher in the rye. Claus was the cream in a Twinkie. You weren’t sure he was good for you, but he made it all worth it.

Claus understood me, and that’s more than I can say for just about everybody. He was one of those people who not only saw through everyone’s crap in what I call the Age of Misinformation, but he had the gall to call them on it, too.

In the class picture on the wall, Claus and I stood beside each other. A black mushroom cloud of hair covered my green eyes, and I smiled like someone who never felt alone.

I was going to see him again, tonight. I knew my world was about to change, but I didn't know how.

"Melissa said hi," counselor Jenkins inserted, brushing his slick hair back. I doubted that. His daughter hadn't talked to me much since the grad party either, but I wasn't too sure why.

"If you have any more questions for your article, don't hesitate to call," said Principal Collins, snapping me out of a daydream. He eyed me and tugged on the lapels of his suit.

"Yeah, sure, I will," I said, folding and unfolding a packet of papers Collins had given me.

As I walked away, I heard Jenkins ask, "What's his article on again?"

It only involved his entire department. I was writing a piece on what this year's Rome High graduates planned to do after they stepped into the real world. The guidance department already had made a report to the state on career plans, so I decided to take a peek. I knew what I'd find — college for the Chicory Hill kids, low paying entry jobs or military for the rest, unemployment and a few anomalies — but I hoped somehow to figure out where things went wrong, where social mobility went to die and where the haves and have-nots alike resigned themselves to nine-to-five in a grocery store and cheap beer on weekends. Easier said than done, of course, and I doubted my editor would let pass the line "Jenkins screwed up, again."

* * *

Let me describe Rome a little bit. Rome looked like a roller coaster that went over two hills, derailed, and crashed. The first climb is a suburbia upon a hill —

Chicory Hill to be precise. The Hill has golf ranges, country clubs and Saint Dominic Savio's Prep School, for those who want the most expensive and least supervised education. And by suburbia I don't mean those tight yuppie upper-middle-class suburbs that everybody complains about on TV and movies. Those neighborhoods can't be so bad either, since so many residents go on to make flicks complaining about where they grew up. Anyway, Chicory Hill was swollen suburbia, the kind where the houses made bigger shadows than the moon and everyone had a football field separating his yard from the next. Claus used to hike up around there and enjoy the scenery, occasionally getting kicked off private property. He'd run away from the cops screaming that the land belonged to the people. I always found it depressing when he did this. The only beautiful things in Rome belonged to the Hillers, and the police were there to remind us of this fact in the name of justice.

Rome's pathetic downtown lies in the shadow of Chicory Hill. This sick puppy of a business district used to be bigger when Rome manufactured some random but essential widget for locks about a hundred years ago. The bigwigs started laying off people when things got rough, and finally about twenty years ago they closed a big factory that gave everybody in town jobs. All the other buildings were knocked down in a game of dominoes lasting decades. Apparently the powers that be saved money by bulldozing everything instead of paying for maintenance.

Downtown we've got Rome High, the Police Department and *The Rome Record* office. Claus lives on the edge of downtown, closer to Chicory Hill.

The next hill on the town's rollercoaster has the projects, named Wisteria Meadows or some pretentious crap like that. The outsides of the houses get repaired

pretty quickly, but the insides are falling apart, and the tap water has bugs in it.

And finally, you get to me at the bottom of the next hill, the roller coaster wreck itself. While it's true that some of us are better off than those in the projects, nobody cares what we look like out here. Houses are strewn across the wooded landscape in various states of disrepair. We can't see downtown or Chicory Hill from here, nor they us. All we can see is the town line that dissolves into to Nowhere, USA.

When I left Collins and Jenkins at Rome High, I had to head back to the office and type some things up before going home sweet home.

* * *

I pulled into the big empty *Rome Record* parking lot. It was still raining.

The Rome Record building was huge and archaic, in the yellow brick style of an earlier version of Rome's downtown. On postcards of Rome from fifty years ago, the office fit in with the neighboring businesses. Now, surrounded by a big empty parking lot, with neighboring structures vacant or renovated, the building stuck out like a whale: no one had any idea what to do with the dying paper and a few people felt obliged to check now and then and see if it was still running.

The receptionist and I exchanged our obligatory hellos, the farthest our relationship had progressed in my year-long employment. I headed past circulation and advertising, up the staircase to the newsroom. I heard Kevin, the editor, mumbling one of his rants in his office.

"People say they want to keep the papers around," he growled. "I ask, 'Are you subscribed?' and they say, 'No, I read it online.'"

I dropped my pad and the report on my desk, which occupied a dusty corner of the office. Sighing, I downed two ibuprofens and started my coffee maker. Something fluttered by quickly.

Our publisher came in from time to time and demanded that the windows be left open for whatever reason. As a result, birds sometimes would fly into the room and get trapped. This one was brown with black streaks and white circles around her beady eyes. When she saw me, she leapt and soared over Lena the intern's desk, which faced the side of mine. I often had the misfortune of turning and seeing the intern's eyes, as wide and dark as desire, boring a hole in me. I had tried putting my coffee maker in between Lena and me, but it wasn't big enough. Her flat, brown hair framed her face. Her voice was soft like a lullaby, so gentle and high that it irritated me. Her cheeks were so large and her smile wide that she looked a little like a nutcracker. For some reason I always found myself staring at her large arms, thick and full like the trunk of a tree.

The bird circled around the empty newsroom. You wouldn't have known from the outside that *The Rome Record* building stretched so far in every direction. Rows and rows of desks stood at attention like a small army. The bird's wings blew stacks of yellowed newspapers onto the floor. Two mini Christmas trees populated the room; you never had to clean up if your complete staff filled only a fourth of the office space. Clips of funny headlines like *Tiger Woods plays with his own balls*, *Nike says*, and *Mississippi's literacy program shows improvement*, maps, and photos of Rome peppered the walls. With the rest of the staff present, the room still would have

felt lonely. The bird crashed into a window and then landed on one of the Christmas trees near Kevin's office.

"You want to mumble about freedom of the press? This is the way to restrict it," he said.

I peered in his office, which had large windows for walls, and I saw Lena nodding along, rearranging her brown hair into a pony tail with her monster arms. I had just assumed my editor was chewing out someone on the phone again; I hadn't known Lena was suffering through the rant. Kevin scratched his graying beard and pointed at the poster on the wall that said, "NO LAW SHALL EVER BE PASSED TO CURTAIL OR RESTRAIN THE LIBERTY OF SPEECH OR OF THE PRESS — The Connecticut Constitution." He wore an unbuttoned polo shirt covered in cat hair. He rarely dressed any better. I had a feeling that he didn't shave because it took too much effort. His eyebrows, the only dark hair on his head, were furry and permanently arched. This and his inability to smile gave you the impression that he had given up on life.

Kevin grumbled a few more incomprehensible words. "We used to have ten reporters snooping around City Hall all the time! Mumble! Who's going to keep the politicians accountable when they mumble mumble all over Rome? Who's going to let them know what's going on? Mumble mumble, mumble! We can't even get straight answers out of the police anymore, for Christ's sake."

Lena turned when she heard the bird's wings. Her dark eyes made contact with mine, like black holes threatening to suck me in and crush me. Her arms, thick as fire hydrants, gripped the back of the chair.

The bird soared down a hallway. Pictures hung on the wall of a barbecue featuring *The Rome Record* staff. Everyone was smiling, which I hadn't seen in a while. I recognized a few faces of co-workers; someone had written GONE over all the laid-off or fired employees. I didn't know how long ago the pictures had been taken, but a mere handful of faces remained unmarred. Further down the hallway there were dark rooms, storage for photos, the IT guy's office, and a break room with a moldy fridge. No one went down there anymore.

I opened window after window to let the bird out, but each time I got close to her, she would flee. Finally, half-way down the hallway she picked one window to slam into. I approached cautiously. The bird folded her delicate wings and crashed headfirst into the window over and over. The tiny creature paused for a moment, beak gaping wide, breath fogging the glass a little. I slowly opened the window, and she flew out. I kept thinking about the bird as I typed up the rest of my day's work.

* * *

The rain poured down like piss as I ran out of my car and into my house, a nondescript brown building that made my dad and me feel claustrophobic.

"Tony!" Dad called my name loudly just as soon as I'd shut the door behind me.

"What?" My earlier grumpiness had reached a low simmer, but just the sound of my dad's voice threatened to make it boil over.

"Why are you back so late?" he yelled from the living room couch.

“I told you, I never know how late I’ll get back.” I unbuttoned my collar and threw my umbrella on the floor. “It’s the nature of the job.” I had been at *The Rome Record* a year, and he still hadn’t figured that one out.

“I’m hungry. Make me dinner.”

“Excuse me?” I entered the living room, where magazines and other junk covered all the furniture. I don’t know why I bothered acting offended. It wasn’t as if this kind of behavior was unusual.

Dad ran his hands over his black buzz cut and his big nose. I was glad I hadn’t inherited that beak. “I’m tired from work. Make me dinner.” He lately had taken up wearing athletic clothes all the time. That day he was wearing a white tank, blue shorts with a sports logo, and running shoes. He dressed as if he were ready at any moment to sprint a mile and do a hundred push-ups.

“I’m tired too, you know.” I picked a paper plate and an empty box off a chair and sat down.

“Oh, is that notepad and pen getting too heavy for wittle Tony?” Dad said.

Dad strictly believed that work was tiring only if it was physical labor, which was odd, considering he had once sold insurance, and convenient, since he now worked construction.

“Fine.” I caved as always. “But it’ll be something quick. I’m going to see Claus tonight.” I pushed myself out of the brown, torn-up chair. Dad had reserved the nicer, newer couch for himself.

“Claus? You haven’t talked to him in a while.”

“Yeah, I know.” I lingered in the doorway, looking at Dad. He didn’t like Claus. He probably knew Claus would encourage me to not put up with all of Dad’s antagonism.

“Just don’t start spending all of your time with him again.”

I sauntered down the hallway to make some microwave lasagna. When I brought it to Dad, he was still lounging on the couch.

“Look at Tony,” he said in a high-pitched voice. “He’s got his oven mitts and his little dinner he made all by himself, like a girl.”

I really had no idea where he got this crap. I sat down and ate in silence.

“So, when are you going to get a girlfriend?” he asked.

“Kiss my ass,” is what I should have said.

“You worry me, boy.” He kept at it. “Chicks dig a guy who works with his hands, not one who sits behind a desk all day making up stories.”

I didn’t say anything, didn’t even look at him. Something bad must have happened at work, and that was why he was out for blood that night. I didn’t bother to get close to see if his breath smelled like beer.

“What’s that degree getting you, Tony? Obviously not any poon tang.”

I slammed down my fork and left before I learned any new vocabulary. Where did he get that one?

“What?” he called as I stomped down the hallway and back out to my car. “Is it something I said?”

I stuck my keys into the ignition and reclined in the driver's seat, listening to the car beep over and over. I was angry again. I wanted it to be eight already. I wanted to see Claus.

* * *

All in all, I had to admit that Claus and I had never been really close, or never as close as I had wanted to be. I had always felt this barrier between him and me, a snake that choked us when we tried to speak about personal things. Electricity ran through his skin; we couldn't touch. And whenever any walls were broken down, we never spoke about it. We just continued as if nothing had happened. He had taken about a year to hug me the way I wanted.

I'll never forget that night, six years ago. My dad had spent the evening yelling at me -- the usual. At the age of sixteen I had already failed at life, and he was ashamed of me. He thought I was wasting my time with the wrong people. He wanted me to prepare to get a good career. In short, he felt like taking his problems out on me. At about 3:00 a.m., I left the house and wandered Rome on foot. After being offered drugs a couple of times and kicking a lot of sticks and stones, I found myself by Claus's window. He let me in and closed whatever he was doing on his computer. In his immaculately neat room, I became a mess. Tears gushed out of my eyes, and I heaved confused sobs until he put his arms around me and leaned his chin on my head. I fit perfectly in his tall, thin frame. From time to time, I gazed up at his sandy hair and his thin pointy face, shaped like an arrowhead, but he didn't seem to notice. We must have stayed that way for half an hour.

Claus was the opposite with me. I never saw him cry, not even when he and

Melissa broke up, and they were fairly serious. In fact, I never really got the details about that deal. All I knew was that Melissa had been the reason Claus had left the grad party early and had the accident that changed his life.

Maybe now would be different. We were now both in our twenties, and with age comes maturity, right? Thinking of my dad and starting my car, I felt less optimistic. Still, a second chance was better than none, so I pulled out of my driveway and headed down that familiar route. The ride went so slowly.

Thinking back to the evening of the grad party, I came across one more thing I didn't understand. Claus and I were hanging out at his place before the festivities. We were using Mike's, his brother's, computer. Since Claus had walked in on Mike looking at porn once, and since Mike had a car, we had made an arrangement. Mike gave us rides when we needed them, and we didn't tell his mom.

Mike was in many ways Claus's older brother. He had Claus's sandy blond hair and height, but added broad shoulders and a thick build. His smile was more severe than Claus's perpetual grin. Mike had taken the year off to volunteer at a local non-for-profit health organization, after which he would go to med school. He filled his parents' shoes in the philanthropic work department, and I imagined that his parents' approval really mattered to him. Claus wasn't exempt from this impulse, however. He just dealt with it in different ways.

Mike had tried different ways of covering his tracks, deleting his browser history and temporary internet files, and would sometimes try to call our bluff, saying we had no proof, but he never figured out how we were tracking him.

We played Mike the night of the grad party the same way we always did.

“Start, run, regedit.exe,” I said, clicking away while Claus beamed behind me. It is a little known fact that on some Windows operating systems like XP, the registry tracks files placed on the desktop, even when the files are deleted or moved soon after. “Bingo. Chickswithdicks.mov? Shemaleseduction.mp4?” I roared with laughter. “It sounds like someone’s got a thing for trannies!”

Claus stopped smiling. “Transsexuality isn’t funny.”

I sank in the chair. Guilt and embarrassment flushed my face, as if I had just admitted liking my burgers with a side of newborn.

“Do you think a life of alienation, being the butt of stupid jokes, and even getting targeted for violence just because you don’t fit the arbitrary standards for gender would be amusing?” he continued. It was Claus’s job to keep track of what oppressed minority we were feeling guilty for. “Be honest. Do you fit all of societies’ random standards for your sex? Most? Many? Does anyone?”

Claus had an eye for seeing the overlooked unfairness and inequalities in society. He was usually right, which made his criticism sting the most. Still, curiosity killed the cat or your relationship with your best friend, so I asked after a silence, “Does this mean Mike is gay?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Claus looked down at his lap, saying nothing more.

When Claus would get in one of his moods I’d usually just sit it out or leave. I wanted to go to the party that night so I stayed. We were silent for a few minutes.

“Tony, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Is it about your break up with Melissa?” I had been wondering.

Claus paused. “Sort of.”

The front door of Claus's house shut loudly so we bailed from the room.

Mike had arrived.

"Hey Mike," I said, nodding to him. "Claus and I need a ride to the grad party tonight. Interested?"

"Isn't it a little early in the year for a graduation party?" Mike asked. Mike had furry arms, a stubbly face and hair growing out of his knuckles. If Claus and a yeti had a baby, you'd get Mike. I was glad Claus didn't inherit the same fuzziness; his skin was smooth to the touch.

I looked at Claus, who stared at the floor. "Don't worry," Claus muttered. "We won't tell Mom."

Mike could tell something was up so he gave in quickly. The rest of the night blurred fast, and I never got to find out what was on Claus's mind. That talk, like many other mysteries that evening, still gnawed at me today.

* * *

My heart beat a little faster when I pulled into Claus's driveway five years later. This was it. In all my time at college, where you're supposed to meet those friends you keep for the rest of your life, I had never met anyone like Claus. No one had understood me the same. I felt as if my life was going to get back on track to a place where I was happier.

The driveway was empty except for a Mercedes-Benz. Claus's family was way better off than most, but they usually didn't flaunt their wealth. I also found the luxury car's appearance odd because Claus had told me over the phone that his

parents weren't around for a while. They spent a lot of time abroad, and at the moment they were off working for Doctors Without Borders.

When I knocked on the door, I noticed I was shaking a little. I wanted to blame the shivers on being a little wet from the rain, but the drizzle barely had dampened me.

The door opened, and there he was again. That messy sandy hair, that wolfish grin, tore at my heart and brought back memories. Something about him made me think of a Greek god. His statuesque figure towered in the clouds above me. The pointiness of his nose and chin seemed to emphasize the shortness of us mere mortals. The only imperfection was a large, triangular scar on his right cheek from the accident. The plastic surgeon had done a good job fixing his face, but a small part of the right side was gone. His right eye always looked as if it were wincing, while his left usually looked happy.

For a moment we shuffled left and right, our arms wobbling in uncertainty, a ritual that ended in a disappointing manly handshake. We forgot to speak for several moments but remembered to stare.

“Come in,” he said softly.

I panicked, realizing I had no idea what to say to him after all this time. “Is that car yours?” I spouted, jabbing a thumb back at the door.

“Yeah,” he said. “You like it?”

“Wow,” I said. The pricy ride put me off a little bit, after having had so many conversations with him about the pitfalls of materialism, but I accepted that there

were going to be changes in the Claus I knew and loved. I could get used to him owning nice cars.

We went straight to his room, which was a little messy since his parents weren't around. His parents usually cleaned up after him. He always had been a boy at heart. Claus jumped into his spinning chair, folded his hands behind his head and leaned back. His chest muscles stretched his shirt a little. He had very visible veins that twisted around his forearms like roots. He crossed his legs and adjusted his shorts to cover his knees. Claus wasn't body-builder muscular; he just looked solid, as if you could cling to him during a tornado and you'd be safe.

“So?” he asked, flashing those shimmering blue eyes.

“So,” I said, as if I hadn't encountered this word recently. I glanced at his computer, which lit up the room with LCDs on the tower. Speakers hummed some quiet, bassy music.

“How have you been? All done with school?”

“Yeah, I'm working at *The Rome Record* now.”

“Wow, how's that?”

“You know, it's a job, and I'm into journalism.”

He smiled his wolf-grin. I noticed his teeth seemed yellower than they had once been. “That's right,” he said. “You're my info man.” Claus and I had sort of given ourselves jobs in high school. His job was to get passionate and angry about things, and my job was to research the issues. He had started a lot of clubs in high school, like an HIV/AIDS awareness group and a multicultural club, where he reminded people that countries existed in the southern hemisphere. I lacked his

initiative, his imagination and his awareness of global issues, but if he asked me a question, I'd lose sleep until I had found the answer somehow. Claus would never get discouraged even when his clubs would fail because of poor attendance.

One day I saw him wearing a Che Guevara shirt. I told him that I thought Che was a murderer, not a hero. I showed him a bunch of stuff I had read about Che killing AWOLers, and I never saw Claus wear the shirt again.

“How have you been doing, Claus?”

“Good, good, good,” he said.

I glanced at his bookshelf. Claus had a revolutionary obsession, and books about all kinds of revolutionaries stocked his shelves: Zola's *Germinal*, Silone's *Bread and Wine* and Guevara's *The Motorcycle Diaries*, to name a few. As for that last one, I guess old habits die hard.

“What have you been up to?” I had heard through the grapevine that Claus had had some trouble getting back into school life after leaving the hospital, but I wasn't sure why. He was a decent student and possessed the intelligence to be an excellent one, but he refused to let the Man tell him how to think, as he put it.

“Oh, you know,” he said, “hanging around, chilling.”

I wasn't willing to push the point. When you're almost the only one of your friends to go to college, asking about life plans gets awkward quick. Suddenly, Claus's phone rang.

“What up?” he answered. “Uh huh, uh huh.” He glanced at me, as if I were intruding on his privacy. “I'm kind of in the middle of something. Yeah. Really? Party beads? Can't—” he paused, looked at me again, then lowed his voice. “Can't

he do it? Yeah, him. No? Well, shit – no, don't worry, I'm on it, I'll be there soon. Don't flip out. Seriously. I'm on my way, putting my keys in my car right now. Chill." Claus hung up the phone and put it on his computer desk.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Nobody. A friend," he said.

"Who?"

"You don't know him."

"Oh."

"Listen man, I'm real sorry but I got to go. My friend needs me, okay?"

"Okay," I said, without hiding my disappointment.

"But we're going to hang out real soon and catch up, right?"

"Right."

"Hold on, though, I got to take a leak first."

Why couldn't I at least know the name of the friend who was interrupting our get-together? Why was he so important? Why was Claus being secretive? I decided to take things into my own hands while Claus was on the john. I grabbed the phone and saw that the last call came from a guy named Michaelangelo, just Michaelangelo. What a name.

I put the phone back right before Claus returned.

"Soon, promise?" I asked.

"Promise," he said. We hugged this time, and I felt his soft chest and animal warmth for an instant, but he still seemed far away. I stared at the house after he shut the door behind me.

Being alone in your car provokes a special kind of reflection. I kept mine spotless so that I could think in it without any clutter. I felt a little silly for being so upset about what had happened. Still, I wanted Claus and not a rain check.

* * *

A fly buzzed in circles around *The Rome Record* office. The smell of weed drifted in the windows briefly, then back out. Outside, the walk signals blared in the silence, annoying everyone.

Ah, summertime journalism. The heat dogged all the city council meetings to a close, school finished, and anyone up to anything important decided to sleep on it for a few months. The summer was journalism's finest, and slowest, hour: slice of life pieces, man on the street reports, advances for irrelevant events, and human interest stories for all. At least being at the office was better than being at home with Dad.

I stared at my phone, trying to will it to ring, while Lena asked increasingly personal questions about my life. I answered noncommittally, vaguely – my life wasn't any of her business. I contemplated going out and looking for a story, an act of desperation really. I hated approaching random strangers and asking them if anything interesting was happening. I might as well have asked them if I could see their dicks for a minute.

My mind turned instead to a profile piece I was writing on Lione Locks, the business that had essentially started Rome as a city. Back in the eighteen somethings (I had heard numerous dates and hadn't been able to confirm anything) the Lione factory had drawn thousands of employees. That's why Rome, Connecticut was

known for its locksmithing; half of the city's people had been locksmiths or had worked on a line making lock springs for the company.

Doing any kind of research on Rome was hard, since searching the name brought up enough red herrings to make a seasoned researcher cry. So we reporters relied on the Rome Historical Society, a network of elderly men and women bursting at the seams with photographs of Rome's once successful downtown and anecdotes that usually touched at least obliquely on your inquiry.

The nice thing about talking to retirees for a story was they were so often available. So, this story should have gone quickly, except that O'Mara, the guy the historical society said I just had to talk to, had decided to head to West Palm Beach for some vacation. I never caught O'Mara's first name. Everyone who directed me to him mumbled it. Chet, Chester, Lester, Heston? Even if any of these were right, his parents could have been jerks and spelt Chester like Chaystaerye or something. So much of journalism was checking names.

Anyway, the Lione Locks factory in Rome closed after a series of layoffs in the eighties. I was hoping to find where the business had moved next. My guess was the new location had cheaper maintenance costs. The new factory was probably more automated now than in the 1800s, so the owners wouldn't have to pay all those pesky people who wanted to eat. One thing Claus would say – when he'd get in one of his wackier moods and don a beret – was that he was against our so-called technological progress. Better technology, he'd argue, had helped the rich stay privileged and the poor stay poor. As life had become easier for the wealthy, their place in society had become more secure. He'd then go on to list all the things the upper classes benefited

from thanks to technology: better learning materials, more access to high quality medical care, nicer vehicles, faster communication, more enjoyable leisure and easier housework. I'd call him on the housework bit, saying that maybe dish and clothes washers made it easier for those with more money, but he insisted that wealthy people had robots to vacuum their floors. Claus could get pretty crazy sometimes. He also pointed out that internationally the technology-wealth gap was wider, however, and he had me there.

Who was this Michaelangelo guy? Why was he more important than me? How close were they? Closer than Claus and I had once been?

Intern Lena called my name and showed me how many paperclips she had stuck together. I praised her good work and went back to brooding and sipping coffee. She didn't need to write any stories. She wasn't getting paid. The employee budget was shrinking as is, so paid internships were more or less unheard of. Lena was a twenty-year-old college drop-out. For the time being she received grant money to work at *The Rome Record* because she knew somebody who knew somebody. She also had a job on the side at McDonald's.

"Somebody robbed the bank!" the editor shouted, saving us all from the doldrums.

Everyone cheered. I almost spilled my coffee. Kevin called the photographer and a reporter. He told them to follow the cop chase. If these chosen two were lucky, they could photograph the catch. Kevin assigned me the privilege of taking Lena and going to Meridien Bank on Elm Street.

I sulked. I wanted to follow the chase. I didn't care if Ross happened to be near it. Kevin probably was sending Lena with me just to get her out of the office and maybe to stop her compulsive decorating.

The car ride went mercifully fast. I had the radio set to NPR, but Lena tuned in with her big meaty arms to some song about sex and boobs. She gyrated in her seat. I really didn't like it when people changed the radio, but I didn't say anything. She also wanted me to take a different route to the bank past McDonald's, but I wanted to follow my own directions.

On the way there I saw a red newspaper dispenser with *The Rome Record* written in fancy script. I thought I saw its handle hanging open and a dent in the side, but I was in a hurry and couldn't tell. I had heard the guys in marketing grumbling about how many papers get stolen.

I parked down the street from the bank. When Lena got out, I quickly changed the radio back. It was raining lightly but was also hot and muggy, the worst of both worlds.

You'd think that a recently robbed bank would look different from any other, but it doesn't. Besides a few cruisers and cops, robbery looked like business as usual.

I tried to decide which cliché was more suitable: "Stay behind me and try not to mess anything up," or "Be quiet, I'll do the talking." Instead I silently beckoned Lena to follow and gave her a taste of interviewing the police.

Two cops tried to bounce my questions onto each other until a blond-haired, blue-eyed and yellow-mustached Lieutenant Clemens stepped out of an eighties cop movie to take care of me. He looked bitter, as if he were sucking on a lemon. He

must have been in the gritty part of the film, where his partner had been shot and his wife wanted a divorce.

“How many people were in the bank at the time of the robbery?” I asked.

“We’re still investigating that,” he said.

“How much money did they steal?”

“More information will be forthcoming.”

“Was it a hold-up type situation?”

He stroked his mustache. “It appears so.”

“What did they drive away in?”

He sighed at length, glanced left and right, and then said, “It’s too early to tell.”

“Are the people who were at the robbery still inside?”

“Yes.” He fiddled with his hat. “We are in the process of gathering information.”

Finally, an answer.

“Was anybody hurt?”

“We will, uh, issue a press release in the following hours.”

But only one.

After that fruitful experience, I visited the local store fronts and asked if anybody had seen anything. No one had noticed the robbery. Those who knew had heard about it on the radio. Otherwise, the crime might have never happened.

Heading back to my car with a handful of unimportant quotes on my pad, I told Lena, “And that’s how you cover a bank robbery.”

I hoped with all my being that Ross would come up with something good, so we could combine our notes into a real article. Secretly, this was my first bank robbery, too, though there had been a few since I had begun working for *The Rome Record*.

“Why don’t you go over and check out the bank?” Lena asked.

“And how do you propose I do that?” I asked.

She pointed to the fence running along the back of the bank’s parking lot. Theoretically one could climb over unseen by the cops, but the move was risky.

Even though I shook my head vigorously, Lena ran over to the fence. She waited until a guy with forensics equipment returned to the front, and then she hoisted herself up with her tan, muscular arms.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“Don’t you want a good story?” she asked, dropping over on the other side. I paced nervously and then, not to be outdone, mounted the fence and dropped down quietly.

Lena scanned the ground for clues while I copied car makes and license plate numbers, casting jittery glances at the building.

“Hey, look at this!” Lena exclaimed at a stage whisper. On the pavement were donut-shaped skid marks with zigzag-shaped treads. They trailed out the parking lot exit. A little way off, near the rear entrance was a bunched-up blank deposit slip and a neon-green toothpick snapped in half.

I continued my methodical recording of the vehicles, hoping to find someone to interview with the information. One car made me stop dead in my tracks: a familiar Mercedes-Benz.

* * *

My high school grad party had taken place at Aiden Lefebvre's house. He lived up on Chicory Hill. His double-driveway house had more glass and windows than walls – some home designer had swindled Mr. Lefebvre, telling him transparency would be the style in a few years – which made the home look like an aquarium. The rain that night doubled the effect.

The entrance led to the main hallway, a runway of photo-ops. Picture after picture – Mr. Lefebvre getting married, Mr. Lefebvre giving Aiden a Porsche for his sixteenth birthday, Mr. Lefebvre cheering Aiden on at a baseball game, Mr. Lefebvre showing off his bleach-blond orange-tanned daughter crowned at a beauty pageant – showed Mr. Lefebvre living life exactly as it ought to be lived. You could also see Aiden's dad living life to the fullest driving around a shiny SUV during the gas crises. His vehicle had sported a "support the troops" ribbon-shaped sticker at the outset of the war, which mysteriously disappeared when public opinion divided.

The large living room gave the impression that everything – the potted probably fake plants; the picture frames; mirrors; the wide screen plasma TV slanted just right, so that you could see it from almost every angle – had a place, and you weren't allowed to move anything.

One time, when I slept over at Aiden's house in elementary school before he started going to Saint Dominic Savio's, I suggested we move his bed and dresser to

build a fort for protection against the enemy. I don't remember who the imaginary enemy was. Our foes were the government's latest excuse for acting the way it did, the types whom kids usually imagined themselves fighting. At that point they were no longer the communists or "Indians." Maybe it was the Arabs, or Muslims, since – let's face it – many Americans use those words interchangeably anyways. Getting back on track, Aiden wouldn't let me move the bed. Everything was held in place by imaginary lines, so you could peek in and see perfection at any given moment.

Aiden didn't fear his father much. To the contrary, he looked up to his dad, dutifully going through the steps of being a good son: performing well in varsity sports and school, dating nice and not trashy girls, and cultivating everyman political opinions – or rather none at all – that no one could blame him for having. Still, there was something wispy and ghostlike about Aiden's hunched tall and thin frame, something empty in his handsomely high cheek bones, and the frosted hair poking out of his drooping baseball cap, which made him seem as if he were just a place holder for something else.

That whole sleepover situation in elementary school had been weird. First, I was the only one there that night, which was unusual because Lefebvre sleepovers usually consisted of ten to fifteen kids in the basement where instead of cobwebs there were all sorts of entertainment a kid Aiden or his sister's current age group could ever want. Second, I usually wasn't invited, and that wasn't going to change. As we grew older Aiden noticed more and more the differences in the way we dressed, what side of town we came from, what kind of school we went to, and later in high school he began to realize how many cars I had (approximately zero), my

ability to procure alcohol (likewise) and my station in life. In short, I had become a liability, and he cut me off.

Things hadn't really changed by the time we were seniors. Still, politeness obliged Aiden to invite me to the grad party. Handing out an invitation to everyone in our mutual classes (honors and APs) but me would have been awkward. Aiden even invited Claus without much hesitation; they had been close friends when they both used to go to Saint Dominic Savio's together. Plus Claus was dating Melissa, and Melissa formed a part of the Chicory Hill posse. Claus and Melissa made their relationship work a long time despite her being "one of them," as he'd say.

Claus and I got to the party unfashionably on time, his brother being easier to convince than expected. There was no need for anyone to rent out a hotel or other venue, since it would have paled in comparison to Aiden's house. Aiden opened the door in a tuxedo and greeted us coolly but professionally, his frosted hair now organized carefully, cheekbones adding dignity. He had a couple rings on his fingers: a large class ring, a silver band with what looked like a sine wave on it, and a ring sporting some kind of shiny gem. He passed his bejeweled hand in front of his face and yawned, his small mouth stretching into a tall oval. His brown eyes looked unnatural on his very pale skin. After passing through the Mr. Lefebvre hall of fame we reached the living room, where he had installed a fountain with fish in it and an open non-alcoholic bar with an espresso machine. Confetti already lined tables, popular music ran over an invisible but omnipresent speaker system and gift bags called to guests. Later Mr. Lefebvre would mail us DVDs with compiled pictures of the event.

“Remind me why we pay for prom,” Claus said.

He and I hung out at our assigned table and chatted awkwardly, eyeing people who we weren't sure we wanted to party with. Claus occasionally left my side to greet party-goers, mostly friends he had made through Melissa. This took a bit of social grace and maneuvering because she and Claus had broken up just days before. Claus had debated coming at all but we had RSVP'd, and he had decided with gusto that he would attend, saying he wasn't ashamed of what had happened.

At the party, Mr. Lefebvre came out from time to time to remind us that he would take a group photo at 9:30 sharp, after which he would make good on his promise to leave us alone for the rest of the night. This always caused a stir. Common knowledge dictated that booze would come out at ten. Every time Mr. Lefebvre appeared, this kid Drake flocked around him like a paparazzi, asking if he could help. Drake was very ordinary, with a distinctly forgettable look. He had brown hair and a plain face; in fact, I can't really conjure up his appearance in detail. All I remember was that he had dressed almost exactly the same as Mr. L. Anyway, Claus knew Drake from middle school. The two, along with Aiden and Chris Williams, used to hang out until they all eventually came to Rome High. They were known as *los cuatros*, which is stupid high school student Spanish for the Gang of Four, and they all left Saint Dom's for various reasons.

To pass the time I started suggesting things for us to do. Claus was not surprised when I recommended that we investigate the espresso machine. He often gave me crap about my caffeine addiction. Somehow we ended up having a stupid fight.

“Hey, let’s go get some cookies. Are those éclairs over there?” I asked, standing up and pointing.

“Hold on, my friend Chris just showed up, and I want to say hi,” Claus replied, looking at the hallway.

“Fine,” I said.

He glanced at me, and then made for Chris.

“I thought you wanted to go to the party with me,” I mumbled, emphasizing the end of the sentence just as he was leaving earshot.

“What?” Claus asked, looking alarmed.

“I mean, nothing. I can go get cookies myself. It’s fine.”

“If you would hold on just a second Tony, I really only want to ask Chris if he saw the last episode of *Weeds*. Then I’ll be right back.”

“No, no, it’s fine Claus, good, have fun. I’ll go alone. I don’t need anybody.”

He sighed. “Are you guilt-tripping me?”

“Excuse me?”

“Just stop. Don’t do that thing.”

“What thing?”

“That thing where you try to control me when you’re not getting something you want. What’s up, Tony?”

“Nothing’s up,” I said, folding my arms and looking down at the table. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, I can’t work with that. Do you want me to go get cookies with you? Last chance.”

“Have fun,” I said, biting my lip.

Claus walked over to Chris, who had been talking to Aiden. Aiden turned briskly and left as soon as Claus showed up. Chris and Claus shuffled uncomfortably for a moment, then high-fived and began talking.

I spotted Drake getting Mr. Lefebvre some punch. Drake spent so much time with Aiden’s dad, he seemed to be ignoring everybody else. Mr. L looked as if he were pushing Drake away, encouraging him to talk with other people his age, but this only made Drake even more attentive. Claus had told me that Drake considered Mr. Lefebvre more of a father than Aiden did. Drake apparently had a pretty rough home life, and Mr. Lefebvre had helped get him an athletic scholarship at Saint Dominic Savio’s. According to Claus, Chris and Aiden had picked on Drake when the four of them had been at Saint Dominic Savio’s, and Drake had never fit in.

I didn’t admit it then, but I did feel a little bitter about Claus’s excursions during the party. I went fully expecting to mock the “bougs” as we liked to call them (Claus loved blaming the bourgeois – who didn’t?), but instead I spent a lot of time by myself feeling abandoned. I didn’t know what the hell was up with this “controlling him” business, though. I spaced out, fiddling with my cell phone.

Claus woke me up from my dream-state and handed me an entire, oversized plate of cookies for ten as reparations. I smiled at him and ate a few.

“We cool?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I didn’t want the cookies that much but ate several more to please him.

That's when things started moving fast. All the noisy conversation suddenly hushed, and as I looked up I noticed Melissa entering. Apparently the break-up drama would take the center stage tonight. Claus's wolf-grin twisted. Was he happy or sad? He had no idea what was coming.

* * *

Fortune smiled down on me the day of that bank robbery, but not on the bank, obviously. I had a hell of a lead on the story and an excuse to see Claus again. I spent all day fidgeting and hoping the witnesses would get out of the bank soon. I was so excited, I forgot to call ahead to see if Claus was even home. I realized this when I knocked on his door, but I thought I was doing too well for Fate to stop me now.

The door opened and there stood my favorite sandy-haired Greek god.

"Tony?" Claus said with that toothy grin. His gums and lips were a splotchy red.

"Claus!" I hugged him roughly, brushing my body onto his and nearly knocking him over. "You have to tell me about your day!"

"My day?" He backed out of the embrace brusquely.

"The bank robbery. That's so crazy, man. What was it like? I want to see one on the inside someday!"

"Are you serious, Tone?" Now he looked hurt. "How did you even know I was there?"

"I'm your information guy," I said, trying to imitate his wolfish grin. It probably looked dumb on me.

Instead of responding, he groaned and walked towards his room. I followed.

“It’s funny,” I said. “We were all sitting around, nothing to report about today, all I got is this stupid zoning committee tonight, and then my editor was like, ‘Hey, somebody robbed the bank,’ and we were all like, ‘yay’ and had something to do cause I was going to fall asleep at the desk and—”

I ramble when I’m nervous. I stopped myself this time.

“They beat him,” Claus said slowly.

“What?”

“A security guard tried to stop the robbery and got the shit beat out of him. After the guard fell down, the guy kicked him in the face so much that it looked like he cried blood and vomited it too.” Claus focused on an area of the floor to the right of me. “There’s your story.”

“Did you see who they were?” I asked. Claus didn’t respond for a long time. “Claus.”

“What did you expect?” He threw his arms in the air and paced violently. “Are you having fun now? Gee, I hope work doesn’t get too boring. Maybe somebody will need to die next time.”

A mixture of anger and guilt clouded my thoughts. “What do you mean?”

“You listen here! I was scared out of my mind, and you barge in here like it’s something you saw on *Law and Order*. This isn’t TV!” He jabbed his finger at me.

“Have you ever had a gun pointed at your head? Have you?”

“I thought we were friends, Claus.”

“Don’t start that. This has nothing to do with us. I had the most terrifying day of my life, and you didn’t even stop to consider that it might have been frightening.” He fumbled in his pocket for a second, looking pensive but still furious. “It was just like another show you saw on a TV, another article you read on the news about something bad happening.” He grabbed a glasses case and made for the door. “Unreal.”

“I didn’t know you wore glasses,” I heard myself say on an impulse.

“Glasses? What?” He looked down at his hand and seemed suddenly to remember he held the case. “Oh.” Then he breezed by towards his front door and muttered to himself, “Information guy.”

“I’m sorry!” I called. But it was too late.

* * *

I’ll spare you the details of the zoning committee meeting. I couldn’t pay attention or write notes. All I could think was that I had blown it with Claus, again. I spent most of the meeting imagining my apology to Claus. What can you get someone who’s non-materialistic as a make-up gift?

I also had blown my chances for having a great story the day it broke. Kevin told me later that night that Ross had a solid scoop on the robbery, though the cops hadn’t caught the suspects. A teller had put a device in with the money that would cover it with ink, though, so the criminals may not have gotten away with much. I spent the rest of the night covering the committee meeting, so I couldn’t find another witness. Besides, the insider story could wait a day, and I had a feeling that Ross had earned the privilege of writing it.

Though I really didn't want to, I let Claus stew in it for the night. I needed to know we were okay, but Claus had enough of a temper for two ancient Greek heroes. When I got home, Dad knew something was wrong and didn't give me a hard time. He started to complain that not all the cheese was the right consistency on the microwave pizza I made for him, but he soon backed off.

Dad and I had a sort of arrangement where emotions belonged in our rooms. I think our agreement had started when Mom left. I hadn't been really shocked by the divorce. Though they may have put a silver lining on it, I wasn't stupid. My dad hadn't wanted to get married when he was eighteen, nor my mom at sixteen, but my maternal grandfather sure as hell wouldn't have his first grandson, that's me, born out of wedlock. My parents weren't made to be together. I always had imagined my conception as an alcohol-induced mistake after cheerleading practice under the bleachers. Thanks to abstinence-only "education," they didn't use their contraception right and I was made. I guess imagining your own conception is kind of weird. It's not like I've spent that much time thinking about it. Whatever. It also must have been weird for my Mom – blonde, attractive, popular – to get pregnant with my dad's kid, since yearbooks my Mom showed me indicated he was your button-up shirt, thick-rimmed glasses chess club type. My dad didn't talk about them getting together. I only knew that they had moved up here from North Carolina to get away from her dad, that my dad got a job selling insurance, and that at first it seemed as if something good would come out of something bad – me being the bad part in this equation.

So, while I was starting high school, my parents parted ways. Living in different places seemed like a natural extension of their relationship. My mom moved back down South, I went to college out West, and my dad stayed in the East.

One time, soon after he and Mom had separated, I heard my dad crying in his room. I knocked on his door, and he stopped making any sound. I called his name, and he didn't respond. Later, when he'd finally left his room, I asked him if he was okay and told him I thought I had heard him crying.

“Crying's for pussies, and no one likes a pussy,” he said. “No one.”

Ever since then, our problems and our tears had been confined to our walls.

* * *

After my bad post-robbery encounter with Claus, things that looked normal began to scare me. First, there was the bank, which looked fine on the outside and incubated violence in the inside. Then, two days later, when I returned to Claus's place, the house waited in the afternoon sun, entirely still, like a dead body.

As I reached over my car seat for the cookies I had bought to appease Claus, I noticed his Mercedes was gone. I hadn't called ahead again, because I wasn't sure I could hold a phone conversation with him. At this point any reasonable person would have turned back, but here I was on my day off, visiting my friend who wasn't home. I also heard a low white-noise sort of sound, like hissing or one long whisper. When I saw his back door open like a mouth vomiting his things onto his back yard, I ran inside.

“Claus?” My shoes crushed broken glass near the rear exterior door. The hissing grew louder as I penetrated deeper into the dead house. A painting on the wall hung crookedly.

I reached the end of a hallway and followed the hissing to the left. There was a fist-sized hole in the wall. I slowly pushed Claus’s bedroom door open.

His dresser was overturned and shelves falling out. A lamp lay on the floor, the bulb cracked. Clothes covered the ground. Speakers rested on their sides, whispering quietly. A few magazines littered the carpet, pages bent. The bookshelf was on the bed, and Che on the front *The Motorcycle Diaries* looked scared. Someone had even torn down the posters on the walls. What was this person looking for?

The one neat article in the messy room caught my eyes: a folded note on the desk. I opened it:

YOU CAN’T JUST UP AND LEAVE LIKE THAT. YOU KNOW HOW IT WORKS. WE’LL FIND YOU. IT’S TOO BAD IT HAD TO END THIS WAY. M SENDS HIS REGARDS.

I pushed the bookshelf aside and sat in Claus’s bed for some time, thinking. I had a lot to digest. Someone, M’s crony, had torn up this place. This wasn’t just vandalism. The damage was too targeted. Claus had something they wanted. M’s thug hadn’t found what he was looking for, so he had written a note, punched a hole in the wall, and left. But I couldn’t wrap my head around the part of the note that said they’d find Claus. Did that mean Claus was gone?

That last thought made breathing difficult. I was willing to deal with my inability to maintain a healthy adult relationship with Claus, but what did his

disappearance signify about us? I tried to calm myself. There was no car in the driveway. So, Claus must have escaped. He could be as far away and safe as he wanted to be. But would he ever come back?

There was only one thread to follow: I had to find what M and his crony were looking for.

I didn't know where to start. I looked under Claus's bed and found nothing. I shifted around piles of clothing, moved furniture that already had been moved, even peered on top of the ceiling fan. Where hadn't they looked? Or was I assuming far too much?

I righted a chair and booted his computer. I pushed a copy of *The Rome Record*, headlining one of Mr. Lefebvre's accomplishments out of the way of the mouse. Claus had kept his digital tracks clean, just as I had taught him. I had difficulty tracing his history, but he had made one beginner's mistake. When I clicked on his instant messenger program, it logged in automatically.

How many times had I told him never to save his user name and password on a computer? I was a little annoyed with him for his indiscretion, but stayed on task.

I looked at the long list of screen names; apparently the instant messaging fad hadn't died for him in high school. Maybe he had used his phone to access the online service, which somehow made IMing less juvenile.

Before I could log off and think what to do next, I received a message.

MELMEL2387: HEY HEY :) :)

I stared at the screen for a moment.

MELMEL2387: HOW R U DOIN HON??

The only way I knew to investigate was to collect names and ask questions.

ELANTIER4: WHOSE SCREEN NAME IS THIS AGAIN?

I couldn't remember how Claus typed, so I figured the less I said, the better.

MELMEL2387: R U SERIOUS? HAHA U BAKED OR WUT

I instantly regretted trying to impersonate Claus. Too much time had passed since the days we had stayed up all night IMing each other. Even if this person gave me a first name, I'd probably have no idea who the hell she was.

MELMEL2387: ITS MELISSA! REMEMBER ME FROM LIKE ALL UR CLASSES IN HIGH SCHOOL? DURRR

Oh, *her*. Part of me wanted to stay signed in, to find answers to all my questions. Why had she and Claus broken up? What was that talk Claus had wanted to have about? What had been going on with Claus' life since then? Melissa didn't seem to realize anything unusual had happened in Claus's life. Or, Claus could have told her he was leaving, which would explain why she didn't seem concerned. I decided to play it safe and keep this resource available for when I knew what the hell I was doing.

ELANTIER4: HEY SRY G2G BBL CYA PEACE

I signed off before she could respond. I also started to feel nervous about being in Claus's house by myself. What if this M guy or his people came back?

As I pushed out the chair and stood up, I noticed a bright yellow toothpick broken in half on the ground in front of the desk. I reached down and twirled half of it in my fingers. I looked under the desk for the second time, to be thorough. There were clothes and papers on the floor and a vent on the wall. Something had scratched

white paint around the screws on the vent, which gave me an idea. I ran to the kitchen and grabbed a butter knife, which I used to unscrew the grating. In the hole I found a small, sturdy chest. On the box's lock was etched a golden lion, the logo of Lione Locks. I tried to force the lock and hit the chest against things, but I only succeeded in chipping the wood on the desk. Some clothes fell off the bed and startled me, so I grabbed the chest and left the house.

* * *

I sat in my parked car on the street across from Claus's place, hands over my face, thinking about what to do next. Where the hell had Claus gone? What was he not telling me?

A motor hummed, and gravel churned. A blue Buick pulled into Claus' driveway. I slid down in my seat and eyed the car. A guy about five-feet-ten with a medium build and short brown hair got out of the car. His hair spiked in every direction, as if he had stuck his finger in a socket. He wore a black t-shirt, baggy jeans and brown sneakers. Gold hoop earrings adorned both of his ear lobes. I couldn't see his face; he seemed to hide it intentionally. He disappeared behind the house, probably entering the back door. He emerged again and paced outside for a minute, as if waiting for someone. He glanced over in my direction, and I ducked down farther, almost to the floor of my car. A second later I peeked out. He leaned against his car for a moment longer, and then got in. The guy must have had seen the mess, and I had a feeling he hadn't been expecting to find Claus at home.

As the guy started the ignition and pulled out of the driveway, he picked up his cell phone. The conversation ended shortly. I trailed him as he left the paved outer reaches of downtown and started up Chicory Hill.

I kept my distance from the Buick as he picked up the pace. For a while, the only sounds were the tires rolling on the street and crickets chirping. The pursuit was going well until some ass in a red pickup cut me off and butted in between us. As the roads got emptier, the interpretations of the speed limit got looser, so pretty soon the pickup truck was gunning it. I fumbled with my steering wheel and considered using my horn. How can you politely ask someone to allow you to continue tailing a suspect?

“Balls,” I said, pounding my steering wheel. “Get out of my way!” I craned my neck in every direction but couldn’t see my prey.

I pushed my gas pedal down slowly and firmly: 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65, 70. A cop emerged in the distance, and I cursed loudly before slamming on the breaks. The patrol car turned on its siren and turned towards us. The officer ignored me and chased down the pickup truck while I caught my breath. I slowly steered around the stopped cars and glared at the truck as I passed.

Once I was far enough from the cop, I put the pedal back to the metal and caught sight of my Buick again. It turned off the main road and onto smaller ones. The sun had just set, so each turn seemed to take me deeper and darker into the bowels of Chicory Hill. I spotted a kid, maybe thirteen years old, waiting on the side of the street up ahead. The Buick halted suddenly next to him. I jerked into

somebody's driveway. I opened the door very slowly, not making a sound and then snuck behind bushes to get a closer look.

The driver handed something in a baggie to the kid, who fumbled in his pockets for some crumpled bills. The Buick kicked back into gear and sped off. I followed the kid from shadow to shadow. He walked past maybe ten houses until he found his own and started looking in his pocket for keys. I trembled from the adrenaline, but I knew that this was maybe my only chance of finding out what had happened to Claus.

"Hey kid," I said, emerging from the darkness.

"What do you want?" He turned around, looking completely unsurprised.

"I'm Sergeant," I paused, "Billy." I'm terrible at making up names. "I want to make you a deal."

He looked annoyed. "What deal?"

"You're young, kid, and I don't want to nail you. So tell me who just dealt to you and I'll let you off."

"Where's your badge?" he asked. He looked like a little weasel on two legs. He had an almost-moustache and goatee; maybe in a few years he wouldn't look so stupid.

"Uh, I don't have one. I'm undercover. But drug possession's a serious crime, son. It could stay on your record and haunt you for the rest of your life."

"Bullshit. It's just some weed. I know my record gets wiped when I turn eighteen."

Is that true? Crap. “You’re not going to have a lot of fun in juvie, boy. Don’t drop the soap.”

“I’m not scared. I’m big for my age.”

I sighed. “Alright, listen, just tell me who it was. I’ll buy you a CD or something.”

“I download everything I need,” he said, folding his arms.

“How about a DVD?”

“I’m only interested in Blu-ray.”

I think I regressed a little under the stress, stopped acting my age. “You little punk,” I said. “I’ll kick you in the nuts.”

“I’ll call my mom.”

I sighed loudly.

“Assaulting a minor is a serious crime, you know,” he told me, deepening his voice. “It could stay on your record and haunt you for the rest of your life.”

“You haven’t heard the last of me,” I warned. I made a mental note of his address, 93 Rudolph Road, and stomped back to my car. A man stood waiting by my ride.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“I live here. What are you doing in my driveway? It’s not a free parking space.”

I stared at him wordlessly.

“You better leave before I call the cops,” he warned.

“Oh, ah, sorry. I had to use the bathroom,” I said. I climbed into my car and drove away. When I got home, I found 93 Rudolph Road under the name “Jeff Sanders” online. I’m always nervous about making phone calls. Even though the situation only involved a little kid, this one scared the shit out of me. So, I imagined Claus somewhere in danger, took a deep breath and dialed the number.

“Hello?” responded a pleasant female voice.

“Hello, this is Mr. Billy from the school. Is this Mrs. Sanders?”

“Yes.”

“Nice to finally talk to you. Is, uh, your son there? Can I speak to him?”

“Sure, one moment.”

That was some blind luck that there was only one boy Sanders running around.

“Yo?” a familiar voice answered.

“Hey, brat. Remember me?”

“Mom—” he started to say, but I cut him off.

“Listen good. Here’s a new deal. You tell me who dealt to you right now, or your mom hears from Mr. Billy that you got caught toking in the bathroom.”

He was quiet for a short moment. “I don’t know, okay? I don’t know his freaking name!” I had tapped into every child’s fundamental fear of his mother. How’s that for psychoanalysis, Freud?

“You don’t know who dealt to you?” I hadn’t planned for this scenario.

“Usually it’s a guy named CC, okay?”

“Didn’t the dealer call you before he showed up? Don’t you have his number on your phone?” Guesswork.

“If I give you that, will you leave me alone?”

“Sure, I’ll leave you alone.”

So I got one name and another person’s number. That wasn’t a whole lot to go on, but it was something. You had to be a terrible person to deal to a kid. The name ‘CC’ went on my shit list.

* * *

The number I got from the kid was an unlisted cell phone.

I had no idea what to do next. I was just a local reporter, not a detective. You know what I said about a name and a number being something? I take that crap back.

My editor Kevin had a lot of experience from “way back when,” so I thought I’d get some advice from him when I returned to work. I felt uncomfortable telling him the whole story, though, so I had to talk around it.

“Hey Kevin,” I said.

“Mumble,” he said. He rubbed his glasses and put them on his face. His graying hair and beard made him look like a dirty snowball.

“How are you?”

“Mumble mumble in the mumble.”

“Oh. I have a question.”

“Mumble?” He managed to look pensive.

“I was thinking about doing a story on drugs.”

“Drugs?” he asked loudly, leaning forward.

“Yeah, drugs in Rome, and I mean the illegal type. Just an idea I’m toying with. A story, I mean.”

“Mumble mumble old days mumble mumble mumble completely smashed,” he said, speaking faster.

“Where should I start with that? What do I do?” I quickly added, “Speak louder. I think I got water in my ear or something.”

“Mumble. Try Wisteria Meadows, mumble mumble. The projects are a good place to go if you want drugs, or to get shot.” Kevin’s bushy dark eyebrows arched, and his laugh startled me. His phone also rang, effectively ruining my chances for more advice and stereotypes.

I returned to my desk, popped two ibuprofens, sipped my coffee and sighed.

Lena asked, “What are you thinking about?” This is the most annoying question known to mankind.

“I’m thinking about this thing I heard on the radio,” I responded.

“About what?” She twiddled pens in both her hands.

“About meth. Apparently the Midwest is meth land.”

“Oh. I’ve never tried meth. You?” Lena’s dark eyes burned smoking holes in my brain.

“No,” I answered. “The program also said meth is a working-class drug: no thirstiness, no munchies, just something to keep you going your whole shift. What does that make weed?”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly, hand to chin, taking time to think as if it were a problem on a test. “Anyone can smoke weed, I guess, but it’s easier for the people with money to smoke it all the time.”

“And they have the time to do it,” I added, “usually.”

Lena reminded me of Claus here. Claus wouldn’t smoke weed for political reasons. He’d point out how people in lower socioeconomic positions were more often targeted by police, whereas Chicory Hill types could easily smoke away without a care, wearing their respectable, expensive clothes and speaking their refined, educated language in their big, secluded houses. Even written law favored the wealthy here. Students on financial aid lost their federal support and had to pay back their awards after being convicted of a drug offense. So, if your parents paid for college, you could smoke weed with relatively more ease. If you paid yourself, other people’s pastime could be the end of your career.

Claus refused to benefit from this particular privilege. My experiences in college had confirmed Claus’ thoughts. It wasn’t the financial aid crowd that was toking up every day.

* * *

I never understood why parties were such a big deal. I always preferred small get-togethers with a few friends. From middle school to college everyone had been psyched about fitting as many of their friends in one space as possible, turning up the music and getting drunk. In my opinion, putting that many people together at one time could only lead to bad things happening.

When Melissa arrived at Aiden's grad party, I didn't know I had about twenty more minutes of friendship with Claus before everything went to hell.

Melissa's way of dealing with the situation was pretending that Claus didn't exist. She played with her curly, waist-length blonde hair as if it were the only thing in the world that mattered. Her friends had their own ideas. I continued spying from my table, not really wanting to get involved. If I were a superhero, awkwardness would be my super weakness.

Claus gathered his wits about him and decided to greet Melissa. When he got near, Melissa's friends formed a circle around her in a flash. Claus stopped cold in front of the colorful wall of angry but well-dressed young women with hands on their hips and fire in their eyes. Body language told me all I needed to know; the girls politely suggested he high-tail it, so he tried shouting over the mob to Melissa. She responded by crying and walking away.

Claus' shoulders sagged, and he rubbed his face with his hands. I couldn't tell whether he was sad or annoyed. Chris patted Claus brusquely on the shoulder. The two guys began talking just as Mr. Lefebvre came in and yelled for everyone to gather round for the group pictures. His appearance always surprised me. He had shoulder-length blond hair neatly gathered behind his back and a well-trimmed yellow beard. There was something fiercely animal about his angular eyes, yet his dress suggested a dignified, civilized man. He looked as if someone had taken a lion, put him in a suit and taught him to be the most charming person you've ever met.

We all herded to the center of the room. An unseen nuisance kept throwing confetti, and someone turned the music up loud.

“Tony,” Claus said, appearing behind me. “I’ve got to go. This is too difficult for Melissa, and I want to do the right thing.”

“So we’ll call your brother?”

“No, we can’t,” he said, “because—”

I didn’t hear the explanation. The music was too loud. “What?”

“Mike’s busy until later. Chris will give me a ride home.”

“I want to go with you,” I yelled over the noise.

“No, no, you can’t go with me.” Claus shook his head vigorously.

“Why not?”

“You just can’t. We really need to have that talk.” He shook my hand. “I’ll see you later, Tone.”

And that was the end of it. I stayed at the party for a little while, glaring at people who weren’t my friends. I called Mike repeatedly until he drove me home.

As for Claus, he dropped off the radar entirely. I didn’t hear about the accident until the following Monday at school. The next time I saw him, he was on a hospital bed under a mess of tubes, bandages and casts. The walls, the sheets and the uniforms were a shade of white that made everyone in the room look sick. Claus’ eyes wandered around the room as if unattached to his body.

Having suffered brain damage, he’d forget that I had seen him before and would tell me the story of the accident over and over again. I heard it so many times, I felt as if I had lived it myself. I could feel the brisk wind on that early summer night blowing through the SUV’s windows, licking Claus’s arms. The stars were out in full

force that night; you barely needed lights to see. Chris, responsibly sober, punched random stations into the radio. Claus sloshed back and forth in his seat, smiling.

“Thanks for taking me home,” Claus said. The car seemed to sway in a happy, drunken haze.

Chris didn't get a chance to say, “You're welcome.” A cat jumped out into the road. I always imagined its big dark pupils caught between those headlights, tail shooting up in alarm. The bristles of the brown fur its owners stroked every day stood on end. Chris jerked the wheel to the side and avoided disaster. But then, just as he was righting himself in his own lane, another vehicle came swerving down the road and scraped against the side of his, pushing him and Claus off the street into the woods. The stars burned even brighter, shooting jets of light through the sunroof and all the windows, blurring into lines like falling comets. Branches of trees and bushes slapped the sides of the car, shattering the windows and sending shards of glass into Claus's face and arms. The woods sucked the SUV in like a piece of hard candy. The hot breath of the night penetrated inside. Claus was not wearing a seatbelt, and his head smacked into the dashboard and the ceiling as the car landed upside down and finally came to a rest.

* * *

Lena flicked a paperclip onto my desk. “Now what are you thinking about?” You should only be allowed to ask what one is thinking at most once a month, never twice in the same twenty-four hour period. In my head, I demanded that Lena allow me to continue spacing out about Claus, or at least about the drug story I discussed with Kevin today.

“You know a guy by the name of CC?” I asked, taking a chance.

“Yeah! He’s pretty cool. I’ve smoked a jay with him before.” She stapled together little rings of colored paper to decorate her desk. “Do you know him?” Her nutcracker face – especially her large cheeks – made her look like a girl in a woman’s body.

“Not as well as I’d like, I guess.”

“Why’d you ask?” Now she stacked cups and writing implements on her desk to make a tower, her large arms scurrying around and grabbing random things.

“No particular reason,” I said, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. Lena had spent an above average amount of time staring at me today. Maybe it was the heat. Everyone was a little off that day. Earlier I had seen Ross slimy with sweat, furiously tearing through his desk looking for a notepad, and now I thought I could hear Kevin snoring in his office. “Can I ask you an awkward question, though?”

“Awkward questions are the best type of questions,” she said, stopping her activities and smiling at me. I felt as if her face were glued to a pair of glasses I was wearing, and I wanted to take her off.

“How do you go about getting, well, a jay?”

“Oh my god, have you never smoked before?” She covered her mouth as she laughed a little, her straight brown hair tumbling in front of her.

“No. I mean, it’s not like I’ve never had the chance. I did go to college and all, but no.”

“No way, we are so getting stoned this weekend!”

I shushed her. “What if Kevin hears you?”

“Oh, come on. You know he was a bong-monger back in his day. He hasn’t told you any stories?”

“No, he hasn’t.”

“It’s such bull that people pretend they didn’t do drugs, like not telling us is going to stop us.” Lena’s rant sounded rehearsed. “So when do you want to meet up?”

“I wasn’t planning on getting stoned. It’s for a story.” I winced after I said that. Stupid, stupid stupid. Why would she help me report about drug dealers if she was friends with them?

“Oh.” Her bottomless eyes lost their glimmer.

I heard tires screech to a halt. I peered out the window and saw a car stuck at a crosswalk with a guy slowly walking across, looking like he had no idea where he was going. The person in the vehicle honked and honked but the guy didn’t seem to notice. He kept on trudging one way, changed his mind and went back towards where he came from.

I turned back to Lena and she still looked disappointed. “So, I’d like this to be anonymous. Do you usually meet at your house or some public place or what?”

“Well, it depends. Back when I lived in Indiana, we used to have places we’d meet, but it seems like the Chicory Hill kids here just do it on their own street. It’s not like the cops will stop them.”

“Chicory Hill?” I asked. “What do they do in Wisteria Meadows?”

“I don’t really know. I mean, I think most of the drugs are in Chicory Hill.”

“Why’s that?”

“Beats me. I met CC at a Chicory party. Generous guy, you know the type. He deals, and he spends.”

I didn't actually know the type, which was probably why Lena elaborated.

“I don't spend a lot of money on weed,” she said. “I can't afford to. Lots of people can't. It's guys like CC that pretty much bribe us girls with weed and booze to hang out with them. But it's cool, and CC is a nice guy.”

“So, this CC guy, where does he get his stuff from?”

“Angelo, where everybody else gets it from. Angelo's a serious dealer. He gets all nervous if he doesn't recognize the cars that drive by his house.”

“Where exactly did you meet CC?”

“I don't remember too much about the party that night, to be honest, except for rum and coke. Oh, and CC was so wasted when he drove home, I never thought he was gonna make it. If they had a blazed-and-drunk-driving event in the Olympics, he would get a gold medal.”

“Sounds like a nice guy,” I said. I judged people who drank and drove. Thinking you deserved to have fun even if it endangered other people's lives was the height of entitlement, in my opinion. So this CC guy hung out with the Chicory Hill crowd, probably had lots of money, would bribe his women with it, drove drunk and dealt to kids. Lena liked him but I wanted to strangle him, if I ever met him.

* * *

I preferred to meet the dealer in Wisteria Meadows, but there were too many houses and people there, and I didn't want to be seen. So, when I made Lena call the number I had gotten from the kid, I had her say to meet us on one of the many empty

roads around Chicory Hill. She also asked him where CC was, and the dealer said he was “on a little vacation, sort of”.

“You didn’t have to do this, Lena,” I told her.

“Anything for you,” she said and smiled with her dark eyes.

The blue Buick pulled slowly up to the curb. I stood far away from the road, near the woods. The same guy I had seen earlier, just a little taller than me with spiked brown hair, stepped out of the car. He was even less remarkable from the front, except that his face seemed to have been twisted by the nose into a permanent angry sneer, and he had a scar on the left cheek.

“Where’s your car, man?” he asked, laughing a little as he saw me near the shadows of the trees, practically hiding behind Lena.

She laughed. “Someone’s a little paranoid. It’s his first time.”

That line so wasn’t part of the plan.

“I know you, girl,” the dealer said. “I met you at a party, hanging out with, man, who was it?”

“Chris, CC,” she said as they hugged.

“How you doing?”

“Good. How’s your mom?”

His angry exterior cracked for a second. “She’s alright. She’s been clean for,” he paused, “a few days. Have any luck finding a new place?”

“No, still looking.”

“What are you doing?” I whispered loudly.

She spun around. “Hey, we connected, okay?” she responded.

I had a one-track mind. “Ask him about CC!”

Lena sighed and turned back to the dealer. “I gotta ask, what’s up with CC?”

“He’s where I usually get my shit,” I interjected suddenly. That would have made sense if Lena hadn’t called me out as a first-timer. So much for the plan.

The guy glanced in my direction and then went on ignoring me. “Honestly, I don’t really know.”

“What’s this ‘vacation sort of’ business?” I said, meriting another glance.

The guy turned back to Lena and lowered his voice. “Keep this on the DL, but CC just peaced out with no warning. Gone, like that.” Scarface snapped his fingers.

“Oh my god,” she said, hand covering her mouth. “When did it happen?”

“Two days ago. He’s not picking up his cell, nothing.”

Two days ago? That was the day after the bank robbery.

The dealer shifted back and forth. “Hey, I got things to do. Can we speed this up a little?” He hadn’t seemed nervous at all until we brought up CC.

“Sure, yeah,” Lena said, slipping him a bill. She looked him in the eye hard, and he seemed to relax.

“Wait!” I shouted

“What now?” The guy looked annoyed again.

“Where’s Claus Clayton?” I said from behind Lena, jabbing my finger. “I saw you in his driveway. Don’t lie to me!” As I shouted at him, it dawned on me that he looked terribly familiar.

“Is he for real?” he asked Lena, gesturing at me as if I were Santa Claus. “I already told you bro, I don’t know!”

“No, I meant Claus, not CC.” My voice slowed down to a halt as I pronounced that last syllable.

CC. Claus Clayton. The dealer had shoved in my face the truth I had been ignoring the whole time. The Mercedes, the glasses case (too many stoners keep their stash in there) and the lack of a job had been all too obvious, but I just hadn’t been able to see it. My eyes were too faithful to the Claus I knew to let me realize who he was. I imagined Claus standing next to me.

“Party beads, you idiot?!” I screamed at him in my head. “You deal drugs and you call them party beads?! How did you get so stupid? Stupid!”

But Claus just stood there, his empty hands raised a little, his head shaking slowly.

Drugs. Privilege. Journalism. Accidents. Love. Lies. The roads of Rome had led me down a twisted path, and the one person I thought I knew was just a façade. What next?

PART II: INVESTIGATIONS

“Well, this is a surprise,” I said.

The last week had blurred past. In between writing trite, lazy articles and sleeping as much as my caffeine addiction would allow, I had spent hours watching TV with my dad. Neither of us spoke. We just let the blue light fill our brains and burn away bad memories. Back at *The Rome Record* office, I wasn't expecting a ghost from the past to show up and ask me for my services.

“Yeah, well, I need your help,” Aiden Lefebvre said, shoving his ringed hands in his pockets and shuffling side to side. His hunched tall frame reminded me of a nervous animal ready to run if I got near.

I felt violated by Aiden's entry into the newsroom. Lena, Kevin and I owned this room. Even Ross did, though he always seemed to be out on assignment and never in the office.

“My help?” I almost knocked over my coffee while reaching for it.

“Are you telling me you aren't going to help me?” He put his hands down on the desk, and his rings made a loud noise against the wood. He stared at me with his pale skeletal face, predatory brown eyes trying to push me back into my seat.

I didn't like his attitude. He had scared me with the sudden movement but hadn't made me want to help him. "Why did you come to me?"

"Tony, Tony!" he exclaimed, now cordial. He slid onto my desk and put a hand on my shoulder. "You're talking like we don't go way back. Remember the sleepovers we had? Remember the grad party?"

I stiffened up.

His eyes flickered from point to point on my body. "Remember Mr. Mahon, Government and Civics class?" he added quickly.

"Yeah." Remember how you and everybody else cheated through his ridiculous tests? Jerk.

"Remember when Chris and I would put random stuff like 'sea monster' in the middle of our essays, and he wouldn't even notice?"

Chris and Aiden had goofed off together as a team to alleviate our crushing boredom. They were the only two in this class of *los cuatros* – the band of four friends including Claus and Drake – so it was up to Chris, the athletic social butterfly, to be the wingman to Aiden, the devious prankster, and to amuse us all.

"Yeah." The sea monster trick was pretty funny. Mr. Mahon was a good teacher, but he only skimmed essays. Chris and Aiden still got good grades on the essays because they would remember to mention the cotton gin and the emancipation proclamation but not genocide.

"'In 1906, Congress passed sea monsters the Meat Inspection Act.' Oh man, that class was bull. Good times."

I allowed myself to laugh as if we had shared some fun back at Rome High.

“So what do you say?” Aiden continued. “A favor for old times’ sake? It’s about Claus. You remember him?”

“Claus? What about him?” I sat straight up.

He adjusted the ball cap on his head, pushing down his frosted hair. “Didn’t you guys used to hang out back in high school?”

That was an understatement. I nodded in rapt attention.

“Anyway, he told me that you were a good person to go to when a man needs answers.” He toyed with a pen on my desk.

“Did he?”

“Hi!” Lena piped in, dropping some McDonald’s food on her desk to my right. “I’m Lena!”

“Hey,” said Aiden.

How dare she interrupt my flattery? I didn’t get this kind of attention very often. I theorized that something in the McDonald’s meat went straight to Lena’s mammoth arms and beefed them up.

“Do I know you?” she asked, swiping a finger at Aiden. “Maybe we met at some Chicory party.”

“No, you don’t.” He said. “Look, Tony, can we continue this conversation somewhere else?”

“Sure we can.” Sorry, Lena, we have to go do grown-up things. Oh, I wished I had said that and seen the look on her face!

Aiden and I walked down the hallway where I had let that bird escape, past the dark room and into the decrepit break room. Mold grew in the sink, and the

fridge belched foul odors at us. I refused on principle to put anything edible inside of the refrigerator.

Aiden pulled out a cigarette, so I pointed at the NO SMOKING sign. He shrugged and lit up. The sign had caused a controversy. Kevin hated it and would rant about the good old days, when drinking and smoking were allowed, reporters got into fistfights, and the editor occasionally had to bail his coworkers out of jail. Sometimes I'd imagine older era reporters sitting around the break room. They wore shirts and ties, but with the collars loosened. Puffing on cigars and sipping vodka martinis (shaken, not stirred), they argued about the Socialist threat and nuclear proliferation.

“Are they paying you enough here?” Aiden asked. “I really need you, and if you find what I want, I could help you with that.”

“Go on.”

“Have you seen Claus lately? I heard you guys stopped talking to each other.”

Aiden exhaled a cloud of smoke.

I listened silently and waited until he spoke again. I didn't want to put my chips on the table until I knew what he knew.

“Well, Claus has disappeared, and I'm worried about him.” He gazed at me a long time, sizing me up. “Are you aware he's gone?”

Sorry, Aiden, but I'm going to pump you for information, not the other way around. “When was the last time you saw or heard from him?” I asked.

“I don't know. Two weeks ago? We talked on the phone.” Aiden spun the rings on his fingers. “But after that Claus stopped picking up when I'd call. I wanted

to talk to him, so a couple days ago I went to his house. The door was open, and the place was trashed.”

I wondered if he saw the note from M. “Did you see any indications of where he had gone or why he left?”

“I don’t know.” Aiden adjusted his baseball cap. “It’s not like I snooped around his house. Wouldn’t that taint the evidence or something?”

“Did you file a missing persons report?”

Aiden laughed, and the sound rang in the empty break room. “You know as well as I do how useless the Rome PD is. The only thing they’re good at finding are donut shops. I just avoid them.”

I never knew what the big joke about cops and donuts was. Was it funny because they were fat? This is America; everybody is fat in real life and skinny on TV.

Aiden flicked ash onto the table. “So you haven’t heard about Claus at all?” His bony fingers caressed the dirty table. His beady eyes observed my every movement. At the same time, he managed to look bored.

“I figured something was up. But I’ll take a deeper look.” I could barely resist the urge to sweep the ashes off the table. I already found the room unbearably messy. “Is there anyone else I should talk to? Who else was Claus hanging out with?”

“Beats me.”

“Nobody?” Aiden made a pretty crappy witness. Lena had mentioned that she had met the dealer at a party with CC and Chris. Was this the same Chris that

drove Claus home the night of the grad party? “What about Chris?”

“Chris Williams? Yeah, I think they chill sometimes. Want his number?”

Aiden put out his cigarette on the table.

“Sure.” Chris Williams, the fourth member of *los cuatros*: Claus, Aiden, Drake and Chris.

“What about Drake?”

“No, none of us are really friends with Drake anymore. He’s pissed at all of us; I don’t even remember why. Anyway, I’ll be really grateful if you track Claus down, Tony. I’m counting on you.”

Kevin, with his dirty snowball beard, entered. “Is that the Lefebvre boy?” Kevin pronounced it ‘Le-fave,’ which I thought was correct or at least better than ‘Le-fever,’ the way Aiden and his father said it. The sound pleased my ear like nails on a chalkboard. I wasn’t pretentious about pronunciation, but the Lefebvres were being dumb. The majority of people sounded out ‘Le-feb-vree.’ At least they tried.

Aiden stood up and shook Kevin’s hand. Aiden appeared a little set back by the enthusiasm; I imagined he didn’t know Kevin very well.

“How’s your old man doing? Is he still mumbling around with those mumbles?” Kevin asked.

“Um, yeah.” Aiden backed away quickly. “Sometimes he mumbles them all day.”

“What was that?” Kevin’s furry dark eyebrows bent in concern.

“Nothing.”

Kevin turned to me. “Did you know, Tony, that Mr. Lefebvre has almost

single-handedly kept this paper afloat?”

“No.” I had noticed that Mr. Lefebvre bought up a large part of the advertisements, which was a godsend. When circulation went down, fewer people bought advertisements, which meant there was less money to make a good paper, so circulation would drop, and so on. Thinking about this problem, I visualized stacks of papers spiraling down into a bottomless pit, along with my parents’ marriage, Claus and the rest of my personal life.

* * *

After another day’s work and a visit from an old acquaintance, I snuck into my house, closing the door quietly so I’d have a few seconds of peace before Dad harangued me. In the dim light I found stacks of boxes lining the walls.

“Not this again,” I mumbled to myself. I figured Dad was trying to make me move out. He often told me a real man was master of his own domain, which was Dad-speak for “Get your own damn place, son.” Every now and then he’d interrupt a conversation to complain that he didn’t have anywhere to bring a woman, but I imagined he would need to find a woman before he could worry about the next step.

When I opened the boxes, however, I found his things inside, not mine. I pulled out a hammer, a lamp, a small mirror, a jar and all sorts of objects. He must have thrown stuff in randomly, which didn’t surprise me in the least. One plastic container was organized. It contained movie tickets, prom mementos, pictures of my mom and some letters. One of the letters wasn’t in an envelope, so I grabbed it first. A light perfume drifted into my nose, and the smell reminded me of my Mom.

Dear Raymond, [that’s my dad]

I really don't know how to tell you this, so I'm just going to say it.

"Are you home, Tone?" Dad asked from down the hallway.

I hid the envelope behind my back. "Yeah, I just got in. What's with the boxes? You aren't moving out, are you?"

He came to the doorway smiling, the corners of his mouth pointing at both of his big ears. "No, I'm not moving. I'm just organizing. This place can't be a bachelor pad forever." His short, thick fingers grasped a roll of paper towels and some envelopes. Dad had been working on his posture lately to exude confidence, so he was standing straight up like a missile ready for take-off.

"I never thought of you as the housekeeping type."

"Yeah, well, I read in *Man Magazine* today that women look for a man with a neat house. Counterintuitive, right?" He scratched at his garishly colorful sportswear.

I had to give it to him; I never knew what surprises Dad had in store.

"Hey, look at what I found at the store," my old man said excitedly, holding up a medium-sized box. "It's a robot that vacuums your floors. Isn't that awesome? It was on sale and we needed a new sweeper anyway. I bet you rich people have had these for years."

"No way," I said. Maybe Claus had been right. Maybe wealthy people did have cleaning robots.

Dad whistled a few bars of music to himself. "Oh, yeah, guess who I ran into today, Tone?"

Did he find a girl today? Did he run into that girl he had dated on and off for

a while, what's-her-name? No, probably not. But what had inspired the cleaning spree? "Who?"

"Lena."

Ew?

"She's cute, Tony. I like her. Why don't I see you two hanging around more often?"

I sighed, relieved that Dad was suggesting Lena for me rather than pursuing a girl half his age. I didn't appreciate that he was trying to hook me up, though, so I shrugged.

"Come on, son. Tell me you see it. Those eyes, those dark, dark brown eyes!" He clasped his hands together and shook them plaintively.

"She's my co-worker, Dad."

"Intern. You're supposed to screw those. It's in their job description!"

"What about her enormous arms?" I thought about their beefiness and shuddered.

"You can work around that. They might be useful." He winked at me.

"Where are you going, Tony?"

I already had turned to walk away, keeping the letter out of sight. "I just don't see it. Sorry."

"Tell me you see it." His voice dropped to a low, begging whisper.

I went to my room, anxious to read my pilfered loot.

Dear Raymond,

I really don't know how to tell you this, so I'm just going to say it. I need a real man. Now I know you're a man and all that. God knows you

remind me every night when you beg and beg and I just want to go to sleep. But I'm not made for this kind of life. I need someone else.

You go off to work all the time and leave me alone here with nothing to do. We don't do anything. I just wait for you. We don't go out at all. This life isn't any fun. You don't even make that much money.

Is taking care of Tony supposed to be a fulfilling life? When do I get to live for myself? Do you really enjoy playing your part of this marriage game, working behind a desk all the time?

I'm not made to look after kids. You know that. So I'm leaving Tony with you. You've always loved him most, anyway.

*Sorry,
Tina*

P.S I'll be staying in a motel with Steve, so I don't have a place you can contact me.

I could hear my dad moving boxes downstairs, whistling. Later he'd work out ("It's all about the gun show," he'd say), stay up all night watching infomercials, go to his job the next day and come back to an empty house. I wondered what really went on in the poor bastard's head.

* * *

I always had suspected that Chris Williams was kind of stupid. He first gave me this impression sophomore year of high school when Mr. Mahon talked to our class about becoming a teacher.

"It was a long and hard but ultimately satisfying process," Mr. Mahon had said to rows of drowsy students. The motivational posters and American flags covering the monotone white walls did little to stir vigor into the future of our nation.

"That's what she said!" Chris had snickered, turning to me. His head was as round as a coconut and probably as hollow, too. His large body threatened to burst the tiny desk he was sitting in.

“That’s what who said?” I asked. We didn’t know each other yet, and we weren’t going to.

“She.”

“Who’s she?”

“The girl I did last night.” Chris grinned with his wide-bowed lips. He usually smiled, eyes expressionless, indicating either that he was on top of the situation or had no idea what was going on.

Everyone put their pencils down and stopped taking notes as Mr. Mahon continued to pontificate on how personally satisfying it was to bore us all to tears.

“You did a girl last night?” We had just finished a tough exam. I had studied all night for it.

“No. Hypothetically.” His round face turned red, taxed with the intense difficulty of forming words.

“Then why are you telling me what she said, if she didn’t say anything?”

“Never mind, man. It’s a joke. Chill!” He didn’t talk to me for the rest of the class.

Somehow I had survived middle school without being exposed to “that’s what she said” jokes. Naturally I was thrilled about catching up with Chris eight years later. Throughout high school Chris was known as the chatterbox of *los cuatros*. A good way to disseminate information was to tell it to Chris under the guise of a secret. Chris thrived on the attention of pulling pranks; Aiden liked the power.

Chris got excited when I called him to interview him for a newspaper. He lost enthusiasm when he found out it was for *The Rome Record* but already had agreed to

come in.

When I met him in the rancid break room, he was still sporting that ridiculous blond comb-over, as if he were preparing to be Donald Trump. Chris attracted more than his share of girls with that doo, though. He had taken the same advanced courses that I had in high school. I could explain this phenomenon only by assuming that he had worked just as hard as everyone else at plagiarism.

“This place smells,” Chris said, his perfectly round face grimacing.

“Sit down.” I gestured to a seat.

After sniffing it and brushing it off, he sat down with a look of disgust. “What up?” His big body flattened the chair a little. He looked all dressed up for a golf tournament with his polo shirt and checkered pants, but seeing his blank expression of apathetic wonder, you’d assume he didn’t know how to play.

“I’m here to talk to you about Claus Clayton.” I paced around the table Chris sat at, playing the detective.

“You want to talk about CC? What about him?”

I stopped, hearing that name again. “You call him CC? Who else does?”

“I don’t know.” He scratched his head. “Everybody.”

Not Aiden. “When was the last time you talked to Claus?” I put both of my hands on the table, hard. I was having a little fun with the interrogation.

Chris squirmed in his seat, uncomfortable with the attention. “Thirteen days ago. Fourteen. Sixteen. No, fourteen. About two weeks ago.”

“And how would you describe the nature of your relationship with CC?”

“Relationship? Wait a minute.” Chris waved his hands, then bent forward

and spoke in a whisper. “We weren’t gay together, if that’s what you mean.”

“Not that kind of relationship. Were you friends?” I put a strong emphasis on this last word, hoping to guide him in the right direction.

“Yeah. We partied sometimes. He and I go way back.”

“Do you?” I walked up behind him, trapping him in his seat between me and the table. “What did you and CC discuss, about two weeks ago?”

Chris tried to turn to see me, but couldn’t. “We just talked about TV and stuff.”

“TV?” I used one of a reporter’s sneakiest tools: the non-question question. These vacuous verbalizations got you information you’d never think of asking for, and all you had to do was listen. The technique had garnered me valuable details time after time.

“Yeah.” Chris looked at the table.

Note that it doesn’t work on primates. I glanced out the window at *The Rome Record* dispenser out on the street. I had been keeping an eye on it since I discovered a stick propping it open a few days before. Someone had had the nerve to rig one of our machines right outside our office! I had performed a stake out to find the perpetrator, hiding in the bushes until nightfall, getting sticky with sweat while bugs attacked me from all angles. All I had accomplished was giving some lady with the right amount of change the fright of her life.

“Do you,” I paused, unsure, “know anything else that I should be aware of?” This question never worked.

“No.”

Inspiration struck. “Are you sure there aren’t any hard feelings between you and Claus?”

“Why would you ask that, Tony?”

“Because five years ago, after the grad party, you were driving during the accident that nearly took Claus’s life.”

He stood up. “Hey, that wasn’t my fault!”

“Not your fault?” I raised an eyebrow.

“It was either stay on the road or hit the deer and total my car. You can’t hit a deer. If it was a dog or something, you just run it over rather than hurt yourself, right? And then after that some drunk guy comes barreling down the road and side-swipes me into the trees.”

Deer? I thought it had been a cat.

“Can I go now, Tony? This isn’t fun anymore.”

“Sure, you can go.”

He looked pouty as he slid out of his chair. I watched him leave the office, waited a minute and then got a closer look at our newspaper dispenser. The machine was intact, but that could change at any moment. I glanced across the street and saw another storefront dark and empty with a “For Lease” sign. I returned to my desk inside, sat down and sighed.

I wished I were a policeman, so I could have held him longer. Instead, I was a reporter at a dying paper in a dead city.

* * *

Back home later that evening, alone for once, I looked through the photos of

the grad party. I wasn't sure why.

Claus, in torn jeans and a suit jacket. Blue eyes, sandy hair, tall. Wolfish grin, no triangle scar, looking worried. Holding a cell phone in one of the hands he was waving about, mid-conversation. Destined to be hurt very badly.

Me. Baggy jeans, too big t-shirt, which I tucked in. Green eyes, the bulbous black hair, a little short. Frowning, looking a little angry. Grabbing Claus's lapel, wanting to go with him. Destined to feel something was missing for the next five years.

Thirty well-dressed high schoolers having the night of their life. Dresses, polos, in some cases tuxes. Smiling, laughing, arms around shoulders. Posing for the camera. Destined to succeed.

Until I had talked to Chris, I sometimes had wondered if people even remembered how badly Claus had been hurt. Sure, some of the Chicory Hill kids had put cards in his hospital room and bought him balloons and chocolates. But if Claus was anything like me, he couldn't have been one of them.

I remembered our argument at the party and how he had had to leave but wouldn't take me. Why? That decision maybe had saved my life. I still wondered about that talk we were supposed to have. What would it have been about? At the exact moment of that weird conversation, Mr. Lefebvre had snapped a photo, preserving my confusion forever.

Why did Claus get so injured while Chris seemed unharmed? It was also weird that Chris didn't know what animal he had hit. He also probably didn't know how to tie his shoes, but cats were very different from deer. Claus might have

misremembered the animal. He had suffered brain damage after all.

There was no hurt in checking.

“Lena,” I asked later that day when I returned from home to the office, “do you have anything to do right now?”

Her large arms gripped the sides of her rotating chair, bringing her aimless spinning to a halt. “That depends on who’s asking.”

“I’m asking.”

“Then I’m not working on anything at all.” She smiled.

I handed her a Post-it note with the date of grad party. “Look in *The Rome Record* archives on this date and the days following. Try to find info about a car accident. Don’t forget to check the police blotter.”

“Look at you, taking charge,” she said. “What are you working on?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Tony!” Kevin called from his office.

I entered. “Yes?” Stacks of notes, papers and print-outs of photos sat on every corner of his desk. Ross stood next to the desk. Stubble lined his prematurely-wrinkled face. He had green eyes and black hair that hadn’t seen a brush in a while. His posture was awkward; his shoulders slouched back and his belly stuck out, making him look fatter than he really was. He always tucked in his shirts, even if they weren’t nice, which worsened the problem. Ross was me in twenty years, maybe, if newspapers were still newspapers.

“Oh, sorry, were you talking to Lena? Isn’t she such a sweetheart?” Kevin’s eyes fixed to a far-off point of Lena adoration.

If you say so. “Yeah,” I said, just as dreamily. “What did you want?”

“Ross has some information you might be interested in. Ross?”

“So, long story short, I heard the cops just busted some kids carrying a few grams of a new kind of weed.” Ross had police connections. He covered the crime beat. “Are you interested?”

In my job, having known something about drugs actually would have helped. Too bad I didn’t. “New kind of weed? What do you mean?”

“There’s nothing special about it. It was laced with some other substance that you usually don’t find in Rome, that’s all. I can get you the details.”

“Maybe you should mumble into drugs, Tony. Mumble could make a mumble story.” Kevin pressed the delete key over and over on his keyboard, his fuzzy eyebrows bent with concentration, as he went through the hundreds of emails he received each day. “Everyone with half a mumble knows that Rome has drugs coming out of its mumble, but mumble might be worth it.”

“Do you have time for this, Tony? I’m swamped, but I’ll do the rest if you want.” Ross kept himself busy, even if the bank robbery gave him little to cover. The cops had arrived at a stalemate in the investigation. When they had chased a suspect from the scene, the police had seen him (or her, why not?) flee his vehicle on foot, but he couldn’t have been carrying all the money. So, the police were on a wild goose chase looking for both the money and the perpetrators. Anyway, Ross was being very nice by offering me the drug story. Some reporters were downright possessive about their beats. Lucy, a reporter who had been laid off a few months back, would have clawed your eyes out if you so much as looked at one of her haunts. You needed your

stories.

“No, Ross, I’ll do it!” Who says you can’t mix business with your personal life? Maybe this could lead me to Claus.

“You know, back when people gave a mumble, we had enough cash to send mumbles off for a month to go study mumble and actually write in-depth mumble pieces, not just this piece of mumble daily news.” Kevin stopped, craning his neck towards his monitor and reading an email. His finger pounded the delete key, and he moved on. “One mumble day isn’t enough time to really get to know a subject, especially when you have to mumble out a couple mumbles every mumble. Anyway, Tony, how’s that Lione Locks mumble coming? Have you talked to mumble O’Mara?”

“No, he’s at West Palm Beach, and I’m starting to worry he’ll never come back. I was just headed to the historical society now, though.”

“I’m headed out too,” Ross said. “I’ll walk out with you.”

“So,” I said, clearing my throat. Awkward silences with coworkers were some of the loudest. “I love working with retirees. They’re so available. Do you think when I’m a retired old journalist, some newbie is going to enjoy interviewing me?”

“Tony.” Ross stopped walking. “You know you’re not retiring from *The Rome Record*, right? I’m not going to. Maybe even Kevin isn’t.” Ross rubbed his paunch as if for good luck and then continued his stroll, humming a few bars of music. Waving to the receptionist, he exited the building and left the doors swinging open. The light from the empty outside blinded me. The internet, the economy and apathy were killing traditional print journalism. The small local newspaper as we

knew it hobbled on its last leg.

Maybe the loudest silence of all is unemployment.

* * *

The box I had found at Claus's place really annoyed me. I tried sticking hairpins into the keyhole but I didn't know how to pick it. I even hit it with a sledgehammer and the container didn't break, but my hands almost did.

I brought the box to the historical society. They inspected it for about five seconds and told me that O'Mara was the only person who knew how to open it. I started to wonder if O'Mara existed at all or whether he was this void where they directed hard questions. That is, until he walked in unannounced. He couldn't open the box either but promised he'd have the tools to do it in no time. And, after all the hours spent trying to find his name, he introduced himself as Bob, which didn't even vaguely resemble anything people had been mumbling at me for the past few weeks.

When I got home from the office, a sleek, silver sports car followed me into the driveway. A single shadowy form sat inside the idling car. I waited for the vehicle to turn around and leave, but it didn't. I wanted to back out and drive away, but the stranger blocked me in.

I opened my car door, and so did the driver. I stepped out facing the car and began walking backwards.

"Tony, my man!" It was Aiden. He ruffled his frosted hair and his pale skin made him glow in the dark.

"You scared me!"

He took his sunglasses off his sunken eyes with his bejeweled hands. "How's

the investigation going?”

“There’s nothing really to say yet. I need more time.”

“Okay, okay.” He leaned against his car’s door, stretching his long limbs out and leaning his head back. He looked like a model in a cigarette commercial. “Are you up to anything right now?”

“I was just going to have dinner.”

“Come on. I’ll get you something to eat.” He beckoned me but barely moved out of his relaxed position. He reminded me of a cat, perfectly comfortable in his surroundings, whatever they were. “It’s on me.”

Those were the magic words. Next thing I knew I was in Aiden Lefebvre’s car. I didn’t understand the purposes of half the car’s gadgets: a digital compass, heated seats and a plethora of buttons.

“Sure beats that piece of junk, huh?” He laughed, pointing to my tried-and-mostly-true transport. “No offense,” he added when I didn’t smile.

I tinkered with the knobs absent-mindedly. My hand brushed over the glove compartment.

“Don’t touch that,” he said. “It’s news time.” He turned on the radio, and familiar NPR reporters filled the car with their reassuring voices.

“I didn’t know you listened to NPR,” I said.

“Well, you know, I like to keep up on things.”

We took off like a space shuttle. Aiden raced faster and faster. I gripped the car door.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’ll be fine.” When I drove, I liked to see how well I could keep the dial exactly on the speed limit. I had never broken the speed limit before following that dealer from Claus’s house.

Aiden brought me to this hole-in-the-wall Italian place a few towns over that I had never heard of. When he saw me debating over the lower-priced items on the menu, he told me not to worry about money. I settled on a personal pizza out of politeness, but it was delicious. He had seafood linguini, which he sent back, saying it wasn’t cooked enough. Afterwards, we got ice cream. He had the employee add almost every topping in the shop, until bits of cookies and sprinkles and candy fell off our cones with every lick. Then he brought me to a drive-in that smelled faintly of weed. We watched some gangster movie. It was alright. During the movie, someone knocked on the window. Aiden rolled it down and a male said, “Oh, it’s you. How’s it going?” and left. I didn’t see the guy.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“The owner,” Aiden said. “I come here a lot.”

After the movie we drove around aimlessly and chatted. Our conversation featured a few awkward silences, but Aiden asked me a lot of questions about myself, and for once I talked at length without holding back. He wanted to know where I went to college, how it was, who my friends were and what they were like. My time at school felt disconnected from real life, I explained to him. I had waded through a blizzard of academic texts that no one else had ever read. Aiden hadn’t gone to college. He told me he was working for his dad.

“It’s bull that you have to go to college and spend four years studying crap

just to get a job that doesn't have anything to do with it." Aiden gestured with one hand as he used the other to cut vehicles off in the road. "Especially because it's so expensive."

Aiden's commentary pleased me, even if I didn't entirely agree with it. I was surprised to find he thought about class. Above a certain level of wealth, it's easiest not to think about it at all.

"You know who's got it right, Tony? Those guys in the movie tonight. They were patriots."

"I don't understand," I said, bracing myself as we swerved around a truck.

"Well, America's all about business, right? The government's always trying to bail out our businesses, because our businesses make our economy work, which makes everything else work." He glanced at me to check for comprehension. "So it's like, these businesses keep our country running. But do you think any of the guys in that movie went to college? The characters, I mean. No, but they could set up a business, supply-and-demand, all that good stuff, and provided much-wanted services to everybody. There's your stimulus package. *Capiche?*"

"I think it'd be easier to agree if the services we were talking about weren't prostitution and hard drugs trafficking."

Aiden laughed. "You know what I mean. Speaking of which, you want to get blazed?" He reached for a glasses case. Why do they always keep weed in glasses cases?

"No thanks, I don't smoke." I said this as casually as I could.

"Never? Did you smoke too much in college and have to quit?"

“No, I’ve never been high, never even had a cigarette.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Aiden’s jaw dropped. “It’s the one kid in Rome who’s never been high. Do you want to try?”

“No, I’m good.” I doubted I was the only one.

“Come on. It’s safe. Everybody’s parents did it, and according to some studies they probably still do.” He tried to hand me the glasses case.

“No, I’m good.” I pushed myself against my seat as hard as I could.

“We’ll fix that, eventually.” He glanced at the glasses case longingly and then put it in a compartment.

One of those long silences stunk up the car and didn’t leave for a while.

“Hey, Tony, I have a question,” Aiden said. “Be honest.”

“Shoot.”

We arrived at a red light. “Do you trust me?” He looked at me with his beady eyes, his skin looking paler than ever.

“Um.” I shuffled my feet and picked at my pockets. “Sure.”

“That’s not very reassuring. We’re friends, right?”

“Yeah.” At the moment, saying that didn’t feel too dishonest.

“So if you were on to something in the investigation, you would tell me, right? Even if you thought you shouldn’t because of your job?”

“Yeah, I would. I mean, it’s not like I have a lot of secrets or anything. Usually what I learn ends up getting written.”

“I’m glad,” he said, and slammed on the gas before the light turned green.

The ride home was quiet. I stared out the windows, but there wasn’t much to

see except street lamps. Just at the edge of one illuminated circle, two youths kicked a harmless newspaper dispenser. One slammed the coin deposit box with a bat. I rolled down the window and shouted at them, but they didn't care. Neither did Aiden. When I asked him why he didn't stop the car, he shrugged.

"It was just some kids having fun," he said.

We glided past downtown and Wisteria Meadows to where I lived, the far end of Rome. Weeds grew around my driveway because Dad and I were too lazy to take care of it. Our lawn wasn't the only poorly kept one on the street, anyway. I watched Aiden drive away. Little orbs of light from the lamp posts reflected off his car's shiny exterior.

"You've been out late," Dad said as I crept through our dark house. The blue television flickered, and the shadows cast in the room made his ears look even bigger. "Where were you?"

"If you must know, I went out to dinner, ice cream and a movie."

"With who?" He propped his legs up on a table. He was wearing boxers.

"Lena?"

"No, Dad." I sighed. "It was Aiden. Are we done pretending I'm fourteen now?"

"Aiden? Lefebvre's kid? Why him?"

"I don't know, Dad. He offered. I'm investigating something for him."

"Oh, ok." He looked relieved. "Did you know that Aiden's dad owns a car more expensive than our house?"

"Oh. That's excessive."

“Yeah, me and the guys were talking about it today, actually. I don’t care if he invests the hell out of Rome and turns it into New York City; he’s still a dick if he flaunts his money with a ride like that.”

“I know what you mean, Dad.” Sometimes my father would say wonderful things.

“Then again, he must get hella chicks with that ride.”

I wanted to tell him not to say hella. That word stopped being cool in middle school. Instead I wished him goodnight.

“Oh, and Tony? Next time you go out for dinner, and ice cream, and a movie, and stay out late, make sure it’s with a girl. For me?”

I glared at him.

“Don’t do it just for me. Do it if you ever want to get laid.”

“Goodnight, Dad.” I decided to interpret my father’s words as concern. He just didn’t want me to be alone. Yes, that was it.

As I lay in bed with the lights off, I tried to dispel the image of Mr. Lefebvre getting hella chicks. But, who was Mr. Lefebvre? Why did he feel the need to drive around in expensive cars, have an aquarium for a house and make his presence felt in every bit of Rome public life? The media told us we were watching *The Great Depression Part Two* but he was busy proving to everybody, including himself, that he had money to throw around. And why was I continuing to imagine him in his expensive car with his beard prickling the necks of women, looking like a lion catching its prey?

Rain pattered on the roof. I imagined the little drops flecking the windows of

the Lefebvre residence. I saw the water level rising higher and higher around the walls, threatening to break the glass and flood inside.

* * *

The next time I was at *The Rome Record* building, I noticed that the lights of a usually-empty office attached to the newsroom were on. Some boxes stacked inside. A bald man in his thirties wearing a shirt and tie shuffled past me carrying more bins of things. Grumbling to himself, he tossed them into the office and then left the newsroom.

“Tony! I have to talk to you!” Lena leapt out of her seat clutching a stack of papers with her burly arms, her dark eyes unusually bright.

I hoped with all my being that it had nothing to do with ice cream and a movie. “What?” I asked unenthusiastically. I yawned, still tired from the night before. Some mornings at the office were hell, and noisy interns didn’t make them any better. “Do you know what’s going on with that office?” I pointed. The windows of the newly-lit office were large so you always could see inside.

“No, but I found those articles you were looking for, I think.” Lena spread out a bunch of papers on my desk. “There’s some weird stuff, though. Look at the police blotter. In the issue the day after the date you gave me, it says there was a one-car accident at around 1 a.m. But a few days later, there’s an article on a two-car accident that takes place at the same time, same date. Weird, huh?”

I compared the information on the blotter to the article, and the details – time, location, type of collision – lined up. There was no way they weren’t about the same event. “That is really strange.” I also wondered why the accident was so late when

Claus had left the party relatively early.

“Do you think whoever wrote the article got the date wrong?”

“Maybe the two-car accident didn’t make it into the blotter. Why wouldn’t it?

The police were involved. Hmm. I like how Mr. Lefebvre took over the article. For some reason it’s all about how he’s preventing drunk driving and not about the crash victims.” Even the picture in the article featured Mr. Lefebvre’s neat blond mane. His proud small eyes told us all that he cared, even if we were incapable of taking care of ourselves.

“Hey, Mr. Lefebvre’s in the chamber of commerce, and they pay for me to work here!”

“No way,” I said, not really paying attention. I was busy skimming the article.

*“Drunk driving is a problem that affects us all,” Lefebvre said.
“Every American should take it upon himself to reach out and help...”*

Blah blah, pretentious crap, sentimentalism, blah.

Lefebvre will be running a drive to collect money for local organizations that raise awareness about the dangers of drunk driving.

Blah.

He says he came to this decision after hearing about an accident that badly injured one local teen and put another in the hospital.

That’s Chris and Claus. Blah blah.

The two area teens had been driving home from a party when they had the accident. The passenger was inebriated.

Funny, they don’t mention that the party was at Mr. Lefebvre’s. Statistics about drunk driving, yadda yadda.

“I probably would’ve made it home fine,” said the young man, who wished to remain unidentified, “but I was going down the road and all the sudden a bear jumped out.” Then, they were struck off the road by a drunk driver, he says.

The other teen in the vehicle was unavailable for comment.

And unconscious.

Lefebvre is looking into Rome’s bear population problem.

Well thank God for him.

“By the way, Tony,” Lena said, her voice fading into my consciousness, “that guy with the hat and rings is kind of weird.”

“Are you talking about Aiden? Weird how?”

“Well, first, I swear I had met him before, but he said no. Then, when he was leaving, he came up and asked me what you liked to listen to on the radio.”

Some serious Alzheimer’s seemed to be floating around Claus’s accident. Did they almost hit a cat, a deer or a bear? Was there one car or two? I was sure other accidents like this happened. Why did Mr. Lefebvre turn this one into a publicity stunt?

“Hey Tony, what are you up to after work today?” asked Lena.

“I’ve got things to do, sorry.”

“Okay, maybe some other time then.” Her smile cracked and she averted her dark eyes for a moment. Then, humming to herself, she drew swirls and other designs on a piece of paper that said LENA’S DESK.

* * *

Chris was less excited to speak with me this time. I got him to come by

telling him there would be cake. Slouching in a chair in *The Rome Record* break room, he tilted his coconut head and folded his arms. He sported a five-o-clock shadow and shifty eyes. He scratched at a stain on the white table with a thick finger. His dumb smile was crinkled, inert, and his heavy forehead cast a shadow over his usually expressionless eyes.

“Hey, uh, did you ever catch those bank robbers?” he asked. “How’s that going, Tony?” He had popped his collar, exposing a gold chain around his neck, and I hated him for it. One of the overhead lights was flickering and I wasn’t sure who was supposed to take care of it. “Did they ever figure out where the money went, at least?”

They hadn’t. “Stay on topic, Chris. Are you sure you don’t want to tell me anything else about the car accident? Like why you left the party at around 9:30 p.m. and got into an accident at 1 a.m.?”

He squirmed in his seat. “Isn’t that like your job, though, to tell me the news, and you’re like not doing it right now?” He whimpered. “And where’s the cake?”

What was he hiding? Had he been drinking, too, and somehow managed to get it removed from the records? I decided to try a new tactic. “Listen, I know what happened, Chris.” I loomed over him from behind. “I know everything. I’m just giving you a chance to give me your perspective.”

“Then you know it wasn’t my fault!”

Sometimes things are fun because they are easy. I got cockier. “I know it wasn’t your fault.”

“They really had my balls in a vice.” Chris started to ramble and nearly lost

me. “I didn’t want to be involved. I’ve got enough tickets to build a bridge to China.” He stopped, gazing off into the distance and looking resigned. “But he said I owed him one, and that this way no one would really take the hit cause of the drugs – I was sober – and cause they’d never catch the other car.” He grew silent.

“Oh,” I said, not understanding at all what had just been said to me. “Um, why did you owe him one?”

“Well, at least he didn’t tell you that. Wait, how did you find out? CC didn’t tell you.”

“It wasn’t CC. I have my ways.”

“Right.” He slowly looked me over. Did his face always turn red when he concentrated like that? In that case, he must not have done it very often. “You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?”

“Yeah I do.”

“No you don’t.”

“I so do.”

“Liar.”

“Pants on fire.” Sometimes I turn into a four-year-old when I’m angry.

“Okay then,” Chris said, “what kind of car hit them?”

“Why would I remember that? I’m not into cars.”

“It’s kind of important. What do you know, really?”

“That Claus left the party with you,” I paused and, not wanting to show my cards, changed the subject. “What was up with that break-up anyway?”

“You mean between him and Mel? You know as well as I do. Listen, I’m out

of here, Tony. You're just messing with me. Just because I'm big doesn't mean I'm stupid. I didn't know you'd lie to me like that." His hulking figure escaped with surprising speed.

"Wait, Chris!" I ran down the hallway after him, but I stopped at the newsroom. For a painful moment, Lena and Ross stared at me. To break the stillness I pointed at a previously empty office that now had furniture in it. "How about that? Who's moving in there?" I laughed weakly and then returned to my desk in silence.

"That's the Director of Marketing," Ross said. "They moved his office up here."

In the office I could see a picture of a young girl, of either early high school or late middle school age, as well as a number of stickers that said things like "Teamwork is where you take the blame for my actions!" and "We can't be fired! Slaves must be sold." The Director of Marketing had moved some filing cabinets around his space and had placed a small cage on top them. I couldn't make out what kind of creature lived in it.

* * *

That summer, between action-packed days at *The Rome Record*, Aiden Lefebvre became my friend. If you'd asked me a month before, I would've told you that he could have stuck his head in a blender for all I cared. But the random visits kept coming. He always took the first step. If I called him, he'd tell me he was busy or not pick up at all. Each time we hung out, he asked me how the case was. Sometimes we'd talk about Claus and our memories of him. Aiden and I would go places, too, like the movies, out of the way restaurants, and nice patches of land in

Chicory Hill with a clear night sky and nobody in sight. He'd show up in different cars, and he'd always pick up the tab with an air of nonchalance. I couldn't tell if the sentiment was sincere or if he was trying to impress me.

Though I never smoked weed, I did drink alcohol, and when Aiden found this out, he started bringing every type of booze you could think of: classy wines, strong whiskeys and first-rate vodka. He'd teach me how to taste a red properly and then show me how to avoid hangovers. "It's all about being hydrated!" he'd say.

We always spent time alone. I never met any of his friends, and I didn't really have any to show. One time he stared off silently in the distance for a long time, and when I asked him what was wrong he told me, "Oh, Tony. Friends aren't what they seem to be."

One night we got really trashed on a drink I don't remember one bit. We sat on a grassy hill that led down to a forest below. Aiden led me fifteen minutes into the woods to find this place. I tore weeds out of the ground and threw them at the trees. We sunbathed under the incredibly bright stars. The wind kissed our arms, legs and necks. Grass tickled our feet. Claus had liked to hike beautiful places just like this until he'd get kicked off.

I was drunk enough to say the first thing that came to my mind. "Run, Claus, run!" I yelled nonsensically.

Aiden chuckled, taking a hit from a joint. "No!" he said, and leapt on top of me. We wrestled for a moment. Aiden was surprisingly strong. I freed myself and rolled on top of him, but he quickly mounted me again, pinning my legs down with his and holding my arms against the soft grass. We panted as I pushed my body

against his to get away. His light skin looked porcelain but touchable. His eyes dared me.

“You’re like Claus, aren’t you Tony?”

“Yes I like Claus,” I said matter-of-factly, “but you’re not too bad yourself Aiden Danger Le-fever.” I pried at the rings on his fingers.

“No, I mean you’re like Claus.”

“I don’t understand.”

Aiden brought his face close to mine, until his high cheekbones nearly touched me, as if he were trying to inspect something in my eye.

Weed stank up my nose. “Aiden, you realize you have a blunt in your mouth?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said and chuckled. “Want some?”

“Yeah, sure.” I grabbed the joint, put it in my mouth and inhaled as if born to do it. In my head I saw a scoreboard that said: ‘Alcohol – 1 Inhibitions – 0.’

“Exhale.” Smoke blew into his face, and he laughed. “Tell me when you start feeling good.”

“I don’t feel nothing, Mr. Aiden. Let me try again.” This time I wrapped my lips around the blunt and sucked harder. We smiled at each other.

My lungs decided they didn’t want any of this, and suddenly everything shot out my mouth. I tried to take in air but only wheezed. An invisible weight crushed my lungs, and a coffee straw replaced my throat. I thought of Giles Corey, who had asked for more weight to be placed on him at his execution during the Salem Witch trials and how dumb that was. I clutched my chest and panicked, panicked and

couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe and panicked. My head got as light as a balloon, and the world grew darker.

The Grim Reaper came up and accused me with his white finger of being a witch.

"Am not!" I said. I was the best jujitsu fighter in the world, so I tried to kick Death in the head, but he pinned me down against the ground. "I should've went for a grapple," I groaned. The Reaper's body was boney and hard. He clutched me with his icy hands. His chill penetrated me.

"Tony?" a voice called. It was Claus.

"Hey Claus!" I said casually. "You're dead too!" Meteors were falling out of the sky and hitting me in the chest. It really hurt.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Tony." He pointed at Death, who was now wearing a grass skirt, a coconut bra and a lei.

"This isn't what it looks like!" I exclaimed. Death gave me a toothy, mischievous grin – the only kind he is capable of. I adjusted his bra strap for him and then tried to wiggle away, but the wet grass kept getting wetter and sinking in more and more. Behind him the stars formed mysterious symbols that, if I could decipher them, would tell me the links between Claus, drug dealing, Aiden, Chris, accidents, journalism, Drake, economic depressions and how to make Chia pets grow well.

* * *

The sky dumped a bucket of ice water on me. My lungs reinflated. The real world welcomed me with little ceremony. The universe spun and beat on my head with invisible drum sticks but otherwise left me alone.

“You okay, Tony?” Aiden asked. “You passed out for a little while.”

I tried to speak but could only grunt. The moon was painfully bright, and Aiden’s voice gave me a headache.

“You should go a little slower next time, I guess.”

“There will be no next time,” I hissed. Looking around the clearing in the woods, I tried to remember which way led to the car.

Aiden’s mouth bent to a smile, but then he restrained himself. We sat in silence, listening to crickets while I rubbed my head and thanked my unlucky stars. I couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened if I had died there.

“Why didn’t you call an ambulance, Aiden? I have asthma.”

“How was I supposed to know? Besides you were smoking and everything, and we’d both get in trouble.”

“Oh, I was the one who was smoking? Anyway I’d rather be in jail or get a fine than die.”

“Yeah, whatever. Chill out.” Aiden looked not so much annoyed as inconvenienced. “You’re fine.”

“Excuse me if I’m a little edgy over here. I just almost left this mortal coil and all.”

Aiden jingled his keys. “Do you want to go home Tony?”

“Yeah, sure.”

We stumbled through the woods. The outdoors is scary when you’re drunk. In each shadow, I saw a bear. Fallen branches crunched under our unsteady march. I thought I heard a howl and clutched Aiden’s side. We almost fell over, and he

laughed at me a lot.

We followed the lamp posts' lights bleeding through the tree line and emerged from the forest next to the street, near Aiden's shiny car. The road stretched for miles both ways into the distance. Aiden fumbled in his pockets for a minute. "Oh, here it is!" He laughed. He missed the first time he stuck the key in the ignition.

"Are you okay to drive, Aiden?"

"Yeah, totally."

"What time is it? How much did you drink?" My earlier experience had taken away my happy buzz.

"It doesn't matter." He waved his hand dismissively, violently. "I'm good to go."

Part of my head told me to sit back in the seat and relax. I was so tired. As the wheels began to roll, the bumps in the road rocked me gently towards the world of sleep. Aiden turned on the radio but kept it quiet. But, I didn't want to be responsible for anyone getting hit, and my superego came to the rescue. "You can't handle this. I'm leaving. I'll take a taxi or something." I got out despite Aiden's calls and slammed the door. Stumbling down the dark road, I pulled out my wallet and saw I had five dollars. "Wouldn't matter if I had more," I mumbled to myself. "Freaking taxis would rip me off anyway. I never can afford it." After a few minutes of walking, I realized I had no idea where I was going. I saw a shifting form in the woods, so I started to walk on the other side of the street.

Aiden pulled up slowly in his car. "This is stupid. Don't walk home. Here, I'll give you money for a taxi." He chucked some bills out the window at me.

“Please come with me. Your car will be fine here, Aiden. Please.” I clutched one of the side view mirrors. “Please.”

Aiden sighed, pulled the car over and called information for a taxi company’s number.

“When will they be here?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Aiden said.

“Did you hear that? It sounded like another howl.”

“Just don’t, Tony.”

The cab took what seemed like forever to show up. The taxi driver tried to make casual conversation with us through his bushy moustache, but Aiden and I were unresponsive so he soon gave up. We went to Aiden’s place first. Lights around the perimeter of the house made the building look like a glass fortress. Aiden didn’t tip the driver when he left.

On the way through Rome’s downtown, I almost fell asleep in my seat. The driver asked me if I was alright, and I mumbled a yes. When we pulled up in front of my house, I gave him all the money Aiden had thrown at me without counting it.

Inside, my dad was watching an infomercial about weight-lifting equipment. It was three in the morning, but he was in running shorts, a white tank and athletic sneakers, all ready to go. I knocked something down while creeping by, so he came over to see me.

“Hey, Tony, I was just thinking about that time,” he said, his laughter making his story difficult to follow, “when you were little and I brought you to that play with the people in masks, and you flipped out!” He clutched his stomach. “Remember?”

“Yeah.” That memory was still traumatic for me. I don’t remember what the actors had been putting on. I could just remember their eyes moving, watching, and the rest of their faces being still.

“And then, I got a mask so you could get used to them, and you’d cry every time I wore that thing!”

I remembered him ruining most of my birthdays that way. Dad’s strategy of immersion therapy didn’t work. Masks still freaked me out. Not being able to tell who or what was really underneath gave me the shivers.

My dad took a step closer and saw my face. “What the hell happened to you?” he asked, scratching one of his big ears. His green eyes wavered between shock, worry and annoyance.

I uttered something incomprehensible and left. I didn’t want him to smell the weed. I looked in the bathroom mirror. Dark rings circled my eyes, my bulbous hair was disheveled and dirt marked my face here and there. I had died and come back again. Now I knew what Jesus felt like.

* * *

The next day I found a folder on my desk. Ross had left it there with some notes on what he had heard about the new weed on the market. The police had busted some youths with a few grams on Rudolph Road. Recognizing the street, I wondered if the little punk I had harassed was involved. I had checked up on whether or not your record really gets wiped when you turn eighteen, and, well, it’s a little more complicated than that.

Ross’s notes were in mostly undecipherable handwriting, and I didn’t

understand all the words. He noted that it was “hydro,” which didn’t mean anything to me. A quick internet search taught me what I needed to know about drugs. Hydro refers to hydroponic, a method of growing plants in water without soil. I could’ve asked Ross what his writing meant, but I just didn’t care at the moment. He was in Kevin’s office, and they were joking about some letter to the editor against same-sex marriage. They disagreed with the letter, in principle.

“I don’t care if people want to be gay,” said Ross, “as long as they’re not gay when I’m around.”

“Mumble know what you mean,” said Kevin. “Mumble have to watch out, or they’ll mumble you in the mumble.” Kevin and Ross laughed. Behold the media’s liberal bias.

I couldn’t focus. When Aiden had told me to locate Claus, the job had sounded doable, even fun. But how the hell was I supposed to find him?

“Are you a little hung over?” Lena asked, brushing her brown hair out of her face with her big arms.

“You can tell?” I asked, my hands over my head.

“Well, you usually don’t have dirt on your face.” She pointed to the right side of my jaw.

“Oh.” I brushed it off. “Rough night.”

“Tell me about it.”

I took a sip of coffee and popped some more ibuprofens. I hadn’t stayed hydrated enough. I could hear chirping just outside one of the windows, and I wanted to shut the window to stop any more birds from coming in, but standing up seemed

like an awful lot of work.

“No, seriously, that wasn’t a ‘yeah I know’ tell me about it,” Lena continued.

“That was a ‘I want to know what happened’ tell me about it.”

I was too out of it for English’s ambiguities. “I mean, it’s not so much what happened last night that’s getting at me, but what I’m working on now. And I think I did piss off a friend of mine.” I had debated calling Aiden but, aware of how pathetic this was, I didn’t. I wished Claus had been there. He could have made me feel better. I took another swig of coffee and stared at my desk. Two meaty, powerful arms wrapped around me from behind like boa constrictors.

“I’m sorry you’re having a bad day,” Lena said.

Lena was soft. I leaned back a little bit and closed my eyes. Part of me screamed to move away from Lena, but I think I fell asleep a little. Coming back from the grave really takes it out of you.

She rubbed my shoulders. “Tell me what’s up, Tony.”

So I did. I explained to her how my friend Claus had disappeared, how Aiden had hired me to find him, how all I had managed to find out was that five years ago something hadn’t been completely explained. I described the grad party, how Claus and I had fought, his breakup with Melissa, and the car accident. I told her I had no idea what to do next. She listened carefully without interrupting until I finished.

“Sounds like you need to get organized, Tony. So what don’t you know?”

“Where Claus is,” I said, annoyed.

“Besides that. Maybe if you answer all of the other questions, you’ll find your answer to that one. If you want to know what happened in that car ride, find out what

you can that led up to that. Why did Melissa and he break up? Why did he have to leave without you?”

“I don’t know,” I said, covering my head with my hands. “I don’t know.”

“Well, ask Melissa.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.”

The well-dressed bald man – the one I had seen carrying boxes earlier – walked past us. “A new space, some fresh air,” he muttered. “That’s a veiled threat to my job if I’ve ever seen one.” He breezed past and entered his office but didn’t shut the door entirely. His phone rang and he yelped a little, clawing at his bald head so it had red finger marks on it. He paced around his desk until voicemail took over. Lena and I exchanged confused looks. I looked back when I heard him cooing. Something inside the cage was making loud, prolonged squeaks, but the man was standing between the cage and me so I couldn’t see what it was.

* * *

Melissa Jenkins, had long, curly blonde hair down to her waist. She was the darling daughter of Ron Jenkins, Rome High’s premier guidance counselor. Melissa’s mom came from money, which is what enabled their family to afford a house on Chicory Hill and Melissa to buy the right kind of “good girl” clothes. You knew she was innocent because of how carefully she kept her curls, how she always wore jewelry and the color pink and how she smiled even when she wasn’t paying attention. Her teeth were so white, they could be used as a flashlight.

Melissa was not happy to talk to me on the phone. “What do you want, Tony?” she said.

“To talk.”

“Well no shit, you’ve got me on the phone, don’t you?”

“Are you really mad at me, Mel? Remember when we used to play together in preschool and most of elementary school?”

Her snarl became sympathetic. “Yeah, I remember. But that was a long time ago. We’re very different people. It’s just awkward now.”

“I want to catch up about some things. It’s been a while since we talked. Come down to *The Rome Record*, and we’ll have a chat.”

“I’d rather not, Tone. Why don’t we meet somewhere less workplace-like? How about McDonald’s?”

I sighed and thought about it for a moment. “Okay.”

She had no idea of the sacrifice I had just made.

I walked into the living room. My dad asked, “Who was that on the phone?”

I turned around to reply, but he startled me. “What the hell?”

My father roared, wearing the old mask he had scared me with when I was young. It looked like a normal person with fake, fleshy lips and a permanent smile. The nose was big and had two large nostrils. The hair was slicked back, and the forehead had deep creases that spindled out like spider legs. There were peepholes in the pupils. Seeing my reaction, Dad bellowed with laughter.

“Not cool!” I yelled, cowering in the far-away kitchen.

He chuckled a little while longer and then shouted, “Don’t worry, it’s off.” He knew I wouldn’t go near him until he removed the mask. “So who was it?”

I came back and glared at him. “Melissa Jenkins.”

“Hey, alright!” he said, his face lighting up and his big ears turning red. “You guys used to hang out all the time when you were very little, but who cares? You can still go on a date now. Ron Jenkins isn’t a bad guy, either.”

“It’s not a date, Dad.”

“Oh.” He threw some popcorn into his mouth and decided the TV was more interesting than his dateless son. Resting his sports sneakers on the coffee table, he scratched his crotch and belched. If your dad was supposed to be your role model and teach you how to be a man, I was in big trouble.

* * *

I slid into a red booth with some French fries. I was nervous so I didn’t buy much to eat, but I did profit from the free mocha offer. I got into McDonald’s okay; the Scary One wasn’t outside, and I hadn’t seen him yet. The staff wasn’t able to keep up with the volume of people, so garbage and stains covered the tiled floors, the red tables and the yellow chairs. I had read somewhere that seeing red, yellow and green made you hungrier; I was in the middle of a color conspiracy. The trash flap swished as the considerate customers tried to force their food scraps into the overflowing receptacles. Someone was going from table to table, asking for change so he could catch the bus.

I also looked for Lena among all the people, but didn’t see her. For fifteen minutes, I sat alone, taking in the greasy smells, the advertisements and the noisy crowd. The bright sun reflected off the cars in the parking lots and shone in through the windows. Melissa had chosen a perfectly public setting for an absolutely private conversation. Great.

A girl emerged from the hungry mob and came to me. “Hey,” she said. Her lips were pursed tightly, as if she hated everyone in the room.

“Hi.”

She put her food on the table and sat down. Her fingernails were so long and manicured, she probably could have slit my throat with them.

“Uh, that spot’s taken,” I said.

“Tony, you know it’s me, right?” she said.

“It’s you?” I looked more closely at her. She had brown eyes and short blonde hair with pink streaks. Her nose was pierced and her jeans were torn. Instead of dimples she had craters in her cheeks. “Mel?” She had lost a lot of weight. Her neck was long, like an ostrich’s.

“Yeah.” Her face, usually one tone thanks to copious amounts of make-up, had red splotches like little auroras.

“I didn’t recognize you one bit.”

She didn’t seem in the mood for reminiscing. “So what’s this about, Tony?”

“It’s about Claus.”

She sighed audibly. “I was hoping it wasn’t.”

“Do you know that Claus has gone missing?”

“Yeah. He and I were just starting to talk a lot again, and what a surprise: You show up, and he disappears.” She flicked at her nose ring anxiously, making little *tink!* noises.

I stared at her habit, disgusted. “Alright, Mel, I need to ask some questions. I think where he is right now may have to do with something that happened the night of

Aiden's grad party."

"Fine." She put her long fingers against her cheek, showing off her dangerous nails.

"Oh god, there he is." I froze up. "We need to switch booths."

"Who's 'he?'"

"Ronald McDonald," I gasped. "Let's go." The cardboard cutout waved to me in a friendly manner, but I knew better. I convulsed a little, staring at his curly red hair, his – no, I can't even describe him. I hopped into a nearby booth that didn't face the same way, and Mel followed. "I hate that. He's such a dumb mascot. Do you know how many people are afraid of clowns? Like one in seven of adults! I read that somewhere."

Mel flicked her nose ring and said nothing.

"Don't do that. Do you know someone named Angelo?"

"Not personally, but yeah. I've heard of him. I know what he does."

"And were you aware what Claus had been up to, before he disappeared?"

"Yeah. The Angelo and Claus business wasn't exactly a secret for people who were close to him." Her eyes lowered. "We all wanted him to stop. I worried about him a lot, you know? Claus was a real nice guy. He wasn't cut out to be a dealer." She let out a broken sigh. "But here I am, talking about him in the past tense, like he's dead."

"I'm going to find him." I tried to put my hand on one of hers, but she pulled it away. "Do you know what happened with the accident after Aiden's grad party?"

"I do as much as everybody. Chris and Claus got hit by a drunk driver."

“The accident happened really late at night, like 1 a.m. Do you know why?”

“No.” She ran her fingers through her short, pink-streaked hair. “No clue.”

“Did you wonder why Chris was gone for so long?”

“Sort of, but Aiden’s house is really big and you lose track of people, especially when you’re drinking, you know? Hell, I don’t remember seeing Aiden all that much, but he was probably hooking up with somebody. I guess I just assumed Chris was off getting stoned.”

“Chris smokes, huh? Is that how Claus got into drugs?”

“Maybe. It could have been Aiden, too. His parents actually made him leave Saint Dominic Savio’s after he and Chris and a bunch of other kids were caught baking.”

Here I imagined a bunch of teenagers preparing beautiful chocolate cakes and their parents shaking their heads in disapproval.

“I guess some people passed weed around to the whole class. Aiden got suspended for two weeks, and his parents were so embarrassed, they never wanted him to go back. You know Mr. Lefebvre. And the school took away some kid’s scholarship.”

I saw a flash of yellow and heard a hideous laugh. “Jesus!” I cried.

“What is it, Tony?”

“Of all the days, they have a real-life Ronald here?” I moistened with sweat. Ron’s shoes squeaked in the crowd, but I couldn’t see him. I hid under the table to avoid seeing his permanently smiling, make-up caked face. Pieces of gum stuck to the table’s bottom. Someone had taken the time to diagram all sorts of genitalia, even

some that as far as I knew didn't exist. I examined the plastic-and-wood hybrid table we were eating on, the pole that fixed it to the ground, and the tiles on the floor. I wondered who had designed all of this, and why they had done it that way. Whoever chose this one design impacted millions of people all over the world looking for inexpensive food.

Melissa interrupted my self-reassuring digression. "He's gone, Tony."

I slid back up into my seat and promised myself I'd write a piece about coulrophobia, the fear of clowns. It was a serious issue. Regardless, I could feel my face gushing red at the embarrassment of cowering before a mascot. I wanted to leave, but there was more to ask. "So, this next one is going to be a very awkward question. Claus wanted to have a talk with me before he went on the car ride that led to his accident, but he couldn't. I think he said it was about you. I don't know any better way to ask this, but why did you and Claus break up?"

"Are you cracked in the head? You do know that, don't you?"

"No. Could you tell me?"

"He never told you." Mel tapped her fingers on the table. "He really never told you? You had to have known."

"Why does everybody keep saying that?"

"So you're telling me you guys never--?"

"Never what?" Mel and I stared. We were both deer caught in each other's headlights.

"Don't play dumb." She raised herself slowly with her arms, not breaking eye contact until she was completely on her feet. She smiled at me inexplicably, then

scowled and in one quick movement, she spun around and stomped out the door.

I was half-angry that she walked out on me and half-relieved that I could make a break for it. I left through the exit that wasn't near cardboard Ronald McDonald. Finding my car without glancing back towards the building was harder than I expected.

* * *

I had left at least three pathetic, apologetic voicemails on Aiden's phone before he appeared in that sleek silver sports car in front of my house. I didn't know what to do with myself. I missed Claus so much, and Aiden at least distracted me from the fact that I had no other friends. We had fun, too.

"Aiden!" I hugged him, bending his thin frame back like a reed.

He was posing in front of his car with catlike nonchalance and sunglasses, so he received my hug like a statue. Finally, he begrudgingly put his ringed hands around my back and then pulled me off of him.

We drove off, up and down streets with no purpose.

"I'm sorry about what happened. Are you mad at me?" I asked. I knew I was being over apologetic, but I needed him to find Claus.

"Sort of." He stared forward for a second. "I'm starting to wonder if you're just using me for my money, my cars and my booze. I don't think you respect me. And I don't believe you're actually trying to find Claus. That's the one thing I asked you to do, and you don't care."

"Wait!" I said so loud he jumped in his seat a little. "I have been looking for Claus, and I can prove it. I found something."

“What’s that?”

“You remember the accident that Claus had after your party?”

“Oh boy.” He sighed, leaning his head against the window as he drove.

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, I noticed something very odd about it. The police blotter in *The Rome Record* described a one-vehicle accident, and an article a few days later describes two vehicles in it.”

“So? Don’t tell me you’re trying to say that the paper never makes mistakes, especially not *The Rome Record*.”

I felt the sting of that comment but knew it was fair. “Yeah. I just thought you might know something about it, since your dad totally takes over the article and talks about the perils of drunk driving and bears or something.”

“That was an ugly spot for my dad, so he had to make a public appearance and condemn it, understand?”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. Two kids, leaving a party at his house, get into an accident and one of them is a drunk minor. That’s a public relations nightmare.”

Our car passed a newspaper dispenser hanging open. A figure wearing a green jacket snuck up, stretched out a wiry hand and grabbed a stack of newspapers. He glanced over his shoulder before shoveling out another handful. I told Aiden to stop the car. I waited until we came to a complete stop. Then I jumped out of the vehicle and ran to the machine. The man in the green jacket saw me approaching fast and bolted down the sidewalk. I stopped to shut the dispenser and then chased him. I

visualized my paychecks floating away and disappearing into thin air with each ill-gotten issue in his hands. Those quarters made me a living. The man was clearly in better shape than I was and slipped through some bushes into the distance. By the time I made it through the shrubs, he was long gone. Why do people think it is okay to steal just a little bit, when they could realize so easily – if they wanted to – that all those quarters added up to a big sum of stolen money?

Aiden pulled up and stared at me. I got into the car casually. “Sorry. Pet peeve.”

He glared a moment longer before putting the car back in gear. “As I was saying, Tony, I think we’d just rather forget this whole accident business. Do you journalists have access to those police records?”

“I could probably get my hands on them. Why?”

“Just trash them. Don’t even bother looking at them. That would do a huge favor for my old man. Maybe I could see to it that you get something from him for the deed, too.”

I had never been asked to cover something up before. I stuttered. What was the etiquette for this kind of criminal activity? I imagined the police handcuffing me against my desk as I loudly proclaimed my innocence. Lieutenant Clemens could take a break from his eighties cop movie life to shake his head in dismay at such bright potential going to waste in this gritty, gritty world. “Would destroying the files really do you any good though?” I asked in reality. I fiddled with the cigarette lighter, trying not to look Aiden in the eyes. I dropped the hot burner on the floor.

“I have it on good authority that the Rome Police Department has barely

begun its crawl towards digitizing what it has. It's no surprise to me, seeing what kind of people they've got to work with." He was busy driving and didn't notice me scrambling in the darkness under my seat. "So if you destroy some documents from a run-of-the-mill accident some kids had five years ago, no one will notice, and Dad doesn't have to worry about some punk running a smear campaign against him."

I waved my hands to dissipate a little rising smoke. "Does that mean your dad will be running for office?"

"Who knows what he'll do next."

I grasped the lighter by the wrong end and quickly dropped it again.

"Are you going to grab those files, Tony?"

"Yeah, I will. Don't worry." I needed Aiden.

"Good. So, that accident happened ages ago. That doesn't have anything to do with where Claus is now. Do you have anything else for me?" Aiden glanced at me just as I caught the lighter between my fingers and sat up.

"Not really." I sank in my seat. "I heard about you having to leave Saint Dominic Savio's." I winced, hoping not to make him angry.

"That was dumb. We got two weeks of suspension and a bunch of community service. My dad was so angry that they'd punish his son, as if I was born in the manger or something." Aiden frowned. "He never let me go back, even though I wanted to. Keeping up his image was more important than my future." He laughed suddenly. "But I shouldn't have got in trouble. We had a fall guy."

I waited for the right moment and stuck the lighter back in the slot, sighing with relief. "A fall guy?"

“Yeah, Drake Capetti, you know him? Dad got Dom’s to give him some scholarship cause he was a wicked wrestler and our team hadn’t won a match in like twenty years. Apparently his dad got shot randomly when he was little, and then his mom couldn’t take it and became a drug addict, a big sob story. And we were supposed to be nice to him, and not make fun of his clothes or how he sucked at school. Basic bleeding heart liberal stuff, right?” Aiden jumped in front of another car, which honked furiously in response. Aiden flipped them off without looking back. “Of course Claus took a liking to him – Claus could never resist taking care of injured squirrels and being nice to freaks and whatever – and we ended up having to hang out with Drake. So, we used him as a lookout and stuff and gave him shit whenever we could because, unlike Claus, Chris and I didn’t care for him.”

I tried to visualize the four boys known as *los cuatros* racing down Saint Dominic Savio’s marble floors, past works of art and suits of armor, under golden chandeliers. Okay, I had never been inside the school, but I liked imagining in that way. Aiden would rub his hands together, his beady eyes devising the next prank. Claus, wearing a beret, a checkered shirt and backwards pants – dressed as randomly as his parents would allow that morning – would jump on board for the sake of rebellion. Drake would sit in the shadows, dutifully playing the lookout for his fake friends. After the prank would be over, Chris would point out their nefarious deeds to all the other students, his perfectly round head blushing with pleasure from all the attention he’d get. I remembered Claus telling me that the group had earned their name from an angry custodian who they’d crossed too many times, so she called them “*los cuatro culeros*” Claus didn’t know what *culeros* meant; they usually just referred

to themselves as *los cuatros*.

“Are you paying attention, Tony?”

I blinked. “Yeah, go on.”

“So, one time Chris and I make some hash brownies, right? And we give them to Drake like we were all nice and stuff. We told him to share them, because he’d never bring in treats to class for presentations. We had Claus give him the brownies because –not knowing about their special properties – he’d feel good about it.” Aiden still looked proud about his scheme. “So when Drake gets in trouble because everybody’s getting high, he says we three gave it to them without realizing what he’s doing. Then he panics and goes to my dad, who reminds him that real men don’t rat on their friends.”

“What did your dad say to you?”

Aiden scoffed. “He said, ‘Don’t take the blame for that, son. Don’t be stupid.’ So I wasn’t.” A condemning silence followed. “Drake took the hit for us, so they revoked his scholarship, and he went to Rome High. And Claus eventually left for public school, too; he convinced his parents he wanted to see ‘real life’ or something, as if Saint Dom’s wasn’t real. You know him and poor people. He only got wackier about poverty when he was friends with Drake. And Claus was so mad when they revoked his scholarship.” Aiden rolled his beady eyes. “Chris ended up joining us at Rome barely a year later. The dumbass didn’t do his community service, he made racist comments towards the one black kid at Dom’s, he did badly in class, he got stoned again and his dad was screwing the director’s wife, or something. He blew it basically.”

Aiden drummed his ringed hands on the steering wheel. We reached that awkward stage in a story that could be the end or just an intermission. I looked in the side view mirror and brushed my bushy hair out of my eyes. I ran my hands over the dials again, and my fingers lingered on the cigarette lighter, but I quickly retracted them.

Aiden picked the conversation back up. “But I liked it at Rome High. I almost never got stoned on school grounds there, though. They’d probably send me straight to the cops if that happened. Why are we talking about this? It’s not going to help us find Claus.”

“I’m having a really hard time, okay Aiden? I’ve talked to a bunch of people but I’m just not coming up with much. Maybe if I didn’t have a job I’d be making progress faster, but I’m still keeping up all my stories on the side.” I frowned, thinking of O’Mara and the Lione Locks story. For some reason he was being tight-lipped about the deal that had closed the local factory, almost as if he were guilty of something. At least he had managed to open the box I found in Claus’s room, and for free at that. Inside had been some cash, a safe deposit box key and a bud of weed. O’Mara had glared at me, but I assured him I was not responsible for the contents of this mysterious time capsule I had found in my backyard.

“Have you heard anything about the bank robbers, Tony? I’m just curious.” Aiden moved from lane to lane with one hand on the wheel. I noticed he had a long scar starting at his collar bone and going down inside his shirt.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to ask around next time I’m at work. What’s that scar?” We were going down my street again.

“Nothing. Well, I have things I’ve got to do.”

“Like what?” I quickly interjected.

He pulled up at the curb in front of my house. “Work, for my dad. So, I’ll see you around.” He looked away as if I suddenly didn’t exist.

“Bye.” I waved, but he didn’t notice. I watched him, waiting for some kind of acknowledgement, but he sighed, scratched his arm and looked straight ahead. I stepped out in the brisk night. As soon as I got my last leg out, Aiden shut the car door and sped away. I walked into the road to see him disappear. Whistling to myself in the too quiet evening, I formulated a plan. Next chance I got, I’d go to Claus’s place again. I had to make some progress, and I was desperate.

* * *

It was a close one. The long, jagged shard of glass came out easy. My foot was okay, but my shoe had been better. The wind haunted the shaking back door and the rest of the dead house. I needed to get closer to finding Claus, and here I was again, at his place. I pulled some more glass out of my shoe before walking through the rear entrance.

The floor creaked louder than it had before, but everything else looked the same. The sky was cloudy and cast a grey-blue light that made the home seem part of a surreal nightmare. In each corner hid phantoms of drug dealers who would leap out and bash my teeth out with the butts of their pistols.

Claus’s room looked as if it had been turned upside-down and shaken like a magic eight ball. I turned on the computer. The fan hummed, the RAM clicked and the disk drive whined. As I waited, it occurred to me that the police had yet to tape

up the place, release a public service announcement or acknowledge in any way that somebody was missing. Had no one told them?

I started Claus's instant messenger program and winced when it logged into his account automatically. Then, I waited.

Aiden needed answers and I needed Aiden, so the time had come for desperate measures.

Claus had a lot of people on his friend list, and I couldn't tell who was who, never mind which people he still talked to. Did he and Angelo IM? Was that how drug dealing worked? What if Chris came online? Could I trick him into telling me what really happened at the accident?

Ding!

DON_PAOLO2: WHO R U?

Opportunity knocked as someone who knew as little as I stepped onto the scene.

ELANTIER4: YOU FIRST. WHO ARE YOU?

DON_PAOLO2: ...MICHAELANGELO?

Sometimes it's tough to decide who you want to impersonate.

ELANTIER4: COULD BE.

DON_PAOLO2: NO U DON'T TYPE LIKE HIM. I KNOW WHO YOU AREN'T

If he knew I wasn't Claus, then what did that mean?

ELANTIER4: CLAUS?

DON_PAOLO2: U BETTER TELL ME WHO THIS IS. IVE SEEN U LOGGING ON AS
ME BEFORE

DON_PAOLO2: I WILL MESS U UP

This wasn't exactly the reunion I was hoping for.

ELANTIER4: IT'S TONY! WHAT'S BEEN UP CLAUS? I'VE BEEN WORRIED SICK ABOUT YOU.

DON_PAOLO2: HOW DO I KNO U R U

ELANTIER4: WE NEED TO HAVE A TALK, AND I'M VERY SORRY WE HAVEN'T HAD IT.

He didn't respond for exactly one minute and seven seconds; when an online conversation gets quiet, sometimes I like to look at the time stamp and to measure how fast we are going.

DON_PAOLO2: NOWS NOT A GOOD TIME

ELANTIER4: LET'S NOT WORRY ABOUT THAT RIGHT NOW. ARE YOU OKAY?

DON_PAOLO2: IM FINE IVE JUST BEEN HIDING. IVE GOTTEN MYSELF IN SOME TROUBLE

ELANTIER4: I CAN SEE THAT.

DON_PAOLO2: SO U KNOW WHAT IVE BEEN DOING?

ELANTIER4: YEAH...

DON_PAOLO2: MAYB WE'D BETTER CONTINUE THIS CONVO ON THE PHONE. PROMISE NOT TO TRACE THE CALL?

ELANTIER4: OF COURSE!

DON_PAOLO2 signed off.

I didn't have butterflies in my stomach; I had a flock of geese. For a moment I forgot that being in Claus's house was really scary.

As I listened to the third car drive by on the quiet evening, I started to wonder what was taking Claus so long to call me back. Had he lied to me?

Frippy curtains lined the windowsill. They were the only non-masculine items in the room. Claus had his Axe (body spray), his axe (guitar) and his weights to prove his gender identity. I toyed with visualizing a new room for Claus's imaginary sister, Claudette. Inside its pink walls, I managed to keep the curtains, the two axes and the weights. She might smell funny, but I could see her being a regular girl.

Four. Five. Six. Seven vehicles. Any moment I was going to leave a fist-sized hole next to the one M's crony had put in the wall. Did 'M' stand for Michaelangelo, the friend who had dragged Claus away from me that first time we'd met that summer?

I started pacing and cussing. I kicked Claus's books around until my phone rang and I felt guilty. I answered the phone but didn't say anything. I listened to his breath on the line, heavy and in large bursts.

"Claus?" I cringed, imagining a wrong number.

"I'm sorry that took so long, Tone," he said. "I'm on a payphone, and I don't have your number. So, I had to look your house up in a phone book and I asked your dad for your cell. It was awkward."

"That's okay." His voice sounded so deep over the phone. If he had used a phone book, he had to be in Connecticut still. I curled up in Claus's bed and nestled the phone against my face as if it were a person.

"Your dad asked me if I was Aiden, Tony. Have you been hanging around him?"

I wonder what my dad had thought when Claus called him. I hadn't mentioned the whole search for Claus. I didn't mention much at all to my dad.

"Yeah, why?" I ran my fingers over the sides of my phone and all the buttons.

"He's trouble. Watch out."

Did I detect a hint of jealousy? "If he's so dangerous, why were you guys such buddies?" I stared at the ceiling and wished Claus was there.

"How much about my life have you figured out, Tony?"

I began to talk, but I heard a crunching noise. "Hold on, I hear something."

The exterior door creaked. I prayed for wind.

The next thud was unmistakable. I unplugged the computer and scurried into Claus's closet.

Footsteps entered the room. The intruder was a loud mouth breather, probably male. He leafed through some books, moved some sheets and then went back into the hallway. He walked over to the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

I took a deep breath and bolted down the hallway.

"Who's that?" a gruff voice called. It sounded like the scar-faced dealer. I dashed into my car. As I sped away, I saw Scarface run out in the driveway, zipping up his pants.

"Are you okay, Tony?" Claus asked. I had almost forgotten he was on the line.

"I'm fine, but people are going through your house looking for something."

"Yeah, that's probably Angelo or one of his guys."

"Is that who you're hiding from?"

“I left for a lot of reasons. There’s the bank robbery, there’s you –“

“Me?”

“Tony, you have a tendency to just figure things out, and I was ashamed. I wasn’t sure you were going to take my side after all I’ve done. Maybe you’d turn me in with everybody else, even though they do things I never would.”

“I don’t understand what’s happened to you, Claus, but come back.” I tried to stuff my thoughts of CC, his drug-dealing amoral alter-ego, into the dark recesses of my conscience. “We can figure it out. We can make it work.”

“I’m not sure I can, Tony.” I heard shuffling, and then Claus lowered his voice. “No, you stupid machine, I don’t have any more quarters.”

“Why not? Why can’t we make it work?”

“Ah, listen, Tony, this thing won’t let me keep talking to you. I’m out of cash, and I can’t be having this conversation in public. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Wait, Claus!”

“I’m not even sure this was a good idea at all. Goodbye, Tony.”

Click.

I yelled and punched my steering wheel. I accidentally hit the horn and startled some driver on the other side of the road.

The sun was setting early, and downtown closed itself up. Street lamps and store lights turned on. I wondered whether I was near the end of my adventure or just at the beginning.

* * *

I glared at the receptionist to let off some steam as I entered *The Rome*

Record. Other than that and a lot of thoughts about Claus, the morning was pretty routine, until I made a discovery.

“Oh, God, what is this?” I gagged a little. Something on the ground next to my desk was brown and shaped like a small banana, a little over a centimeter in length. On second glance, there were three of them.

“I think they came from over there,” Lena said, pointing at the Director of Marketing’s office. It would have been a nice day in our messy office, but I could only tolerate so much, and I had pretty strict limits when it came to feces.

“What does he have living in there?”

Lena shrugged.

Ross dropped a folder on to my desk. “I got that police file you were looking for,” he said. His prickly face creased in spots I didn’t think could.

“You’re the best, Ross.”

“It wasn’t hard to get. See, Lieutenant Clemens’s kid got picked up with that batch of little stoners, and those in the know have seen it fit to remain silent.” Ross jabbed his paunch with his thumb.

“That’s nice.” Blackmail? All things considered, you couldn’t say what I was doing was any better.

Ross must have detected a hint of hypocritical judgment in my voice because he responded, “It’s the times.”

I called Aiden to let him know the good news, but as usual he didn’t pick up. So, I sent him a text message telling him that I had gotten the police file on the accident and spoken to Claus. I reclined in my chair, taking a long drag from my

coffee. As I began opening the police folder, my phone rang.

“Aiden?”

“How’d you get in contact with Claus, Tony? How’d you do it?” He sounded in a hurry.

“Easy. I went to his house and talked to him on his instant messenger. He had his login and password saved so I logged in as him and he contacted me.”

“Did you run into anybody there, at his house?”

“Why do you ask, Aiden?”

“I’m just curious. The place isn’t swarming with cops?”

“No, it isn’t.” I tapped my desk with my pen. “His parents are off doing Doctors Without Borders and the police don’t seem to have noticed Claus is gone. It’s really strange.”

“Alright. And you said you got that file?”

I glanced around the office and chose my words carefully. “Yes I did.”

“Hey, I just thought that maybe we should be more careful about destroying the file. Like, I’ll come down and take care of it for you. We wouldn’t want the cops finding scraps of it in your office, right? Is now a good time?”

The bald Director of Marketing came in walking something tiny on a leash. He had dark rings around his eyes. “Come, come, my Demogorgon. You’re the only one that appreciates me,” he called behind him. “If you owned a newspaper you certainly wouldn’t lay me off. Ha!” He bent down to pet his companion, and I could see dirt marks on his pants. I craned my neck over my desk to see a guinea pig, jet black with ears resembling wings. She had white streaks in her fur that looked like

little flames and tiny dark claws. Her shadowy eyes were always watching. The critter squeaked affectionately as the marketing guy ruffled her fur. He picked her up, swooped her around while making whooshing noises and then landed her gently in her cage.

“Are you there, Tony?” Aiden asked on the phone.

“Uh, yeah, sorry. Sure, come down now.”

“Be there soon, in like five.” He hung up without saying goodbye.

Some might say I’m nosy; I’d just say I’m curious. I didn’t wait for Aiden to show up and take away my find. I made a copy of it and hid the duplicate in my desk for later.

In other news, while investigating Lione Locks I had found reason to believe that Mr. Lefebvre was involved in the deal to move the big factory out of Rome. That must have been why O’Mara had been so hesitant to talk to me about the factory’s closing. I already had started sorting through our many stock photos of Mr. Lefebvre, searching for the ones where he looked the most evil. So far I had found a pretty good one in which he squinted and snarled at the camera. You could almost see him pacing in a cage, waiting to break out and lunge for your jugular. Pro-tip: if you ever want to make someone look bad, just take a picture of him while the sun is behind you.

In short, I was awesome. I was an unstoppable force of journalism, and Lena and Ross were minions to me. I did the right people favors, I had established contact, with Claus and I knew how to do it again. I could work this old *Rome Record* building, the streets of downtown, Chicory Hill, the city, Connecticut, you name it. I

was on top of the world. Yeah.

PART III: CONSEQUENCES

“This is okay, I got it,” I said to Lena, whom I had brought along as a lookout. Claus’s back door was locked, but I wasn’t afraid of this unexpected obstacle. I was going to get in his house, talk to him online and convince him to come home. I had been awake the night before, thinking about all the arguments I would use, and he owed me a lot of answers.

“And how do you propose that?” Lena asked. The sun highlighted the little frizzy hairs around her dark ponytail.

Claus’s door was brown, and a wooden lattice barred the window. The gaps were too small to fit your hand through, and the remaining broken glass threatened any exposed hands. “I’ve been researching locks, you see, so maybe I can pick this one,” I said, eyeing the keyhole. “What have we got here? Some locks are called pin-tumbler locks, and then there’s wafer locks and lever locks. One way you can tell what kind of a lock you have is—”

“Stand back, Tony, I’ve got an idea.” Lena approached the lock and wiggled the knob a bit. She took two steps back and then kicked right next to the keyhole. With a loud crack and some splintered wood, the door swung open.

I shuddered, thinking of the things she could do with her beefy arms. “That’s one way to do it.” Why did Lena always have to be so much more badass than I?

We entered, and I carefully avoided getting any more glass in my shoes. The light danced off everything so nicely, you almost didn’t notice that Claus’s place had been trashed. I galloped down the hallway into Claus’s room as Lena trailed behind, awed by the destruction of the house.

“Something’s different, Lena,” I said. The shelves were knocked over in the same way, the books were in the same spots, and the chair remained propped up at the desk where I put it, but something was missing.

“Uh, there’s no computer?” Lena laughed. “Or did he keep it in a different room?”

“Lookouts aren’t supposed to talk so much. They should listen. And look.” I ran over to the desk. The surface was slightly discolored where the computer had rested. I felt the wood in disbelief, getting a little dust on my fingers. Peeking over and under the desk, glancing all around the room, I started to cuss. “Where could it be? What the hell?”

“Maybe someone took it.” Her dark eyes surveyed the room, but nowhere near as frantically as mine.

“But why? And who?” Nothing else was missing. I couldn’t find any clues.

Would Scarface have grabbed it? Why hadn’t he taken it the first time? What had changed? What was he looking for, anyway? The key in the hidden box? Maybe. I hadn’t found out what the safety box contained, though; the bank was requiring me to show some photo ID. Lena said the place was creepy and that she

wanted to go. I was even more unsettled.

I was absorbed in my thoughts, so when Lena danced in her seat to the radio as we cruised down the street, I didn't mind too much.

* * *

We moseyed back into the office about ten minutes later, my head hanging low. Lena was enjoying giving me crap about my latest failure. It was still early in the day, and I had more things to look at.

"Well, that was pointless," Lena said, rearranging things on her desk. "But, it wasn't bad in entertainment value."

I shushed her. "I'm reading." I flipped through my copy of the police report. Aiden had picked up the original the day before, and I hadn't told him about my transgression.

"Well, you're no fun. It's time for a lunch break. See you."

The file detailed a one-car accident, involving Chris Williams and Nicholas Clayton. Claus's full name surprised me; I hadn't seen it in a while. He didn't like it very much. The report went into details about the damage and the contents of the car, including some used condoms and empty bottles. It also noted that while Chris claimed to have been struck by a drunk driver, there was no forensic evidence that suggested another vehicle was at the scene. Furthermore the police were puzzled by Chris's miraculous lack of injury. He seemed unharmed and refused medical treatment, even though blood was found on his seat. Claus's injuries presented a mystery, too; though glass had hit him in the chest, his shirt didn't have any holes in it.

I looked up the license plate and according to the DMV, the car belonged to a Mr. Jeremy Lefebvre, Aiden's dad. The dossier also suggested that the accident was caused by Mr. Lefebvre's car. His vested interests in the accident might have gone a little deeper than I originally had imagined.

As I finished perusing the files, I noticed the Director of Marketing in his office. On his desk was a plate with a large sandwich on it. He had only taken one bite, being busy building a large castle out of cards. His fingers slid each card delicately in place. His chateau stood a few feet tall on his desk. Demogorgon sat at the base, nibbling on a red Jack.

"Tony! I need you in my mumble, now!" Kevin called. "Please, sit mumble," he said when I came in.

I found this unnerving. He usually didn't remind me to seat myself. "Yes?"

"Tony, you know who Mr. Mumble Lefebvre is, right?" For once, Kevin was talking only and not multitasking on his computer.

"Of course."

"Mumble you know how important he is mumble our newspaper." Kevin's furry brows scoured everywhere in the room but my face. "He buys up a lot of our mumble advertisement space and we need his mumble."

"I don't see why you're telling me this."

"I mumble want you to know that it's very important, if you mumble mumble, that Mr. Lefebvre considers our mumble worthy of his advertisements. I got a phone mumble from him today. He can't be displeased with our mumble or he won't mumble with us."

“What are you recommending I do?”

“Just be careful what you mumble dig up.”

“I’m sorry, Kevin, but I must be misunderstanding you,” I said as diplomatically as possible. “It almost sounds like you don’t want me to get the truth out there.”

He leaned forward, eyes fixed on me now. “Without a newspaper,” he said, “there will be no truth.”

I returned his gaze uncomfortably.

“So, Tony, to mumble you back on track, I’ve sent a mumble assignment to your email mumble. You’ll mumble some fun with it, and there’ll mumble no worries mumble your opinions. That’s all.”

“Uh, thank you, Kevin.” Did I just thank someone who had threatened my job?

I went back to my desk and checked my email. Kevin had forwarded me an email from someone at Saint Dominic Savio’s. Apparently their preteen girls’ soccer team was going to have a match to benefit a local animal shelter. If I could just stop by and interview a few girls, well, they’d be so pleased, and it’s for a good cause!

Ugh. I vomited a little in my throat. I hate soccer. We have arms for a reason. And why do Europeans call it football? That’s just confusing.

Why would Mr. Lefebvre be angry if I was getting that police document out of the way for him? Had Aiden not told him I was going to do it? What was Aiden up to?

I heard a yelp. The Director of Marketing’s castle came tumbling down. He

groaned, his arms still raised with a card in a hand. Slowly he sank his head onto his desk. Furry Demogorgon came over and nuzzled his face.

* * *

“Why won’t you ever pick up?” I shouted at Aiden’s voicemail, which continued to recite dumbly his name and instructions. “Of course I know what to do after the beep. What kind of idiot do you think I am?” I hung up as the tone sounded. I probably left one of those annoying half-second silent messages, and I didn’t care. That would teach him to ignore my calls. “I’ll get you someday,” I threatened my phone.

Sitting next to me in the stands, a soccer mom glared. She was wearing a Saint Dominic Savio’s Girls Soccer Team tee shirt and colorful pants. I had somehow forgotten for a moment that I was at the painfully boring game Kevin had condemned me to cover. Little girls shouted at each other, dropping their dignified facades and wailing on the ball with animal ferocity.

No longer talking to myself in public went on my self-improvement to-do list. I smiled at the lady and asked, “What’s your daughter’s name?”

Her eyes were fixed on me as she scooted away, dragging a shiny bag with her.

“Ah,” I said for no particular reason. I hated soccer moms and their suburbs and their annoying children and their gas-guzzling SUVs. The sound of the girls kicking the ball punctuated our lack of conversation.

A wiry suit-wearing man, probably her husband, sat down next to her and handed her a coffee. He pulled out his car keys and pressed the lock button. A hybrid

Prius chirped nearby.

I sighed and closed my eyes, blocking out the shrill cries of the girls as they struggled for the ball and their parents' approval. I told myself I was behaving well considering the circumstances. This assignment had been a huge slap in the face. Sure, I had covered my share of crap stories, sometimes with a smile if I needed something to write, but this had "disciplinary action" written all over it.

I glanced across the green hills surrounding Saint Dominic Savio's. The main building stood like a castle watching over its moat. Sports fields and courts peppered the rounded landscape: baseball, football, basketball, even a lacrosse field. I never had understood what drew wealthy people to that sport. Could it be the French name? Are the sticks expensive? I wasn't even sure how you played.

The crowd cheered. A tall, lanky girl with broad shoulders scored another goal. She had been dominating the whole game, earning point after point. Nature had given her a monstrous growth spurt before her peers, and she towered over them as if they were ants. Her long legs sent her flying past her opponents at unmatched speeds. Sports at this age were cruel. I wondered if she'd stay skinny and be popular, or if she'd fill out her large frame, continuing her reign over sports while people called her a lesbian behind her back.

I took a note on my pad, reminding myself to find out her name for the article. The soccer mom, now several feet away from me, stared at my notepad.

"I'm a reporter," I said.

She nodded but didn't look convinced. Her dangling earrings drummed the sides of her face, but she seemed more concerned about me.

I couldn't put up with the awkwardness anymore, so I decided to take a breather and walk to the main building. I knew how the game was going to end anyway. The gardens in front of the entrance were well-kept and featured a statue of the school's namesake saint. I pushed a buzzer on the door, told the receptionist a journalist from *The Rome Record* needed the restroom and was let in.

Pictures of previous classes lined the wall. The school was pretty small, and you could tell when classes had changed size. I found a sixth grade version of Aiden and laughed; his front teeth had grown much faster than the rest of his face. When Aiden's class hit ninth grade, some people were missing. Aiden and the two people he stood next to in the eighth grade photograph weren't there anymore.

"Can I help you?" the same voice from the speaker asked me. In her tweed jacket suit, she looked like a frumpy lady but had shockingly red short hair.

"I'm just looking at some friends," I said. I recognized Claus beside Aiden in the eighth grade photo, and the kid next to them looked familiar. These three didn't appear in the ninth grade. Chris, on the other hand, had managed another year until he got kicked out. I pointed at the mystery guy. "What's his name again? I can't remember."

"That's Drake Capetti."

"Oh." Something about the lady's appearance and the boredom of the soccer game goaded me to cause trouble. "So why aren't Drake, Claus and Aiden in any more of these pictures?"

"They decided to pursue opportunities at different schools," she said stiffly. I was impressed that she managed not to wobble in those heels.

“Oh, so they were attracted to Rome High’s sterling academic reputation?
And what’s this I hear about Drake’s scholarship getting revoked?”

She straightened her tweed suit jacket. “We charge a reasonable fee.”

Well, she knew enough not to insult Rome High’s sub-par test scores, not that they really mattered. “So it had nothing to do with them getting in trouble?”

“None of the students faced expulsion, no.”

“Yeah, what am I saying? Aiden getting in trouble? Mr. Lefebvre pays way too much for that to happen.” I hadn’t realized until just then how angry I was. I had done this guy a favor, and now he threatened my job. I had helped his son out and never heard from him again. I was going to publish my findings on Mr. Lefebvre and Lione Locks. I wanted to take him out.

“I think you should go.”

“That’s alright,” I said. I took another look at Drake before I left. He had a long, pinched nose. His face was squished and twisted into an angry scowl. Shadows filled in his eye sockets, making dark orbs that followed you where you went.

Hello, Scarface.

* * *

Somehow Lena had managed to get me in her car. Chalk it up to persistence. She had tried to take me into McDonald’s, but I had kicked and screamed my way out of it. So, instead we sat inside her vehicle, and she gyrated to loud music while I fidgeted uncomfortably.

Lena said something that sounded like, “Don’t you hate how Guss isn’t supposed to have boobs?”

“What?” I yelled.

Lena turned down the volume, putting the auditory torture to an end. “I said, don’t you hate it how girls aren’t supposed to make the first move?” Her small hand crept like a spider over to my seat.

“I don’t know.” I stared in horror at her creeping digits.

She suddenly put both her hands down near the gear shift. “Tony, why don’t you like me?” The way her dark eyes took me in, I knew she wasn’t talking about friendship.

“Um,” I said.

“Is it because of,” she trailed off, looking at her arms.

“No, no,” I said quickly, and then realized with irritation that I had implied there was a reason I didn’t like her.

“Is it because we’re different? Is it cause I live in my car? That’s just temporary, until I find a place. McDonald’s won’t give me enough hours to afford an apartment, and the wait list for Wisteria Meadows is like five years.”

I glanced around. She had stuck pink skull stickers all over. An infinite amount of dangly things – beads, dice, air fresheners – hung from her rear view mirror. In the back seat were some clothes and food. “No. I didn’t even know that till recently.” I adjusted my seat up and down.

“Is it because I don’t have the swanky college education you do?”

“Hey,” I snapped, “I have student loans.”

“Yeah, and you had parents supporting you through college and raising you in an environment that allowed you to get the grades to go there.” Her hand darted

through her hair.

“Parent,” I retorted.

“Whatever. At least you had one. You ever wonder why I’m out here instead of back home in Indiana? You are lucky, you know.”

I glanced out the window. If we had gone into McDonald’s, at least I would have had an excuse to leave. “I guess you’re right.”

“You’re not the typical Chicory Hill spoiled but whiny white kid, but you’re still lucky. I’m fortunate too. I have a car, and that’s already a lot. Hell, at least I got clothes on my back.”

The Director of Marketing walked by stiffly and stopped to glare in the car for a long time. Lena waved, and he walked away without responding. The day before, Ross had told me that the Director of Marketing once had been a really goofy guy. One day he shaved all his hair off and stopped talking to his coworkers. Later they learned the higher-ups had threatened his job. What was he doing here anyway? Was he getting all his fabrics and crafts necessities at Yarn Barn? That’s pretty much all that was in this plaza.

“Hey Lena,” I asked, hoping to change the subject, “why did you get a grant to work at *The Rome Record*? I mean, I feel like the paper is on its way out, and you don’t seem terribly interested in journalism anyway.”

“I don’t know. I’d really like to do something in interior design. For me the paper was just a job, but working at a paper isn’t all that bad.” She laughed a little. “I remember Mr. Lefebvre made a big deal about it, though technically the Chamber of Commerce is paying me. He said he wanted to save the paper and what better way

to do it than to support the talented youth? It was something like that; you know how he talks with ideals every other word. He said I reminded him of some other kid he had helped get ahead. It was Drake something.”

“Oh, interesting.” I reached for the door handle. “Well, I’ve got go to!” Sneaky me.

“Wait!” She grabbed my arm, and I froze up. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m sure it’ll go away if you apply the cream regularly.” I opened the door. She laughed but didn’t let go. “Humor won’t get you out of this one. Why don’t you like me? We talk a lot. I invite you places, though you always say no. I do you lots of favors.” Her grip was surprisingly strong. “Why? Is there someone else?”

I wished I had an answer for her. “I don’t know why. Look, I’ll see you at work. Bye.”

Then I did the manly thing and fled. I realized a minute later I was in the middle of some random parking lot with no ride. I considered going back to Lena’s car, but when I got close I saw her hands covering her face. I felt guilty, as if I had done something wrong. My heart sank like a stone in my chest. So, I pretended not to see her and walked away.

* * *

“Tony, Tony, mumble. What are you doing?” Kevin reclined in his chair and thoroughly examined the space on the wall behind my head.

I wanted to ask him the same question. Kevin had come into the newsroom

and had solemnly requested in front of the others that I see him in his office. “Am I in trouble, Kevin?”

“You barely mumbled that mumble piece I gave you. You’ve mumble mumbling a hostile work environment.” He wasn’t deleting emails. He wasn’t trying to sort his messy office or field calls. He just sat there. “I don’t know any other way to mumble this.” Kevin let out a long sigh. His furry eyebrows almost hid his sockets in shame. “We’re going to have to mumble mumble you.” Relieved at having finally said it, he relaxed more in his chair. Unusually dressy today, he wore a striped shirt and tie but still sported a beard.

“I’m sorry?” A siren wailed in the distance.

“Me too, Tony, but we have no other mumble.”

“No, I mean, what did you just say?”

“You’re laid off, Tony.” He slapped his hands in his lap. “Mumble can’t afford to keep you around any longer.”

An invisible boxer socked me right in the gut. Time froze. I watched Kevin’s hairy fingers scratch his pant leg and pick off cat hairs for what felt like hours. I looked at him, at his computer, out the window, at the wall and back in his eyes. I listened to the floor creak outside the office. My lips moved wordlessly. I cleared my throat and finally managed to speak. “What? Why? What did I do?”

“Nothing. It’s just the mumble of journalism, you know.” Kevin’s eyes darted between me and the door as if he were trying to will me out of his room. “You mumble, there’s not enough subscribers, not enough mumble, not enough advertisers.” He turned to his computer as if to dismiss me. “I’m sorry.”

I thought he had threatened my job before, but I'd never expected him to make good on it. "If this is about Mr. Lefebvre, why did you let me publish the article on him and Eagle Lock?"

Kevin clicked his mouse vigorously and didn't turn towards me. "Censorship is wrong."

"And getting rid of me for what I write is okay?"

He stopped toying with his computer and put his hands in his face. "You're mumble being laid off, mumble not firing you. There's a difference."

"Well thank God for that!" I said, shoving my chair backwards so hard it fell over. I stormed through the newsroom, grabbing some things from my desk. I knocked some stuff on the floor, and Lena went to pick it up. I ignored her when she asked me what was wrong. Ross just shook his head. Demogorgon squealed in alarm while the Director of Marketing watched with vicious delight. I took a last glance at the colossal mess of a newsroom: the old papers, the empty desks, the clips on the walls, the mini-Christmas trees. I wasn't going to be the one who cleaned it all up. The receptionist stared at me as I stomped towards the front door.

"What?" I screamed, and then left. Rather than getting into my car, I took a walk around the block. I burned up with anger on the unusually cool day. Passing store fronts, town hall and other buildings, I reminisced about all the stories I had written and contemplated all the ones I'd never write. What the hell. Everyone hated journalists. Everyone always blamed the media. Maybe I didn't want to be a part of that anymore. How silly of me to think I could get paid for trying to tell the truth, how idiotic! Why would people give you money unless they wanted you to do

something in their interest? Why would the economy of information be any different?

I took a few random turns downtown and found myself at a pizza joint. In front of it, a guy had pitched a tent and was selling copies of *The Rome Record*. When he turned around I recognized him as the man in the green jacket who I had seen stealing papers from dispensers. We locked eyes for an intense moment. Then, I shrugged and walked on. It wasn't my paper anymore. Maybe it never had been. What was the point?

* * *

"You're being creepy again," I said to myself as I drove down Chicory Hill's long, wooded roads towards Aiden's house. "No, you're not. Yes you are. You're showing up at somebody's house uninvited. Be fair; he owes me answers. Crap, I'm talking to myself again. That's creepy." I turned on the radio to drown myself out. Why did Mr. Lefebvre get angry when I did him a favor? Why hadn't I heard from Aiden since he picked up that file? "You know perfectly well why!" He was friends with Scarface – Drake I mean – and they got in trouble together because of drugs. Our ugly mutual acquaintance was definitely still in the business, as I had discovered by tailing Drake before, so that meant that Aiden certainly wasn't up to any good.

As I pulled up to the glass Lefebvre residence, I noticed a Mercedes-Benz parked along the curb. Aiden embraced a sandy-haired guy so close, they could have been kissing.

"Claus?" I asked, no longer caring if I was talking to myself.

Claus got into his car and started the engine. The two people I had wanted to

find were about to part ways, and I had to make a quick decision. I chose to follow Claus.

We wound through the streets of Chicory Hill for a few minutes until Claus slowed down and let me pass. I stopped and noticed he wasn't moving either. I parked and got out of my car. My heart thumped double time to the rhythm of my walk. I couldn't make out his shadowy face at that distance and wondered if he could see me. Just as I got within a stone's throw, his vehicle roared back to life and he sped away. I dashed back to my ride, jumped in and gunned it towards him. He skidded past a stop sign, taking a sharp turn to the left. I followed and winced as I pushed my foot harder and harder on the pedal. My car shuddered and my tires screeched as I slid around the corner of the intersection. Claus did a flawless U-turn and before I knew it, he was behind me again and getting away. I tried to pull the same move, but I got scared that I would fly over the curb, so I gave up half-way through. Claus disappeared into the horizon. I attempted a three point turn, but it took six points. By the time I had about-faced and was heading his way, he was too far gone. After swearing and abusing my steering wheel, I decided to drive to his house and wait there, even if it took hours.

Drumming on my dash and humming to myself in his driveway, I wondered if I really had lost it. I probably had lost Claus, at any rate. How could I be so sure he'd come back home? His place wasn't safe anymore. The sun set. The crickets came out and chirped. The moon made a reluctant showing. With each passing car, I turned to see if it was him.

Then, headlights passed through my windows as someone pulled into his

driveway. Claus stepped out of his car.

I quietly shut my door behind me and crept up to the vehicle. I tried to speak but my throat shriveled and dried up. A twisted and confused past strangled me just as I was about to unravel it. At this point resolution was almost unimaginable. How were you supposed to reconcile with someone you didn't even know anymore? Finally I managed a weak "Claus?"

He dove into his car and pulled out a monkey wrench. "Who's that?" He panted anxiously. His head darted back and forth, as if expecting an attack from both sides.

I could barely make out his pointy face, and I couldn't see his smile. "It's me, Tony." I held my arms in front of my face as if flesh could stop metal.

"Oh, Jesus Tony, was that you following me? I thought you were the cops, or worse." He dropped the makeshift weapon and heaved a sigh.

"Don't tell me you're dealing again, Claus." I hated it when I spoke before reconsidering my words.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and looked side to side. He didn't seem nearly as annoyed as I'd expected. "I guess you were going to find out anyway. I need the money. It's the times, you know?"

I wanted to remind Claus that both his parents were doctors and that he didn't need the money. I should have been upset with him, but his wolf grin disarmed me.

"Well, you're here, I'm here, why don't you come in?" He beckoned me to follow and opened his back door with his key. Crossing the threshold, I flashed back to all the times I had come in the house with Claus during high school. They were

always my happiest moments. His room was like its own world where the rules didn't apply anymore, a sort of utopia or Garden of Eden. Things were different now at Claus's house. The window on the rear door was still broken, but the glass on the ground had been swept up. Claus had cleaned the place quite a bit, though it still showed signs of abuse, like scuff marks all over the living room, disorganized piles of broken things and a hole in the wall in the hallway. Yet I held on to those good memories so tightly that I could barely see the present.

“Do you want anything to drink, Tony? I don't really have much to –”

“Claus, I've missed you.”

This time I caught him off guard. He stared at me as if trying to detect a trap on my face. Men weren't supposed to miss each other, because that would be like having feelings. He must have been wondering what the hell I was up to, violating one of those unwritten masculinity rules. He decided to take a chance too. “I've missed you too, Tony.” The light cast a shadow in his triangle scar, making it look deep.

I had trouble remembering another time when we had been so barefaced with each other, besides the night I had cried in his arms, and I had been out of my mind then. We were on a roll, so I kept going. “Let's get things off on the right foot this time.” I had forgotten how tall he was. Whenever we were close, he'd have to glance down to see me, but there was something kind and protective in his gaze.

“Yeah, I've been thinking about that.” He stood up a chair that was knocked over in his kitchen and then went back to the hallway. “A lot of things should be out in the open that haven't, and I realized that it wasn't like me to be the one keeping

secrets.” His right eye winced because of the missing part of his cheek, but the left one looked happy.

I followed him to his room. The bookshelf had been fixed up and Claus had started putting his books back. Posters had been placed on the walls strategically to cover up marks. His sheets were back on his bed for the most part.

“I haven’t been here very long. This whole running away thing turned out to be expensive, and I needed my old job again. Aiden found me on AIM under my screen name a little while after you did – I assume you did that, thanks – and he’s sort of my connection to Angelo.”

I clenched my fists. That’s where Claus’s computer had gone. Aiden had used me. That ass! Had the whole friend thing been a ploy to get at Claus? Is that why I hadn’t heard from Aiden in forever? But if I actually had enjoyed spending time with Aiden, what did that mean? Did he like it too? I took in a deep breath and shook a little.

“Are you okay, Tony?”

I wasn’t going to interrupt Claus when he was telling me the truth, though.

“Yeah, keep going, sorry.”

“Plus Aiden told me I’d get protection from Drake, so I felt safe coming back.” Claus shoved some things off his bed and sat down. It was unclear how much of the mess was from a break-in and how much was his inability to stay organized.

“But I’m sure you know all about that.”

I had spent the whole search pretending I knew more than I did so people would tell me other things. I decided this time I could be honest. “No, I don’t, truth

be told.” I noticed Claus’s computer was back on his desk.

“Well, this doesn’t get out to anyone, understand? Anyone.” He waited until I nodded to continue. “Drake robbed the bank. I recognized him. You know, we both get our stuff from Angelo. We know each other. Anyway, I wanted out, because I’m not a bank robber. Will I help some people feel good with an herb? Sure. Will I steal from people or be violent with them? That’s a whole other story.” Claus found a half-empty bottle of soda on the ground and picked it up.

I realized I was pacing back and forth as he told me the story, so I sat on the bed next to him.

His story sounded like a confession, complete with random pauses and ashamed glances. “So I fled everything, and I guess Drake wanted my head on a stick because he thought I was going to rat on him, and I still had some shit on credit so Angelo was mad. Then, Aiden said he could keep me safe. Apparently his dad has some dirt on Drake’s mom, so Drake won’t touch Aiden. Plus Drake still has this weird father-son relationship with Mr. L where he looks up to him but also kind of hates him now. Anyway, I’ve given back everything of Angelo’s or sold it, so that’s all good. There’s one thing that worries me, though. Something of mine was taken: an old Lione Locks box, a gift from Mr. Lefebvre actually.” He sipped the soda.

Oops. “Oh, that was me, sorry.”

Claus gave me a confused look.

“Oh, I should probably explain that, huh? It was part of my investigation to find you.”

“That’s okay.” He laughed. “Can I have it back?”

“Of course. All I really found in there was a safe deposit key, and I couldn’t use it at the bank. What’s in there, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“You got it open? Wow. I don’t know what’s at the bank. Aiden asked me to keep something for him in the deposit box. It’s some big manila envelope. I never looked inside.”

“I’d be careful about doing favors for him.” I bunched up the sheets with my hand and released them over and over. It was such a relief to be honest about everything, but I still hadn’t quite added everything up. I had to choose my words carefully. “Hey Claus, why aren’t you avoiding me anymore?”

“I don’t know. You haven’t ratted on me yet. And why would you? We go way back, and I’m getting the impression that you haven’t forgotten everything.” He smiled, and I tried to.

“That talk,” I said, unsure how to begin.

“That talk,” he said.

I traced the patterns on Claus’s blanket. “What is it about?”

“You know what it’s about, Tony,” Claus said with a hint of annoyance.

“No, I don’t.” I really needed to hear him tell me.

“Seriously? You act like you don’t remember, and sometimes I wonder if you really do. You know what went down. You need to acknowledge it first.” He sat down on the rumpled bed.

I stared at the floor and crunched my face as if Claus had just pointed a spotlight directly at me. “We did something.”

“We did. Go on, say it.”

“You say it.”

“Hey, I admit it happened. I mean, I don’t go around telling people, but --”

Why wouldn’t he talk about it? “Are you trying to embarrass me, Claus?”

He raised his voice ever so slightly. “Are you embarrassed by what you did?”

His pupils widened.

I spoke louder, too. “Should I be?”

Words spilled out of his mouth as if his throat had suddenly unclogged.

“Damn it, Tony, you know how long it’s been? And you can’t even step out of your comfort zone for one freaking second and talk?” His hands were trembling. “Is it easier to listen to other people doing the talking and be all critical of them like you do?”

I leapt to my feet. “Hey, I’m not like that!” Sometimes when you’re angry, you deny things you know are true. “You’re such an ass sometimes.”

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you?” He got up slowly.

“I can’t deal with this.” I rushed down the hallway. “Screw you!” I yelled, slamming the door as hard as I could. I knew I wasn’t making sense and that he was right, but I wasn’t ready to admit it to myself yet. I needed to be outraged and punch things and burn trees and key cars and smash glass. I kicked the tire of Claus’s Mercedes-Benz and screamed when my foot bounced right back to me. Then I got into my car and hyperventilated for a while.

* * *

On the drive home, I stared myself down in my rear view mirror. I knew what Claus was talking about. I just had to face it. But why was he acting the way he was?

What did he feel? This was the one moment I didn't want to deal with, the unveiling of the truth, the part of the play where everybody took off their masks and their face paint and bowed, and you got to see what they really looked like.

I begrudgingly let my mind drift to the weekend before the grad party. I had been sleeping over at Claus's house, as I often did to avoid being at my own. We were lying on the floor side by side, wrapped in blankets, playing Super Nintendo and drinking punch and vodka. The video games were only a distraction; we were talking about what we wanted to do with our lives. We both decided to get out of Rome as soon as possible. How we were going to save the world after that was unclear.

"It's blazing in here," Claus said, taking his shirt off, but sliding back under the blankets. "Isn't it annoying when it's hot, but blankets are really comfortable and you can't decide whether you want one or not?"

I stared at his broad shoulders, his prominent neck bones and the top of his chest. The television threw light into the dark room, highlighting all of his curves. "Yeah." He had a few freckles on his right shoulder.

"Aren't you warm?" He brushed his sandy hair out of his eyes. "You can take your shirt off too."

I was sweating. "No, I'm fine." I blushed.

"Okay. Anyway, so, after college, I want to try to work at an NGO on every continent. I want to see the world, and I know one place on every continent is barely any of it, but it's a start." I hadn't even known what a non-governmental organization was until I met Claus. "There's just one thing that makes me nervous."

"What?" I stared at his soft cheek, next to his arrowhead-shaped nose, where

there was not yet a triangle scar.

“I’m afraid of being lonely. I’d need someone to come with me, preferably someone who does the research, writes, and keeps the information straight.” He looked at me. “I need an info man.”

“Claus, I would go with you anywhere.” I smiled so hard my face hurt.

“Good.” His wolf-grin was bigger than ever, too. We stared at each other. I got lost in his gold-specked blue eyes. On the television screen, Mario died, unnoticed. I hadn’t realized how close our faces were until our lips gently touched. I smelled Claus’s breath, bitter and acidic, not like a girl’s, but it made me want him more. I held his delicate cheeks, stuck my tongue in his mouth and closed my eyes. His warm body wrapped around mine, and his hands glided under my shirt, over my love handles and across my chest, and, well, you get the picture.

We fell asleep in each other’s arms. We clutched each other as if we never planned on letting go. Every now and then I woke up, looked at his eyelashes, smiled and drifted back off.

By some feat of denial, we managed to wake up the next day, eat breakfast together and part ways without one of us pointing out the fact that we had made out the night before. Neither of us knew what to say. I had never done that before with a guy. Had he? Did this mean I liked Claus as more than a friend? How were you supposed to tell? I hadn’t thought about kissing him until it happened, I think. Maybe. Part of me wondered whether this would be a repeat of every other time we got close, physically or emotionally. Would we always act as if it had never happened?

* * *

Now, five years later, I waited for Claus to call me back. I hedged everything on the unfair expectation that he'd get back to me and explain and fix it all. But I couldn't fool myself for too long; the ball was in my court. At the same time, I was too cowardly to show my face in front of him. So, I picked someone less intimidating.

This time I had convinced Mel that if she wanted fast food, we could meet at Burger King. I'd be fine as long as nobody wore that creepy as hell King mask that was always watching, always smiling. This joint was emptier and quieter than McDonald's had been during our previous meeting. I had picked an off-meal time. The seating and walls were painted in neutral tones. I sat in a corner booth, as far away from the cashiers as possible. The window chilled my skin as I leaned against it; the sky was cloudy and added cool, subdued colors to everything. Two employees were arguing loudly near the bathrooms.

Melissa tapped her long nails on the table. Blemishes underlined her eyes. "So, you said on the phone that you knew where Claus was. Dish," she said with characteristic patience.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you where he is and how you can get in contact with him. But first you have to help me with something."

"What?" She craned her ostrich neck in disbelief.

"Explain Claus to me."

"Yeah, sure, no problem!" Melissa snorted so hard her nose ring moved.

"Are you kidding me? What kind of question is that?"

I hunched my shoulders. “Just help me figure out something. Answer a question. Please?”

She was taken aback by my deference. “Go ahead,” she said slowly.

“Claus wanted to have some talk with me before the grad party and at the end. I tried to ask him yesterday what it was about, and he got angry.” I decided not to tell her what the talk was about, in case she wasn’t aware. “I know the grad party was after you guys broke up, but I was wondering if you could tell me what’s going on with him.”

“Well of course he’s mad. He’s been pissed for a while. You haven’t acknowledged anything. The reason he dumped me in the first place is because you guys hooked up.” She said it quickly and ruthlessly, as if punching a bag while wearing a blindfold.

I couldn’t formulate words. I felt blindsided, though I should have guessed it would come up.

“You did screw around, didn’t you? Don’t tell me Claus faked being gay to make me feel better. No, he had to be for real; he was pretty crazy about you.”

Claus had never had the chance to tell me how he felt. Did he still want me? Or was he angry because he preferred to forget about kissing me altogether?

“You’re creeping me out, Tony, just spacing out like that,” Melissa said. “Say something.”

“Uh,” I paused. “I’m sorry.” I spun the straw wrapper around in circles, hypnotizing myself. I didn’t want to think. I didn’t want to listen. Why had I even started?

“I had never been cheated on before.” Melissa must have been holding this in for a while, judging from the way she kept going and didn’t pull any punches.

“Maybe if you guys could have gotten out of the way whatever you had going on before he dated me, it would have been fine.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mel.” I forced myself to glance at her. No one ever believes someone who looks away and denies something.

She started flicking her nose ring again. “Whatever. I mean, it’d be one thing if he cheated on me with a girl, but with a guy? Was I that bad? And that’s just plain gross.”

“What’s gross?” I felt a rock in my stomach.

“Well, face it Tony. Creatures of the same sex doing,” she paused, “*things* is unnatural.” Mel scoffed and played with a pink strand in her hair. “It’s against evolution.”

I didn’t want to talk about myself, but I knew the answers to that line of reasoning. “Unnatural? Do you know how many animals out there are bisexual? Giraffes, bonobos, lions, kangaroos, chickens, types of penguins and fish and tortoises and snakes, and even house pets do it sometimes.” I had done my homework on this before. I had argued for same-sex marriage in debate club. “Besides, some animals rape and kill each other, so not everything called ‘natural’ is so great.”

“Well, fine, but it’s against God.” She folded her arms. “You’re a homo, so you’re a sinner.”

“I’m not a homosexual. And God also said to love your neighbors. If you

think being gay is wrong, then don't be gay. But why do people give queers trouble? Huh?" I unleashed my fury on my helpless French fries, tearing them in half. "If they're already going to Hell for eternity, then why do people feel the need to hurt them in this life?"

"I don't have to listen to your gay agenda propaganda." She got up to leave.

Did she think I had a little sausage-loving subcommittee that got together on Sundays and plotted how to overthrow the heteros? "Now wait a minute, Melissa!"

"No!" Now we were both shouting, and the whole place got quiet. The two employees stopped arguing. "I don't have to wait a single second for the guy who screwed my boyfriend!"

"Screwed?" I whispered. "As in had sex?"

"Yes," she said, sitting back down. "You guys did it." The few patrons present resumed chattering, and the two workers got back to bickering.

"But I thought we just kissed. You know, on the mouth-- and it's not that abnormal, I mean the French do it, and they're pretty Catholic and-- not sex, I don't even know-- what is sex between two guys, technically speaking?" I had lost my ability to formulate complete sentences.

"I don't know, Tony, he wasn't too specific. He said that you guys made out for a long time, and at first he thought that was going to be it. You guys cuddled for a little while, but then you started up again, and you were drinking a lot, and he kept asking you if you were sure you wanted to go that far. You don't remember any of this?"

"No, none of it." I had stopped eating. I had stopped feeling. I had stopped

everything except for listening to Mel's voice and replaying that night in my head.

"Maybe. I don't know."

"Yeah, well, he kind of went nuts about it. He didn't know what to feel. Half the time he worried he went too far and wracked himself with guilt. The rest of the time he wondered if you just used him, or if you wanted him and then couldn't admit it to yourself cause you're uptight sometimes."

I ignored the insult and didn't say anything for a while.

"So, Tony, what about my part of the deal? Where's Claus?"

"Oh, he's back home. He'll probably even start picking up his cell now."

"You know, you're a real douche bag sometimes." She slammed her hands down and got up. Her lips curled, preparing some nastier words, but then only trembled as she spun around and breezed out the door, slamming it in the quiet eatery.

I sat in my booth, thinking about myself more than Claus. You think you know your own self, and then you realize you're too busy trying to see yourself as what you're supposed to be. Why did alcohol have to be involved that night? Would it have happened otherwise? People say *in vino veritas*, but did anybody think that our drunken selves – our crowd-surfing, car-crashing, impatient, overly emotional dumb selves – were who we truly were? Who did my body belong to when I drank? My stomach churned at the thought of me not being in control. I wanted to be sick.

I felt self-conscious in public, as if everyone could read what I was thinking, so I tossed out my leftover fries and drove home.

* * *

I wiped away fog from the bathroom mirror and stared at myself. My hair still

dripped from the shower. I had spent a good twenty minutes just washing and wondering, as if scrubbing hard enough would allow me to see what was underneath my skin. Now I reached out to touch my reflection. I needed two of me to figure out the questions in my head.

“Am I gay? Shit!” I viewed my face from all angles. My features were standard, kind of rounded but in a typically male way. I didn’t look particularly feminine at all. My voice didn’t hiss a high-pitched lisp. I tugged at the collar of my tee shirt. My fashion sense was negligible. I didn’t listen to girly pop stars. When I walked from place to place, my arms were at my sides and not half up with the hands bent down. “Good. Not looking gay at all.”

“Tony!” My dad knocked on the bathroom door. “What are you doing in there?”

“Nothing, Dad!” I was just having an identity crisis. “I’ll be out in a minute.” These things didn’t take long.

I was a little OCD about some things, and gays were supposed to be neat. Maybe that made me a homo, but I felt as if I needed more than one sign to be sure. Then I thought about Claus. He was pretty masculine. Sure, he didn’t have much facial hair but he had a nice, built frame and a voice that was deep enough. And, he was far from organized.

Claus. I had spent so much of the summer looking for him, and why? Were we old best friends? Was I just lonely? Or was there something deeper? Was it that feeling in my stomach when I imagined his wolf grin? The giddy laughter at things he said that weren’t even funny? The way he understood me? How safe and happy I

felt in his arms?

“Come on, me,” I said. One time when I was six, Mel and I had kissed. It had felt good. In fact, I had dated girls before, but never seriously. Heck, I had kissed them too. Girls were nice. They were soft, and they smelled good. I liked breasts, and I liked butts, especially butts. “Crap. Does that make me straighter or gay?”

My sexuality was the million-dollar question, and I needed to phone a friend. Who could I call? Whose opinion did I respect the most? Who knew me best?

I threw my clothes on quickly. I had answered one of my questions. I didn't know if I was gay, but I wanted Claus.

As I stepped out of the bathroom, I ran into Dad. He stared and cocked his head to the side, as if my face had been different the last time he had seen it. I returned the gaze and imagined myself talking to him. I told him that when we both had our own places, when we both knew who we were, maybe we could talk as equals. Maybe we could be honest.

* * *

The walls in my room were too thin for this phone call. My dad would get angsty if I spent too much time in the bathroom. The office was a no go. I had picked the one place where I had real privacy: my car. After listening to my heart pound for a minute, I dialed Claus's number. I started speaking before he could even say hi.

“Claus, I know now. I know what happened, even though I forgot we did anything more than kiss. I didn't mean to put you through that.”

“Wait, Tony, what?” It took a second for him to understand what I had just

said. “Oh Jesus, you didn’t remember?” His voice cracked. “I’m so sorry. I am so, so sorry.” He sniffled. It sounded as if he were crying, but I wasn’t sure. Was he replaying that night in his head right now? Was he regretting it? Did he feel as if he had had sex not with me but someone else? Or was he sad because he thought he had hurt me? Had he hurt me?

“No, don’t be sorry.” My face formed an awkward medium between smiling and grimacing. I suddenly felt claustrophobic in the car. I wanted to run out the door screaming. But I had to do this. I couldn’t let him drown in his own guilt. So, I took a deep breath and continued. “I’m sorry about the way we did it, but I’m not sorry that we had, we had, well--” I closed my eyes. “Sex. All this time, I think you’ve always been what I’ve wanted, but it’s been too awkward – too hard to admit it, even to myself.”

Two eternities passed before he responded. The universe was created, destroyed and created again. What if the talk was supposed to be him telling me we’d never do that again? That I should get out of his life and never see him? “Are you sure you’re okay with it, Tony?”

“I think so, yeah.” I begged myself not to make a promise I couldn’t keep. “Most of all, I want to start over, and to do it right this time.”

Claus sighed. “Tony.” His voice was scratchy and quiet. “This is real life.” I couldn’t hear his smile anymore. “It isn’t a video game. There are no do-overs. I’ve changed a lot, and so have you.”

“But--” This is not what I had expected.

“I’ve spent five years waiting around for you, Tony. Five years. And I’ve

pretty much given up.” His voice picked up speed. “It’s great that you’re acknowledging it now. But how do I know that won’t change in a week? A day? An hour?”

“Claus!” I had to admit he was right on some level.

“I can’t go back into this and still respect myself. I fell,” he said, pausing over two absent words, “for you more than I ever have anyone, and all I got was denial. And Aiden was so good about it. At least he still visited me in the hospital.”

“Aiden?”

“And when we tried sleeping together again, I don’t know, it just worked.”

“Sleeping together? Again?”

“Yeah. I left the grad party with Chris, but Aiden came out later to see how I was doing, and we actually had a guys’ night out. And I was pretty messed up emotionally, with the break up, and with arguing with you and thinking you were never going to acknowledge what happened, so I made some mistakes, tried some drugs I will never do again, and Aiden and I had sex. Then we got into the accident, and he had Chris take his place so we wouldn’t get in trouble. I was out cold, but I guess Aiden and his father hid that we fooled around too. And, and--” Claus trailed off.

“And what?”

“And when we did it, I pretended it was you. At first, but eventually I came to terms with the fact that I couldn’t have you, and I decided to be with someone who could admit that he wanted to be with me. And yeah, the first time I slept with Aiden, it was probably a stupid decision. You make bad choices when you’re in that much

pain. But it worked out well for us.”

“And he’s a drug dealer, isn’t he? He’s the one that got you into drugs.”

Claus fell silent. I knew I was right.

“Please, Claus, just give me a second chance.”

“I can’t, Tony. I just can’t. I have to go. I’m sorry. Bye.”

“Wait!” Click.

I chucked my cell against my dashboard. By chance the phone bounced off just right and landed on the seat, undamaged. I grabbed it and tried to call Claus again, but he didn’t pick up. I buried my head in my arms and rocked back and forth, asking myself how it could have ended up like this.

* * *

My hands clutched the steering wheel. I had told myself not to go anywhere after that phone call, but I couldn’t stop. My fingers turned the key automatically as if pulled by strings. Now I was driving too fast down the streets of Chicory Hill.

I was pissed. My eyes needed windshield wipers, but that didn’t stop me from driving. I clawed tears out of my face and squinted to see the road.

Everything had gone wrong. Everything. And I decided it was one single person’s fault: Aiden Lefebvre. Like a robot I found myself going to his house without any clear idea of what I was going to do next. I was in my own world; I nearly hit a car at a four-way intersection. My tires screeched as I swerved around the other vehicle.

The rows of trees along the road blurred into one brown and green mess. My nose ran. I squinted. I didn’t have Claus. I didn’t have a job. I didn’t have friends. I

didn't—

Thunk! My car hopped the curb. I jerked the steering wheel but kept skidding down a hill towards the forest. I alternated slamming on the breaks and the gas until a tree smashed my left headlight. The tail of the vehicle slid into some bushes. My head slammed the side window as everything came to a halt. The world grew quiet. I could hear only my shuddering breaths and wet snuffles. My eyelids sank and rose like rocking ships.

I didn't move for several minutes. My turn signal ticked, though I didn't recall using it. When I tried to get up, I found to my surprise that I was uninjured. I lacked the will to push myself, but eventually a sort of heartless curiosity made me stumble out and survey the damage. I hadn't totaled my car, but I didn't see how I could get it back up the steep incline without some help. My head swam in my tears. Instead of calling somebody, I started walking down the street. I swayed from exhaustion. Every now and then my knees buckled and I would nearly fall. About half a grueling mile further I reached Aiden's house, the giant aquarium of wealth and deception.

I shouted his name as I punched the doorbell over and over. I peered through all the glass and windows but didn't see anybody. I must have pounded for five minutes. Exhausted, I sat down and leaned against the wall in front of his house. I almost fell in when it opened.

“Tony?” It was Aiden. He ruffled his frosted hair with his ringed hands.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“You're a drug dealer!” I thrust my finger at his face as if trying to skewer his

cold eyes. “Dealer!”

“Come in.” He pulled me by the shirt collar into his house.

“You sell drugs!” I hissed.

“Hey, it’s the times. We’re going through a depression, and we have to resort to drastic measures.”

“Yeah, a depression, and you’re part of a wealthy family in arguably the richest country in the world! How do you think everyone else gets by? I don’t want to hear any of this self-pity crap.” I couldn’t breathe very well with all the sobbing and mucus. “You got Claus into drugs. You started all the way back at the grad party, and now he’s not the same anymore!”

“Hey, just cause I let him try a little E doesn’t mean I’m a bad guy. And your wonderful CC – I mean Claus – deals drugs too, you know.”

“I don’t care! You used me to find him so you could keep making money and cover up whatever you did that night with him. I’m going to take you out!”

I was a belligerent weeping mess, and Aiden laughed at me. “And what are you going to do? Fight me?”

“I’ll get the cops on your ass. I’ll do something!” I gesticulated wildly, knocking down one of the picture frames from the wall.

“If you think you can get away with that, you’ve got a few things to learn, you little—“

“I’m all alone now,” I wheezed, sinking to the floor. “All alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“I asked for Claus back, and he said no. You stole him from me.”

“Hey, hey,” Aiden said, crouching down to me. “You’re not all alone. You got me.”

“What?”

“Follow me.” He led me down the Lefebvre hall of fame, up a tall staircase and into his room, where so many years ago we had pretended to fight off bad guys but couldn’t move the bed to protect ourselves. The space had changed little over years. He had a big sound system, a laptop and a large television flanked by tall racks of DVDs. There were several shelves that had nothing on them, as if he were afraid to leave his things out. The ceilings looked lower now, and the bed didn’t appear quite as tall. Everything seemed smaller.

The spell Aiden had cast wore off quickly. “How do I have you?” I asked. “You’re the one who screwed me over!”

“So Claus doesn’t want you back. He got over it.” Aiden put both his hands on my cheeks. “That’s not my fault, and that’s too bad for him.”

I pushed Aiden’s hands away and stepped back. “He said he couldn’t take me back, not that he didn’t want to.”

“We need to talk,” Aiden said in a whiny voice. “It’s not you, it’s me. I’m not ready for a relationship right now. I wouldn’t want to lose our wonderful friendship. Haven’t heard very many rejection clichés, have we?”

“What are you getting at?” I moved towards the door.

He stepped in the way. “Claus isn’t into you. But I am. I’ve been for a long time.”

“You have?”

“I,” he paused, “wondered about you guys way back. Everyone saw how close you and Claus were. I hoped you were like me. And when Claus told me you guys had had sex, well, I was really glad.” Aiden kept getting closer to me, and I was growing tired of dodging his advances.

“How come everybody knew about that except me?”

“Do you understand now, Tony? It’s always been about you.” Aiden smiled. He never smiled.

“Yeah, well why’d you sleep with Claus the night of the grad party, then?”

Aiden stopped in his tracks and snorted. “So, you know about that. It helped me find out the truth about you, right? Plus when he and Melissa broke up I thought I’d never see you guys again.”

I wished that Aiden’s story would start making sense again. “I guess.”

Then, everything fell apart and before I knew it, I had been sobbing in Aiden’s arms for a minute. Everything seemed to be happening without any input from me.

“Tony, I went a little too far with Claus when I tried to cheer him up. We were both so high. But, it doesn’t matter anymore. You’re not chasing Claus’s shadow around anymore, and we can be together.” Aiden clutched my wrists. Then his fingertips glided up my arms, across my shoulders, up my neck and onto my cheeks.

“Is this happening?”

Aiden didn’t give me time to think about it. His lips touched mine for a split second before he shoved me onto his bed. I drowned in his kisses – on my mouth, face, neck – as he pinned me down with his legs and tore my clothes off. I wrestled his shirt off and grabbed his soft, white chest as my belt hit the floor. On his torso

were the hidden scars of the accident he shared with Claus. I tried to kiss Aiden's mouth, but he pushed my head back down on the bed. He clamped down on my neck and sucked until I felt the sharp sting of pleasure. Then his lips began to creep down my body.

* * *

It took me a minute to realize where I was, waking up from a short, endorphin-assisted nap. Part of me almost felt proud. I was finally able to say what I wanted and get it. And it felt good. But something was wrong. There was no sugar in my coffee. I had never imagined things happening this way.

Aiden was gone. I couldn't say I was surprised; I didn't expect him to have the best bedside manner. I didn't have particularly good manners myself, so I decided to snoop around. In one of his dressers I found the good stuff right away: a bunch of game systems and video games, mostly the violent and criminal kind. Obviously, these were the sole inspirations of Aiden's illicit activities. In the drawer below, I found a Lione Locks box, like the one Claus had but bigger. I couldn't open it.

I heard a thud. I sprang away from the dresser and tried to act natural, but nobody came. I peeked out the doorway, down the hall both ways. To the right was a staircase leading down. On the left was a doorway at the end of the hallway. I grabbed the handle and hoped I wasn't entering somebody's bedroom.

I found myself in the bathroom. Everything was spotless. I wondered how much the Lefebvres' housekeeper cost. I heard faint music coming from the hallway and wondered who was playing it. The tune sounded awfully familiar.

Any morally questionable journalist knows you can learn a lot about someone

by looking in his medicine cabinets. Aiden had prescriptions for Vicodin, Ritalin, Valium and OxyContin. What a poor, sick little boy. A second later, I recognized the quiet sounds as my cell phone ringing. I dashed quietly out the door and into Aiden's room, though I nearly picked the wrong door on my way back.

I had missed a call from Claus, so I listened to my voicemail.

“Hey, Tony, it's Claus. Give me a call back when you get a chance. Bye.”

I wondered what it could be about. Hadn't I burnt that bridge already?

Sighing, I slowly closed my flip phone, until at the last second Claus's voice returned, and I yanked the phone back open.

“No, this can't wait, Tone. I'm sorry. Like so, so, so sorry. I don't know what I was saying. Yes, it's been five years, but I've never stopped thinking about you. I've never connected to anyone like I have you. It's like we grew from the same seed or something. I can't say I'll get back together with you right away, because we have to see if we work the way we used to. But maybe we're luckiest like this, you know? Getting to know each other again, getting to fall for each other again.”

I clutched the receiver as if I was in a tornado and my phone was the only thing holding me down. Claus didn't say anything for a minute.

“So, yeah,” his voice cracked. “That's that. Call me back.” Click.

I rolled on the bed in smiling euphoria, dreaming of the one I had been waiting for. That is, until the unfamiliar setting reminded me I had just had gay sex with the drug-dealing ex-boyfriend of the one I had been waiting for. Was Claus going to be angry? Jealous? Would he forgive me? I cursed and kicked some things around in Aiden's room, thinking he could afford to replace them, until I heard

arguing downstairs.

“What is that moron’s car doing in the driveway?” Mr. Lefebvre’s voice bellowed. I thought he was referring to me, but then I remembered that my ride was banged up in the woods off some nearby street.

“Dad, come on!” Aiden moaned. “Leave me alone!”

“Do you know how hard I’ve worked to get us here?” Mr. Lefebvre’s deep voice growled like a lion’s. “Do you know what kind of background I came from? You wouldn’t last a second.”

Aw, had Mr. Lefebvre been born with a spoon in his mouth made out of a lesser precious metal? I scrambled to put clothes on and opened the door a crack to listen.

“Let me tell you, Aiden, I’ve worked my ass off to make everything perfect, so we could live in a house like this, live a perfect lifestyle like this. And you’re determined to ruin it!”

Aiden stomped his foot. “I work hard too, Dad! I make a lot of money. People respect me! I’m like you.”

Mr. Lefebvre spit so loudly, I could hear it upstairs, which was pretty impressive. “Respect? You’re an embarrassment. The types of people you hang out with,” he trailed off. “And did I hear someone in the house when I came home? Was that one of your lowlife drug dealing friends?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. She’s gone now.”

She? Someone doesn’t want his father to know he spends a lot of time with guys.

“And I don’t see how you can say I’m not respectable,” Aiden continued.

“There’s a demand for a product, and I get it to people, even people you know, Dad.”

I slowly crept down the stairs to get a better look. There were even more photos here lining the walls, but they weren’t as pretty as the ones near the front door.

“You’re getting sloppy, Aiden, and it makes me sad. How are you going to get your old friend out of our driveway?”

“Who?”

“Drake.”

“Shit.”

Each step creaked just a little bit. I tried pushing my arms against the wall to distribute my weight more evenly and make less sound.

“You need to control him, Aiden. He’s a liability. He’s gotten desperate, and he’ll do anything.”

I approached the light at the bottom of the stairs.

“Dad, you’re the one who blackmailed him in the first place.”

“I had no other choice. You got into an accident with your butt buddy and almost ruined everything. It was up to me to cover it up, by silencing Drake. And you made it harder every step of the way. How was I supposed to know that you guys would be naked when we showed up? I don’t blame Drake for running off after he saw you two! If you had thought about the implication of your actions, Drake could have played patsy and we wouldn’t have gotten into this mess. It would have been so simple.”

“We were really tripping, Dad. We didn’t know what we were doing. We

fooled around cause E makes you like touching and then we decided to drive in the buff. It's not a big deal. Besides, you have that tape, and Drake looks up to you so much, he'd never hurt you."

"You need to take care of Drake."

"How?" Aiden asked.

I heard footsteps and a drawer opening and closing.

"Is that a gun? What are you doing, Dad?"

"You pushed Drake too far with this bank robbery."

"What? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't pretend, son. Chris made it all too obvious that you two planned that. He practically told me all the details, including how you planned on not giving Drake his share. Why do you need the money? Did you buy more than you could sell? Are you in debt?"

"Dad," Aiden said firmly. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Why did you even let that blathering idiot Chris in on the job? Was it because he worked at the bank during college? You know he can't keep anything to himself."

"Dad!"

I tried to move my head around the wall but was afraid they would spot my hair.

"It's only a matter of time before the police realize Drake's the one that robbed the bank and they connect it back to you, and then back to me."

Peering around at the bottom step, I found myself behind Aiden. He was

shuffling nervously.

“Aiden, why are you looking at me like that? Is someone here?”

I slid back up the stairs like a snake in reverse.

“No, Dad, there’s--”

Mr. Lefebvre peeked around the corner, and our eyes met. I smoothed my post-sex hairdo. His longish mane was brushed back neatly, but his sharp eyes told me he had savage intentions. He bared his teeth in a fake, bleach-white smile. “Well, Tony, we meet at last. I’ve heard so much about you.” Mr. Lefebvre’s face showed no sign of farce, until he said this: “I’ve heard far too much about myself from you, I’m afraid.” He snarled, turning me to stone with a look.

“I can explain, Dad.” Only then did I notice the gun bulging inside Aiden’s waistband.

“I understand perfectly, Aiden. My fag of a son didn’t mention that he forgot to clean up his trash.” Mr. Lefebvre, the lion in a suit, was showing more animal than human. “You told me the accident was a onetime thing, that you weren’t like that.”

A vein swelled on Aiden’s red forehead. He stood up straight for once. A car engine in the driveway growled for a second and then turned back off.

“You know, I’ve always had low expectations for you, but I never saw this one coming. How disappointing. What do you think everyone else will think of this?”

Mr. Lefebvre gestured around the room with his claws. Bright light filtered in through the many windows.

Aiden’s right hand trembled. His eyes shot daggers, and he gritted his teeth. If I had been Mr. Lefebvre, I wouldn’t have pissed off someone holding a gun.

“How are you going to take care of this? Are we going to have a double feature today?” Mr. Lefebvre’s fancy shoes tapped the ground noisily as he paced around his enraged son.

“No.” Aiden slid in front of me. The bulge in his waistband poked his striped polo shirt just above the small of his back. My hand ventured forth carefully.

Mr. Lefebvre laughed. “Don’t act like you love Tony or anything. I’ve heard you drag his name in the mud more than a few times.”

Aiden stared. My fingers touched the soft fabric of his shirt. How was I getting away with this?

“Oh, and now the boy has morals! Tell me, Aiden, are you on top, or is Tony?”

A loud crash shook us all. Drake barreled into the room with a baseball bat. He had a bright red toothpick in his mouth. His shoes trailed in broken glass. Aiden jumped and distanced himself from my hand.

“Don’t pretend you bastards aren’t home!” Drake shouted, waving his sporting equipment. His twisted face was flushed except for his scar, which remained white. “I’m sick of being pushed around by you guys. I’m sick of always taking the blame.” He snapped the toothpick in half and threw it on the floor. “I’m sick of doing your dirty work.” He turned to Mr. Lefebvre. “And you show your gratitude by hiring some PI to trail my mom and dig up blackmail? After all I’ve done for you?” Spit flew from his mouth. “But no, you were still able to top all of that.” He looked at Aiden. “You told me to put the bank money in the trunk of that car after I got it, but I knew if I did, I’d never see it again.”

“Drake?” Aiden asked, as if he’d just noticed that someone had come in the room.

“What?” Mr. Lefebvre interjected. “You don’t even have the money, son?”

“I knew,” hissed Drake, “I knew you two were up to something when I saw that fag Claus at the bank that day. That was too big of a coincidence! And then when I went to his place to make sure he couldn’t talk, he was gone. How obvious!”

I refused to believe Claus was involved. His terror was too genuine and his spirit too honest. But I couldn’t trust Aiden. He had told Claus that the robbery was all Drake’s. Aiden was manipulating Claus, and I didn’t know why, but it had to stop. Did Aiden plan on making sure Claus couldn’t talk?

Drake tore at his hair. “You know, sometimes I still see that accident five years ago when I close my eyes. I can see the blood. I remember how your naked bodies somehow got wrapped in each other, how pieces of glass stuck to you. Claus was all messed up and out cold, but he was still looking at you, Aiden, smiling, and his face ran red. But that was nothing, nothing compared to the realization that Claus and Aiden – two people I looked up to, yes you Aiden, even if you treated me like shit – were like *that!* I puked when I got home.”

“It was just the drugs,” Mr. Lefebvre said. “They’d never do that normally.”

“Shut up, Dad,” Aiden whispered.

Drake’s voice suddenly softened. “Why did you do all of this, Aiden? Why, Mr. Lefebvre?” He glanced at both of them. “I had so much respect for you. I thought we were supposed to be friends.” His lower lip trembled.

Drake’s scowl, his dark, sunken eyes seemed to me like an abyss of pain and

anger. That's when something weird happened. I noticed Drake's eyes for the first time. They were a vibrant, beautiful green with long lashes. He made so much more sense to me this way. I could see those eyes dutifully watching over his family. I saw their owner working hard to support his ailing addict mother, working hard to forgive her each time she failed and trying to get her back on the right track. I could sense his loneliness in the big halls of Saint Dom's and his frustration at seeing how life could have been different if he had only been born on Chicory Hill. Before I had seen Scarface as a cookie cutter thug from Wisteria Meadows – the type we had all seen on our weeknight crime shows. I had never stopped to ask myself why he was doing what he did. I never asked what made him tick, what made him human.

“This is going to change, right now,” Drake screamed.

And I would never get a chance to find out. His face contorted, and I was afraid of him again.

“I'm not stupid. I know you're just using me. I'm a block in a pathway. I support you while you walk all over me.” Drake bent his knees as if he were at the plate ready to hit a home run. “Give me all the dirt you've got on my mom, or I'm the only one that leaves this house today.”

Mr. Lefebvre, with his hands behind his back, calmly turned to Aiden and said, “Well, Aiden, what are you waiting for? You have what you need.” He was actually smiling a little bit.

Drake held the bat high over his shoulder, ready to strike but not close enough to hit Aiden yet. “What's he talking about?” Drake glared at Mr. Lefebvre and Aiden in turn but ignored me. I debated between making another grab for the gun and

running.

Mr. Lefebvre was in range but barely lost his composure. “Come on Aiden. Don’t disappoint me. You may be a man yet.”

Aiden’s right hand slowly moved behind his back, where his shirt was bunched up and tucked in. I took two steps back. Drake, Mr. Lefebvre and Aiden formed a perfect triangle. If I could just get out the doorway behind me, I probably could run away, but if I was followed outside, I wouldn’t have a chance because my car was busted.

“You’re freaking me out, man.” Drake took a hesitant step forward. “What are you doing? I’m not kidding around. I will smash your face in.”

“You little shit. You really don’t have a backbone, do you?” Mr. Lefebvre glanced at Aiden the way you would at road kill. “Son? Look at me when I talk to you!”

The gun glided out from Aiden’s jeans quickly but gracefully, like a ballet dancer lifting her leg.

Mr. Lefebvre unfolded his hands and tensed up. “Son, who are you pointing that gun at?” His mask of confidence fell off, and we all saw him as a terrified child.

“Aiden?!” Drake shouted.

The trigger bent gently, obligingly under Aiden’s finger. The pistol shuddered hard, and then it was over.

* * *

Two weeks later, on a Tuesday when we had nothing to do, Claus and I cruised through downtown Rome in his Mercedes-Benz. Such is unemployment. My

car was okay, though the repair bill was killing me. I was just trying to get used to steering a fancy car like Claus's. Clouds prevented most of the sun from reaching us.

"I can't believe *The Rome Record* is closing down," I told him. "Can you?" The day before I had run into Ross. He had seemed almost amused that the paper was gone, but when I asked him what he planned to do next he stopped smiling. He had no idea. Then he walked away, rubbing his paunch and chuckling to himself quietly.

"Well, yeah, Tony, I can believe our beloved *Record* is no more. Everyone saw that one coming."

I laughed. "Fair enough. I guess it wasn't the best job for me, anyways." I thought back to all the times I had had to force myself into painfully awkward situations, all the phone calls I had dreaded and all the dead ends I had followed.

"Ever consider being a librarian?" Claus leaned his soft cheek on my shoulder and glanced up at me with glacial eyes. "It's got all the information nitty-gritty you're into, but books don't talk back to you."

"Or wield guns. You know, that's not a bad idea, Claus. Maybe."

"I guess I can't talk about needing a new job, huh?" I was so close to completely convincing Claus to give up dealing, and he was considering going back to school. His parents made more than enough to support him.

"We'll work it out." I smiled.

Things with Claus and me were good. My adventure with Aiden pained him – hypocritically, he admitted – but he was willing to put things in the past. Every now and then I'd watch Claus frown, the missing part of his cheek turning his face into a grimace, and see CC, the drug dealer I hated. But Claus assured me he was turning

over a new leaf.

Aiden now seemed like a shadow of himself. He trailed his father obediently wherever he went, carrying briefcases, coffee and dry-cleaned suits. His hunched posture slouched so far forward that he practically slithered on the ground.

Chris spent a lot of time alone, nowadays, shooting hoops at the local park by himself. *Los cuatros* were officially disbanded, if they hadn't already been in the past. Aiden wasn't talking to Chris because he talked too much, and Claus didn't want to have anything to do with him. Post-school social life was turning out to be not as exciting as he had hoped. In his round coconut head, his little eyes darted side to side, searching for someone to tell stories to, but everyone was gone.

Mr. Lefebvre's ascent in local politics and business was not at all deterred. There were some questions about the sling around his arm, which he answered cordially with an amusing anecdote about teaching his son firearm safety. He exhibited such good American values! Yet, sitting at a round polished table in the company of dignified folk, tapping his claws on the table, Mr. Lefebvre just didn't look the same. Something about how his mane of hair was ruffled, or the way he'd bare toothy grimaces, worried people, as if something deep inside him had become unhinged. One time I ran into him on the street and decided to poke the wild animal with a stick, asking him how he'd hurt his arm. Without missing a beat, he told me it had happened while he was playing with police files.

Claus often asked me why I had pushed Aiden when he fired his gun. I hadn't wanted to let Mr. Lefebvre be a martyr or Aiden a killer, but beyond that I was unable to explain my actions. In the confusion that followed Mr. Lefebvre hitting the floor, I

had managed to escape, so things had worked out. Claus was impressed with how that incident made me sound like an action movie hero, but what he didn't know was that I was having nightmares every few days about guns appearing in random places and firing. In one dream, Claus was the one with the gun.

Maybe you thought this story was about me, or about Claus. This could all have been about Aiden, even. But who set everything in motion? Would I know *los cuatros* if it hadn't been for one particular person? Would *los cuatros* have existed?

I'm talking about Drake. After witnessing what some police officials may have called attempted murder, Drake became less worried about the Lefebvres. Consequently, he didn't seem bothered by spending the money he had come into, either. Claus and I saw him the other day when we were driving through Wisteria Meadows. Drake was moving stacks of boxes into a car. We didn't know where he was moving – anywhere away from here was our best guess. As he carried the boxes, he chatted animatedly with his mom, a frail, skinny woman. The sneer that twisted his face seemed unwound. Lights danced in his big green eyes.

A few questions remained, though. I wondered where the money from the bank had been hidden, if Drake hadn't put it in the trunk he was supposed to, and if the police didn't see him run away with it. The answer came to me by surprise, while Claus and I were visiting the bank to check out the contents of the envelope Mr. Lefebvre had given to him for safekeeping. On the way out of the bank, I noticed something unusual about a nearby *Rome Record* dispenser. It was the one I had ignored on my way to investigate the robbery on that fateful day. The dent in the side was still there. I playfully gave the dispenser a kick – a little revenge, if you will –

and the back panel of the base fell off, revealing an empty space below where the newspapers were stored. Inside were a couple dollar bill wrappers and some cash that was covered in ink. The teller must have put a security device that ruined some of the money and Drake had left the worthless currency behind. But Drake had fooled Chris, Aiden and the Rome PD in one fell swoop, hiding the money where only he could find it.

Enclosed in Mr. Lefebvre's envelope was a security tape of Drake's mom robbing a convenience store. Through the grainy, low-quality video, you could see the wild desire in her eyes, her body screaming for those chemicals that would make her feel all right, if just for a minute.

Drake was putting his mom in rehab; I'm sure the bank money helped there. I thought of the security tape when we passed Drake's place the day he moved out. I asked Claus what had done with the tape after we watched it. Claus glanced out the window at Drake rushing to help his mom carry a box. Identical white houses with cracked paint flanked us on either side. Underground, bugs swam in the tap water pipes. A car alarm went off, and somewhere a baby was crying. I asked Claus again what he had done with the tape. Claus said he had lost it. After Drake's mom put down the box, Drake hugged her tight and whispered something in her ear.