

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RICK HAUTALA

Five years ago Kip Howard saw his mother killed by the 'little brown things.'
Now, they have returned...and this time, there will be no escape for the boy.

UNTCIGAHUNK

~ THE COMPLETE LITTLE BROTHERS ~

UNTCIGAHUNK
THE COMPLETE
LITTLE BROTHERS

by

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AN INTRODUCTION TO *UNTCIGAHUNK: The Complete Little Brothers*

Parents don't love one child more than another. At least they shouldn't. Sure, some parents might understand or "get" one child more than another; some children are more difficult to raise; and parents no doubt love each child in different ways; but a parent's love is (or at least should be) unconditional.

The same applies to a writer's books.

I love every one of my books, of course, but you should by no means think that means I think any of them perfect. Far from it. But if I didn't love my books, I wouldn't have written them in the first place.

Once a book is finished, though, a writer can pause and look at it and see—like parents with their children—that some aspects are just not quite right. Some books are easier to write while others are a hell on wheels tough to get out onto the computer screen. But every book is imperfect in some way or other ... sometimes in far too many ways.

Writers also, of course, are never fully satisfied with the finished book. No book I've ever written scratches the itch to my satisfaction. Otherwise, why bother to write another one?

That being said, I can state that *Little Brothers* and the short stories gathered here under the title *Untcigahunk* are special to me for a couple of reasons.

Although I am often asked (and usually irritated by) the question: "Where do you get your ideas?" I remember quite clearly when the initial idea for *Little Brothers* hit me. It wasn't exactly a stunning moment of overwhelming creative insight. It was more in reaction to a comment from my editor on my second novel, the atrociously named *Moonbog*.

Side note: After working on my second novel for more than a year, my editor didn't like that the book wasn't supernatural, as was my first novel, *Moondeath*. Why the "Moon" in the first two titles? All I'll say is, these weren't my working titles for those books. Those titles were foisted on me by my editor. The original titles were *The Dark Brother* for *Moondeath*, and simply *The Bog* for *Moonbog*. After having the title of my third novel, *Nightstone*, also forced on me against my strenuous objections—the original was *The Menhir*—I was determined to come up with a title for my fourth book that the editor wouldn't be able to change no matter how much she might want to. Hence, *Little Brothers*.

Any way, while I was revising *Moonbog*, my editor kept asking me why I couldn't put, like, some creatures in the bog that were killing off the people of the town. If you've read *Moonbog*, you know that it's more of a mystery/thriller than a straight horror novel. When I saw the hideous cover art for the book, I was appalled. It was terrible. Ridiculous. Funny, even. My first reaction was that anyone who bought the book based on the cover art would be disappointed because the cover totally misrepresented the contents while anyone who might actually enjoy the story would never buy a book with such a cover. I saw this as a lose/lose proposition, but I was just starting out, and I had zero close relationships with the publisher.

Welcome to the world of publishing.

Moonbog it was, atrocious cover and all.

When my editor kept asking me to "insert" some creatures that hid in the woods and killed people while I was fishing for an idea to follow up my third novel, *Nightstone*, I gravitated toward that suggestion. After doing a small amount of research into Native American myths and legends and a whole lot of "making stuff up to suit the story," I hit upon the idea of the Untcigahunk, the Micmac word for "little brother." I created forest creatures who, like locusts, emerge periodically from underground and wreak havoc.

I thought it was a cool idea at the time, and I obviously still like it. That's why later on I wrote these short stories. I kept getting ideas for new ways to deliver the depredations of these creatures. With "Witch House," I even concocted an "origins" story that is hinted at by the "cellar hole" in the novel. I was also working with comic book artists Steve Bissette and Michael Zulli, hoping to launch a *Little Brothers* graphic novel, but for a variety of reasons, that never came to pass.

Since writing *Little Brothers*, I've gravitated more toward ghost stories, which have always been a passion of mine. Starting with *Nightstone* and right through to *Waiting*, the novel I recently completed and hope will be published soon, I've enjoyed the eerie, spectral *frisson* of the ghost story. The bulk of my novels are more "supernatural" than "horror," if I can make such a distinction.

But I've always liked writing monster stories too, as *Little Brothers* and the later book *Moonwalker* (also not my original title, which was *The Siege*) and *The Mountain King* attest. They're a blast to write, and it's always a challenge to come up with something original.

I hope I don't sound too egotistical here when I say that I think the "little brothers" are unique. It never fails that when I do a book signing, at least one person—often several—will say that *Little Brothers* is their favorite novel of mine. Sometimes, that comment hurts because...well, the book was my fourth novel. I would like to think that, after writing something like thirty novels, some of my more recent books would hit the mark a bit better. But I was also always a proud parent, as it were.

I enjoyed writing this book, and now that it's the first of my "children" to see electronic publication, it's like the novel is the first of my children to go to graduate school for an advanced degree. I have always harbored the hopes that—someday—someone in Hollywood would read the book and want to make a movie of it. With the CGI effects filmmakers can pull off these days, it would make for one fun scare fest. Who knows? Maybe it will happen.

In any event, I hope you enjoy the book and stories—either for the first time or for a second go-round.

Beastly good wishes!

Rick Hautala
March 21, 2010
Westbrook, ME

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UNTCIGAHUNK

THE NOVEL

PART ONE

JUNE 17 THROUGH JUNE 19

“Poika on poika vaikka kuinka sen rasvassa paistaa.”

A Finnish expression which, loosely translated, means:
“Boys will be boys no matter *how* long you fry them in fat.”

CHAPTER ONE

“The Cellar Hole”

1

Kip Howard was lying on the couch, trying to keep his gaze from wandering out the window. Beyond the splashes of green leaves blowing gently by the window, he could see rafts of white clouds sliding smoothly along the horizon. Sunlight glinted from the wooden windowsill and caught spinning motes of dust.

This is getting to be too much like school, he thought as he shifted uncomfortably, *me, wishing I was outside...not in here.*

It was the middle of June. The last day of school was so close he could practically smell it; but this...the end of *this* wasn't in sight. Not this month...not this year...not *ever*, he was beginning to feel.

“So,” the voice beside him said gently, “you said you had an ‘okay’ week. Do you want to tell me anything else about it?”

Kip shifted his head and took several seconds to look at Dr. Fielding. She sat with her left leg crossed over her right knee. Her gold Cross pen was poised over an open spiral-bound notebook, and she was looking at him over the large rims of her round glasses.

“Just okay,” he answered. “Nothin’ special.”

The sun reflecting off the windowsill caught the blue silky fabric of her blouse and shattered into a dazzle of light. The color made him think of the sky just after the sun had set, but for some reason that thought sent a chill through him.

“Have you been getting along any better with your brother?” Dr. Fielding asked. She was trying not to let it show, but Kip was pretty sure she was getting impatient. *But why should she be the one getting impatient?...I'm the one who doesn't want to be here.*

“Marty? He's an as— He's a jerk.” Kip had been close to letting the word *asshole* slip out, but he'd caught himself. He wondered why, if Dr. Fielding was supposed to be helping him, he felt so uncomfortable about swearing in front of her.

“Has he done anything—this week? Anything that bothered you?”

Kip shrugged and shifted his gaze back out the window. He pondered how long it had been since he started coming here. This was the second June he'd been doing this, so it had been more than a year...well over a year. But last June was different. After everything that had happened, spending time with Dr. Fielding had been—well, if not *new*, at least exciting. Now, it just felt like a chore.

“If it's all the same to you,” Kip said, “I'd just as soon cut this session short today. I think maybe I got a touch of spring fever or something.”

He cleared his throat and started to shift to a sitting position, but Dr. Fielding's next question took his strength from him, and he sagged back.

“You're not hiding anything from me, now, are you, Kip?”

Kip shook his head...perhaps too vigorously. “Why would I do something like that?”

“Well...how's school been going for you? Have you started to pull your grades up any?”

“Yeah...sure,” Kip said edgily. “I guess I'm doing okay.”

“Have you had any more nightmares?”

Again, Kip shook his head, answering honestly, “No. Not this past week, anyway.”

“Look, Kip,” Dr. Fielding said gently, but still, she held the pen poised over the paper. “I know you

well enough to know when you're holding back on me. I certainly hope by now I have your confidence."

"You do... Really," Kip answered, but he didn't even try to mask the irritation he was feeling. He didn't like the way she could *always* do that—make him feel like he was made of glass or something—how she could read him so easily. At twelve years old, he was starting to think he was a little more complicated than that.

"So...?"

Kip sighed. The sunlight on the windowsill wavered, and he thought for a moment that the clouds floating by had turned to gray, threatening rain.

"It's my dad," Kip said, fighting the constriction in his throat. The sound of her writing made him think, strangely enough, of the scraping sound of a fly caught between two panes of glass.

"What about your dad?" Dr. Fielding asked.

"He's...umm." Kip swallowed, but the lump in his throat wouldn't go down. "He's thinking about starting to work on the house again."

"You mean the new house?"

"Um-hum." Kip nodded, suddenly conscious of the tension building in his shoulders. "The new one."

"How do you feel about that?"

"How do you *think* I feel?" Kip said, suddenly exploding. His eyes started stinging as tears gathered. He knew *that* feeling well enough, but he told himself not to start crying now...not in front of her...not again.

"I can see how much it upsets you," Dr. Fielding said softly. "Can you tell me why?"

"You know damn well why," Kip replied. He knew she meant well; he could hear the kindness and concern in her voice, but he couldn't hold back his anger and pain any longer. His lower lip started trembling, and the stinging in his eyes got worse. "It's the whole reason I'm coming here to see you...isn't it?"

"Has coming here helped?" she asked, shifting forward but refraining from putting her hand on his shoulder.

"I still can't remember what I...what I saw, if *that's* what you mean. I know that I found—" His voice twisted off with a high note, and as much as he tried to stop it, tears spilled from his eyes. "She was dead...my mother was dead...there...in the cellar hole."

Dr. Fielding reached behind her and snapped a tissue from the Kleenex designer box. She handed it to him and he took it without a word.

"She was all cut up...slashed. I remember—or *almost* remember what I saw. There was *something* down there with her. Some *things* in the cellar hole. Lots of them. But—still—you know, in my mind it's all a blur. I saw this...this flurry of activity...almost like they were giant rats or something..." His voice twisted off with a high note.

"Tell me some more about the cellar hole itself," Dr. Fielding said mildly.

Kip dabbed his eyes, then blew his nose vigorously. The clouds floating beyond the trees had, he decided, definitely turned darker.

"The cellar...where my mom and dad were going to build the house." He closed his eyes tight until the pressure squeezed out a few more tears. "They had bought the land on Kaulback Road, Thornton, a year before I was born, but with being so busy at his job and all, my dad never got a chance to start building until—I guess it was around when I was six he started clearing out the land."

"And this cellar hole where he was planning to build the new house, there used to be another house there, right?" Dr. Fielding asked.

Kip nodded. "The kids at school—'specially Patrick MacNair—said it was where there used to be a house."

a witch's house. My dad checked into it, and the best he ever found out was a few of the men around town said that sometime back in Colonial times there was a house there that burned down. When we were first clearing the land, when I was little, I remember finding old rusted pieces of metal and stuff—just junk my parents threw away, but it was like a treasure hunt for me.”

Dr. Fielding shrugged her shoulders, unable to suppress a shiver. “And what did you think about that, about the idea that the cellar hole might be haunted or cursed or something?”

Kip stifled a chuckle, but the thought of it made his stomach feel like he'd just swallowed a snowball. “I guess I was pretty scared...I mean, I was only seven at the time, and I was the new kid in town ‘n all; ‘n I didn't know if they were serious or just teasing. But I guess— when I think about it— I wasn't too keen on the idea of building the house where someone else's house used to be.”

“How do you feel about it now?”

“Come on,” Kip said, suddenly angry. “I told you a hundred times everything I remember from that day.”

“Maybe if you tell me again, a little more of it will come back to you.”

Kip heaved a deep sigh and ran his fingers through his hair. “My dad was cutting down some trees so the backhoe and the cement truck would be able to get in to pour the foundation. My mom was— Again, his voice hitched, and tears burned in his eyes. “She was down in the cellar, picking up rocks and branches and stuff so they could dig the cellar deeper. I had a little toy saw and hammer, and I was over near my dad, pretending I was taking down trees. I remember the chainsaw he was using made a awful lot of noise, and it smoked a lot.

Kip sniffled and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

“I remember how every now and then I'd look over at the cellar hole, and I'd see some sticks or a rock come flying up out of there. I remember seeing my mom's hands flash up above the level of the ground.”

“It was getting late. We were gonna be leaving soon. I was down toward the end of the driveway with my dad, and all of a sudden I got—I don't know how to explain it, this really weird feeling, like something was wrong. I didn't know what it was. I had seen *Bambi* recently, and I remember thinking how the deer must have felt when the forest was on fire. I got that same jumpy feeling except it was for myself. I couldn't help myself. I started to scream, but my father didn't hear me over the sound of the chainsaw, so I ran up to the cellar hole, and that's when I—I saw—”

Kip's voice choked off again, and he covered his eyes with both hands, pressing the heels of his palms so hard against his eyes squiggling point of light filled his vision. His thin shoulders shook like he had a chill.

“Kip,” Dr. Fielding said softly, sounding like she was a hundred miles away. “Kip, don't force yourself to—”

“When I got there...to the cellar hole, it looked like it was...was too dark down there...like it was the first place where night came, even though the sun had just dropped behind the hill. Eagle Hill, they call it. And down there, in the shadows, I saw this...this activity—like everything was under water or something. My mother was lying on the ground, and there were these...these things moving all around her. They were moving so fast I couldn't really see anything clearly.”

“So you don't know what these *shapes* really looked like.”

It was a statement more than a question. Kip shook his head angrily. “Come on, you *know* I don't know. I've told you a hundred times, they were...were little creatures...little brown things, and they were swarming all over her. Suddenly, her shirtsleeve flew up into the air and landed right there at my feet. I screamed, and when I did, it was like, all of a sudden they were just gone— vanished.”

“And then you've told me you were never sure, but you think you might have blacked out for a short time,” Dr. Fielding said.

Kip shook his head vigorously from side to side. “I don’t know. I might have. All I know is, the next thing I saw was my mother, lying on the ground, all cut up and bleeding all over the place. She didn’t move, and I think even then, as soon as I saw her, I knew she was—” When he swallowed, his throat made a loud clicking sound. “She was dead.”

“Now Kip, you’ve told me before that you and your father were down at the foot of the driveway more than a hundred yards away from the cellar hole when this happened.”

Kip nodded, no longer conscious of the tears streaking his face.

“And you know, too, that the police concluded that someone—some crazy person or maybe several crazy people—must have been hiding down there or had come out of the woods and done that horrible thing to your mother.”

Again, Kip nodded. “I *know* all that,” he said, his voice low and trembling. “And I know that you and everyone else I’ve told about what I think I saw are convinced I imagined the whole thing. My dad and everyone else is convinced that, when I saw her all cut up like that, I sorta went crazy and must have imagined seeing those things that attacked her.”

“I don’t disbelieve what you say you saw,” Dr. Fielding said. She glanced down at her notebook as she jotted something down. “I just want to help you get through this so you can let go and start putting it all behind you.”

“That’s just the point,” Kip said, his voice winding up higher, edged with panic. “That’s it exactly. There’s no way I’m going to be able to put any of it behind me if my father starts working on the house again, is there?”

“You don’t *know* that,” Dr. Fielding said. “Besides, don’t you think this might be important to *him*? He’s got to deal with his grief, too. He’s suffered just as much as you have. Maybe by starting back to work on the house, he’s making his own commitment to try to get beyond what happened.”

“Honestly, Dr. Fielding, I don’t know if I even dare go out there again.”

“That’s my point exactly.” Dr. Fielding tapped her pen on her notepad for emphasis. “I think you have to go out there, because I don’t think you’ll ever get over it—not *really*—until you do.”

“Yeah, sure,” Kip said, and again his gaze shifted to the window and the freedom beyond it. “Like you always say, I have to face my fears. Confront them head on.”

“Absolutely,” Dr. Fielding said.

“But what if...what if those creatures that killed my mother are real? What if they’re still out there?”

2

Every Friday morning, after dropping Kip off at Dr. Fielding’s office, Bill Howard usually drove out to either the Eastern or Western Promenade in Portland and took a long, brisk walk. Over the past five years, he had dealt with the grief of losing Lori, his wife, as best as he could—which, for him, meant being as solid and steady as he possibly could be for his two boys, Kip and Marty.

The problem was, even now he didn’t feel all that strong. Usually it was only on these walks—always late at night—that he let his guard all the way down. If the salty wind was blowing in from Casco Bay, he could even almost convince himself the tears in his eyes were from the wind.

Today, though, he had gone back to the law office on Commercial Street to make a phone call he had forgotten to make earlier. He parked the car in the parking lot beside the office building, and ran up the flight of stairs, taking them two at a time. He was winded when he walked into the office and heard Lillian, his secretary, say, “What a surprise. Here he is now.”

Bill glanced over to see Sidney Wood struggling to get his bulk out of the overstuffed chair by the

far wall. He'd been flipping through an issue of *People*. When he dropped it onto the coffee table, it slipped onto the floor, but he ignored it as he started walking toward Bill.

Sidney Wood was probably...no, strike the "probably"...he was *the* richest real estate dealer and most influential man in Bill's hometown of Thornton, Maine. He also *wasn't* the kind of man who drove all the way to Portland on a warm Friday morning just to make a social call.

"Sid. How are you?" Bill said, walking over to shake his hand. The man's grip was cool and slightly damp, the kind of handshake Bill had always characterized as a "cold fish." In Sid's case, that was most appropriate.

"Can we step into your office?" Sid nodded toward the closed office door. The aura of stale cigar smoke clung to Sid like a well-worn suit as Bill unlocked the door, swung it open, and stood back to allow him enter.

Sid made himself comfortable in the chair next to the desk, took out and peeled a cigar, and stuck it into his mouth. He made a show of snapping open his Zippo lighter.

"Well, Bill," he said between sucking puffs as he got the cigar stoked. "I seem to find myself in need of the services of a good lawyer. And since you live in Thornton—hell, I sold you that property out on Kaulback Road—so I figured I'd give you the business."

Bill had to resist the urge to say "Lucky me." as he watched the clouds of blue smoke swirl up around Sidney's balding head.

"I need you to race right over to the county courthouse with me and get the bail they set on my son reduced."

Bill walked around his desk and sat down, taking out a pen and legal pad. "Why don't start at the beginning, Sid? Tell me what happened. Then I'll see what I can do." Sid cleared his throat and leaned forward to tap the glowing tip of his cigar on the edge of the ashtray on Bill's desk. Most of the ash missed and fell to the office floor.

"Hell, you know my boy—Sidney. Everyone around town calls him Woody."

Bill nodded. He knew Woody, and he knew all too well what was coming next. Anyone who had ears had heard the blown-out muffler and squealing tires of his Camero. Anyone who went to Art's at the corner gas station and convenience store, or the Big Apple had seen Woody and his friends hanging out there. They took pride in their reputation as the local tough guys, but generally their offenses amounted to smoking a little pot and maybe starting a fistfight every now and then. They did it mostly to break the small-town monotony. No *real* problems, unless you counted a couple speeding tickets and an occasional "drunk and disorderly." Bill had always thought Woody and his friends were just street punks who didn't have the brains or guts to do anything *too* serious.

The only question was, how serious is the trouble this time? Obviously it was a bit more than a misdemeanor if the judge had set bail.

"Well, he got into a bit of a problem down at—I dunno, one of those bars downtown. Might've been Free Street Tavern. He was down there with his girl friend, Suzie, and—well, she claims he hit her, beat her up, in fact. This was sometime last night."

"Do you know when?" Bill asked. "You must've gotten a phone call."

Sid shrugged his shoulders, waving his cigar like it was a magic wand that could make his son's problems miraculously disappear.

"The cops arrested him and threw him in jail for the night. The bail commissioner set his friggin' bail at ten thousand dollars. The worst of it is, Suzie says she's pressing charges for assault."

Bill frowned from the cigar smoke as much as from the problem that had suddenly dropped in his lap. *If only I'd gone out to the Prom for my walk today*, he thought bitterly.

"Ten thousand's pretty high, don't you think, if it's as minor as you say?" Bill sat back and rubbed his chin. "When Woody's gotten into trouble before, has he had any problems with not showing up i

court?”

Sid shrugged again, rolling the gray tip of his cigar in the ashtray. “He might’ve had a couple of problems with unpaid speeding tickets.”

“That all?” Bill asked, trying to draw him out.

Sid stroked his jowls with one hand and glanced out the window. “Well, last year he got into a bit more trouble. He was...I guess he’d had a bit too much to drink—hell, what boy *doesn’t* overdo it now and then. Anyway, he got stopped for running a red light and had a bit of a scuffle with the cop who stopped him.”

“How much is a ‘bit’?” Bill asked. “Enough for a charge of aggravated assault?”

Sid looked down at his shoes and nodded. “Yeah, enough for that. The bail for that was posted for five thou, and then the son-of-a— He didn’t show, so I lost my money.”

It was now Bill’s turn to shrug. “Well, at least I can understand why they set the bail so high. But Sid, you’ve never used me for your lawyer before. Why now?”

Sidney shrugged. “Just haven’t had the occasion to,” he said. “But I want you to go over there and talk to the judge. See if you can get it reduced.”

“I’d have to file a petition for a bail review,” Bill said. “That will take a little time. I might not be able to get him out until Monday. But just off hand, would you say he did it?”

“Did what?” Sid asked.

“Did he beat his girlfriend up?”

Sid laughed aloud, but his laughter turned into a wheezing cough. It was several seconds before he regained control. Bill noticed a small glistening line of drool on the left side of Sidney’s chin.

“What the hell does *that* matter?” Sidney took a handkerchief from his suit coat and wiped his face. “My son’s in the slammer, and I want you to get him out. I’m sure as hell not going to pay ten thousand dollars and then have him blow it by not showing up. Look—” Sid leaned closer to Bill, looming over his desk—“I don’t think I need the Portland P. D. taking care of a personal problem, you know what I mean. What I want is for you to get my boy out of there. He and Suzie can straighten out whatever differences they might have.”

“Where’s Suzie now?” Bill asked. “I might have to talk with her.”

“Who the hell knows? Last I heard, she was in the emergency room at Maine Med. Got a pretty serious cut on the side of her face. Word is, she slipped and fell in the parking lot after she and my boy had their little spat.”

Bill nodded and then glanced at his watch, noticing that it was close to the time to pick up K from his doctor’s appointment. “I don’t think I’ll have too much trouble getting him out, but like you said, it might be too late to do anything before Monday.”

“I ain’t paying you so my boy can spend the weekend rotting in jail,” Sid said, scowling deeply. “I want his bail reduced, and I want him out—*now!*”

Bill shrugged, wishing he didn’t feel so powerless against Sid. Maybe that was how guys like him got everything they had, by rolling right over everyone. Bill considered himself a pretty tough lawyer, but still... Sidney Wood had a way about him that was pretty hard to beat.

“Look, if the district court judge says the bail’s good the way it is, there’s not much I can do about it. I’ll have to get the police records on what happened and all the reports on any arrests. It’s gonna take a little time to prepare the petition.”

Sid smiled—smirked, actually, and shook his head from side to side as he exhaled thick blue smoke. “Monday’s not good enough, Bill. I want you to hump your ass over there right now and talk to the judge. Get that bail reduced to personal recognizance.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Bill said, standing up. He made a point of checking his watch. “Look, I’m running late. I’ve got an appointment in five minutes.”

“And right after that, I expect you to head over to the courthouse and get Sidney out with no problems. Am I correct?”

Bill did the best he could to mask his irritation. “Like I said, I’ll do what I can. I can’t make any promises.” He dropped his pad of paper—still blank—onto the desk and escorted Sid to the door. They both left the office, and Bill locked the door behind him as he went.

At the front desk, he asked Lillian to give the police in Thornton a call and have them send over Sidney Wood Jr.’s record. Then he dashed out into the warm morning sun, leaving Sidney Wood Sr. huffing as he made his way down the flight of steps to the Commercial Street sidewalk.

3

“Someone’s here t’see yah,” the police sergeant called out as he unlocked the cell door and swung it open. “I’ll wait for you over there.” He indicated a chair next to the door as Bill entered the cell. The policeman slammed the door shut and turned the key in the lock.

“Fine,” Bill said, nodding, his stomach tightening. “This shouldn’t take long.”

Sidney Wood Jr.—Woody—looked up from where he had been lying, facedown on the blue and gray striped county mattress. His thin blond hair stuck up in several places like oily flaps—“roost tails,” Bill had called them when Kip and Marty were young. His eyes, at least the small amount that *wasn’t* bloodshot, had a yellow tinge, like sour-milk.

“I hate to disturb you so early,” Bill said, hooking a chair with his foot and pulling it over so he could sit down. He wanted to keep his distance from Woody. Glancing at his watch, Bill saw that it was past noon. He had already picked up Kip, who was waiting in the car. Bill wanted to be done with this as quickly as possible.

“You ain’t disturbin’ me none,” Woody said. He lurched into a sitting position, letting his feet hit the floor with a heavy clomp. With an angry scowl, he said, “Anything to break the boredom of this fuckin’ place.”

Bill tried to restrain his smile. “Gee, I don’t know, Woody. I thought you were getting to like jail. From what your father tells me, you’ve been in them often enough.” Woody was silent for a moment, the scowl never leaving his face. “I didn’t do nothin’.”

Bill refrained from pointing out that his use of a double negative could be construed as an admission of guilt, but what bothered him even more was the echo he heard of his own son, Marty, and Woody’s defiance. Sure, maybe Marty wasn’t as far down the road as Woody was, but Bill felt a stab of guilt thinking that, since Lori died, he hadn’t carried the weight of the family as well as he might have.

“We can cut through the crap here, okay Woody?” Bill leaned his elbows onto his legs. “Your girlfriend—Suzie—is in Maine Med. with some fairly serious lacerations on her face and scalp. She decided to press charges, and—”

“That lousy bitch!”

Bill shook his head. “This isn’t going to get us anywhere. Look, my boy—”

“I’m not *your* boy!” Woody snarled, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back against the pitted cement wall. The institutional green wall paint gave his skin a sickly white cast. Underneath it all, he looked frightened and nervous, but Bill knew he’d never let it show.

Bill nodded. “No, you’re not my boy, and for that, I thank God. I’m here because your father asked me to do him a favor and get you out of here, but before I can do that, before I even go see the district court judge, I want to have your word that *this* time you’ll make it for your court appearance.”

Woody stiffened and looked at Bill with a narrow squint.

“You’ve been charged with aggravated assault. This isn’t something you should take too lightly, and unless you cooperate with me, you’re going to see a lot more of these bars.”

Woody covered his mouth with his hand. His eyes darted back and forth but never locked onto Bill’s steady glare.

“Look,” he finally said, “my old man’s got enough money to get me outta here, so why don’t you just spring me? Tell the judge and the piggies that I’ll be a good little boy from now on. Tell you what I’ll even start going to church on Sunday. Will that satisfy ‘em?”

Bill rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. “Woody, how old are you now?”

“Twenty-two,” Woody replied, frowning.

“Twenty-two. And do you have any idea what will happen to you if you’re convicted on this charge?”

Woody glanced at the ceiling as if nothing mattered to him.

“I’ll tell you what. You could end up doing some *hard* time in prison—and maybe not here, maybe in Warren. Do you want that?”

Woody shrugged like he could just about care.

“So if you don’t get your head out of your ass, someone in Warren is gonna be putting something else up there, and you ain’t gonna like it. Am I getting through to you?”

A hint of fear had crept into Woody’s expression, but still he maintained his facade of not caring. “My dad’ll put up whatever money he needs to get me out of this.”

Bill sighed and shook his head, positive he wasn’t getting through to him.

“You’re right, Woody,” he finally said. “Your dad has the bucks to get you out, but one of the reasons he asked me to help out is so I could tell you he isn’t going to pay this time.”

“What—? What the fuck are talking about?” Woody’s face had suddenly drained of color.

Bill could see this slight stretching of the truth was helping, so he decided to push it a little further. “Your dad told me this morning that, if I can’t get you out on your own personal recognizance, he’d just as soon let you spend a few days or weeks here. You can see what it’s like in case you *do* end up in Warren.”

“You’re full of shit. My old man would never say that.”

Bill shrugged, pushing the chair back as he stood.

“I’m just telling you what he told me. He lost the money he posted for your bail last time—five thousand dollars. Even for someone as rich as your dad, that’s a healthy chunk of change—a lot more than he’s paying me. So if you can’t guarantee you’ll show for the hearing *and* cooperate with me on every step of this, I’m not even going to try to get the judge to reduce your bail. Your father doesn’t *want* me to do it.”

“You’re so full of shit your eyes are brown, you know that?” Woody snapped, his upper lip curling into a sneer.

“Woody, my boy,” Bill said. He could see he had him, and he knew this time Woody wouldn’t say *I’m not your boy*. “It’s a beautiful day out there. A gorgeous June afternoon. Of course, with no windows here, how are you going to tell what kind of day it is. But do you know what I’m going to do?”

Woody clenched his fist and pressed it against his mouth. He didn’t say a word.

“I’m going to take the rest of the afternoon off. I’m going back home to Thornton and take my boat out canoeing on the river. I may even drop a fishing line over the side of the canoe; I may not. But one thing I’ll try not to do is think about you while I’m sipping a cold beer and paddling down the Sacramento River. I won’t even think of you until Monday morning, when I *might* make it over to the courthouse to ask the judge to reduce your bail.”

“You’re a prick, you know that?” Woody’s voice was barely audible from behind his clenched fist.

“I’ll just tell your father you needed the rest of the weekend to think things over.”

“Hey! Wait a minute.” Woody jumped to his feet and raced over to Bill, who was at the cell door about to signal the policeman to let him out.

“I’m ready to go now,” Bill called. The policeman came over, twirling the ring of keys in his hand.

“Yeah, so am I,” Woody said. The smirk instantly returned to his face, but it looked somehow weaker, deflated.

“See you on Monday, Woody,” Bill said. “In the meantime, you think about how sincere you can be when you tell me you won’t jump bail this time, okay?”

Woody said nothing as Bill walked free, and the heavy, barred door swung shut with a clang. The tumblers fell into place as the policeman turned the key in the lock.

4

“Bitchin’ shirt, man,” Al LaBlanc said, standing back and admiring the red splash, under which was written in scrawling red letters: *I EAT ROADKILL*. “Where’d you get it?”

“I sent away for it,” Marty Howard said.

Al shook his head and gave his friend a wide smile.

“I dare you to wear it the last day of school.”

“Mr. Moody would shit himself.”

They both broke out laughing; but after a moment, Marty’s smile dropped, and he leaned close to his friend.

“So tell me, my man—what’ve you got that’s so hot?”

Al stroked his faint wisp of a mustache he had been cultivating for nearly a year now, and patted the bulge in his tattered denim shirt pocket.

“I got some of the best weed you’ve ever smoked, that’s what.” If it was possible, Al’s smile grew even wider as he pulled out a rolled-up baggie and held it in front of Marty’s face.

“Remember that Maui you scored last fall?”

Marty nodded and smiled at the memory.

“Well this makes that stuff taste like lawn clippings.”

Holding the top of the baggie, he let it drop so the bag opened. Marty stuck his nose into it and inhaled deeply.

“Smells pretty good to me.” He was trying to sound nonchalant when, in truth, the marijuana smelled like herbal dynamite. “What say we give it a taste?”

They walked into the living room, Al glancing left and right. “Your old man isn’t home, is he?”

Marty shook his head. “Yeah. He’s in the kitchen. Wait a second. *Hey Dad! Al’s got some wicked pot. You wanna hit?*”

Al quickly stuffed the baggie back into his shirt pocket until he realized Marty was screwing with him.

“Com’on, lighten up. My old man’s at the office, ‘n Kip the Dip is seeing his shrink.” Marty pulled a packet of E-Z Wider rolling papers from his pants pocket and snapped out a sheet of gummed paper. “Allow me.”

He took the baggie from Al and skillfully folded the paper, laid down a narrow line of pot, and rolled it between his thumbs and fingers. When the pot was tightly packed, he stuck each end of the joint into his mouth, wetting and twisting off the ends.

“Your weed—you spark it,” Marty said, handing the joint and a book of matches to Al.

Al “toasted” the still wet joint under the flame of the match before lighting up, then took a ha

hit. The tip of the joint glowed like an angry coal as a thin, almost liquid string of smoke rose above his head. He took a few small puffs and then leaned back, inhaling deeply with a sharp, hissing sound. He smiled as he held in his lungful of smoke and then handed the joint to Marty.

"You look like a frog that's been stepped on," Marty said before raising the joint to his mouth. Al snorted with laughter, almost losing his hit as Marty took a long, steady toke.

As he inhaled, Marty thought for a second he could see colored lights flashing in the back of his skull. Never had he felt so intense, so immediate a rush. He closed his eyes, held his breath as long as he could, and then exhaled slowly, pleased to see, when he opened his eyes, that very little smoke came out.

"Holy shit," he murmured, handing the joint back to Al, who eagerly took another pull of smoke. "Where the fuck'd you get this?"

Holding his breath, Al merely smiled and nodded. He, too, was surprised by how intense and immediate the high was. After exhaling slowly, he squinted at Marty and said, "I've got some damn good connections. I'm not sure I want to tell you who."

"How much you got?" Marty asked, but before Al could reply, he was busy taking his second hit from the joint.

"Two pounds," Al said. He wanted to sound casual, but his eyes gleamed as he waited for Marty's reaction.

Unable to hold the smoke in, Marty exhaled with a gasping cough. "Two pounds? No way. You're fuckin' with me."

Al snapped the joint from Marty's hand, but he was too astounded to notice or care. "Don't believe me if you don't want to," Al said, taking one last quick hit. "Two fucking pounds."

Marty's grin, augmented by the pot, was wide and sleepy. It felt like the insides of his eyelids were made of sandpaper, and he was convinced someone was probing at the back of his skull with a claw hammer.

"Two pounds," he said dreamily, "of *this* stuff?"

Again, Al nodded.

"And, of *course*, you're going to share it with your best buddy, right?"

Al regarded Marty for a moment, then took another toke and held it. When he let it drift out slowly, he said, "Of course I am. What do you think I am, some kinda dirt-bag? I was thinking we could stash it out by the Indian Caves. Maybe tell a couple of the other guys. Maybe not. But I think we owe it to ourselves to have one bitchin' end-of-school party out there."

"I know," Marty said, slapping his thigh with the flat of his hand. "We'll tell Flash and Duff, maybe Davie. We'll get some girls and have a party out there. How 'bout tomorrow?"

Al's eyes were narrowed to slits, but he nodded knowingly, as if the secrets of the universe had just been revealed to him. "I suppose you'll ask Cassie, too," he said.

Marty pondered for a moment, then nodded. "Why wouldn't I? I've been trying to get into her pants for too long now."

"Here. Have another hit and dream on," Al said, holding the joint out to Marty. He was just about to take it when they heard the sound of a car, pulling into the driveway.

"Shit!" Marty said. "My old man's home."

Al snubbed the joint out in the ashtray on the coffee table, and then slid it into his pants pocket. Then he stuffed the rolled up baggie into his pants. Marty ran into the bathroom and came back with a spray can of Lysol air spray, which he was spraying all around the living room. The antiseptic smell nearly gagged them, but their frantic efforts suddenly struck them as comical. They were both giggling when the door opened, and Bill walked in from the kitchen entry.

"Hey, Marty. Oh, hi, Albert," Bill said as he dropped his briefcase onto the coffee table. The

telltale ashes from the joint were still in the ashtray, but Bill didn't seem to notice them. Suddenly though, he straightened up and sniffed the air. "What's that smell?"

Marty and Al exchanged wide-eyed glances, then shrugged in unison.

"I dunno," Marty said tightly. "When I got home from school today, I noticed a kinda funny smell in the house, so I was just spraying some Lysol around. Maybe it's Kip's dirty underwear," he added as an after-thought.

Bill frowned, then glanced over his shoulder as Kip wandered into the living room from the kitchen with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in one hand, a glass of milk in the other.

"Hey, how yah doin', Dippy?" Marty said. "You know, if you keep eating that stuff, you'll have zits out to here." He held his hands a foot or two from his face. Al snorted with laughter, grateful for an excuse to laugh aloud and happy to see someone else take the kind of grief he was always getting from Suzie, his older sister.

"Stop teasing him, will you?" Bill said as he walked to the front door and picked up the mail that had fallen through the slot and onto the rug. He idly flipped through the pile of circulars and bills, then tossed it all on top of his briefcase on the coffee table. As he did, his eye caught the E-Z Wider pack where Marty had left it, forgotten.

Of course, seeing the rolling papers—and now noticing the spent match and flecks of ash in the ashtray—didn't tell Bill anything he didn't already know. He was aware that Marty had been smoking pot for at least two years, probably more. Bill had smoked a little when he was younger, but that had been in college. Even though he thought pot was less harmful than alcohol, it bothered him that high school—hell, even junior high school and grammar school kids were using even harder drugs. The only real surprise would have been if these were Kip's rolling papers.

Bill picked up the mail again, flipped through it, and then dropped it on top of the rolling papers. Marty didn't miss the move, and Al suddenly straightened up. Not wanting to raise the issue with Kip and Marty's friend here, Bill just said, "We'll be having supper soon, so why don't you wash up. We'll talk later." He looked at Marty with an *I mean business* stare.

Marty crossed his arms over his chest and shifted from one foot to the other. He knew his father could nail him on the spot and was nervous, but he also didn't want to lose face in front of Al.

"I was just gonna go out with the guys for a while," he said, hoping his voice had the right blend of request and defiance. He was so stoned he wasn't sure how it sounded.

Bill stiffened, knowing exactly *why* Marty wanted to go out: they had a new stash they were trying

"Look, Mart—I've had a pretty tough day," Bill said. "You've got the whole weekend ahead of you. Just stay home with us for supper tonight, okay? Besides, it's your turn to do the supper dishes."

Marty sawed his teeth over his lower lip as he glanced quickly at Al. "I did 'em last night. It's Kip's turn."

From the kitchen door, behind his father's back, Kip stuck his tongue out at his brother and made an assortment of faces.

"Look—uh, Marty. I—uh, I've gotta get goin' now," Al stammered as he started back-pedaling toward the front door. He stopped short when he backed into the edge of the couch and almost fell. There was a struggle not to break out in a gale of laughter, but he clenched his jaw tightly shut.

Marty gaped at Al, knowing his friend was as stoned as he was. "Okay. Yeah...sure. I'll meet you down at the Big Apple in about an hour, 'kay?"

Al nodded and then darted out the door, letting it swing shut behind him.

"Don't you have homework to do?" Bill asked sternly. "I think it'd be a good idea, considering your last rank card, if you got that done before you did anything else."

Marty glared at his father. His high was tinged with anger, and the worst of it was, that little jerk Kip was standing in the doorway and mocking him from behind the safety of his father.

Marty squared himself and looked his father straight in the eye. “No, I ain’t got no homework do,” he said, his voice edged with sarcasm.

Bill tensed, hearing an echo of Woody’s defiant *I didn’t do nothin’* and almost said something, but he just didn’t have anything lefty in him after his visit with Woody in jail.

“I could use a little help,” Bill said as he turned and walked into the kitchen. “Marty, if Kip’s got the dishes, it’s your turn to fix the salad.” His voice was muffled from behind the closed kitchen door.

Marty stood, glaring at the kitchen door. Kip had turned and was about to open the kitchen door when a sudden pain slammed between the shoulder blades. For a split second, he didn’t know what had hit him, but when he was jerked around, he saw Marty’s clenched fist coming toward his face.

Ducking to the side saved him, but Marty pulled his punch anyway. Kip tried to twist out of his grip, but Marty held on. He pushed Kip’s shoulders back as he did a swiping kick at Kip’s feet. Kip made a slight woofing sound when he hit the carpet.

“You creep,” Kip whispered heatedly. “Leave me alone.”

“No, *you* leave *me* alone,” Marty snarled as he bent down and rolled Kip onto his back, then dropped his full weight onto Kip’s chest. Using his knees, he pinned Kip flat to the floor and leered over him.

Kip looked up at his brother’s bloodshot eyes. Marty’s heated breath washed over his face, smelling like burning leaves. He wanted to cry out for help because he didn’t want to get beaten up, but he didn’t want his father to have to save him, either, like he was still a little kid.

“Get...your...halitosis...outta...my...face...” Kip said. Marty’s weight pinned his chest down so tightly he could barely breathe. The sudden fear of suffocating, of being crushed to death, infused him with strength, but even his violent thrashing was useless against Marty’s strength.

“Come on, Marty,” Bill called out from the kitchen above the sound of running water.

“Be right there, Dad,” Marty shouted back, his voice steady and pleasant sounding. As he glared down at Kip again, a wicked smile split his face.

“You wanna know something, *Dip*?” Marty hissed as he came up close to Kip’s face.

“Yeah...” Kip grunted. “You’ve been...eating fried shit again...haven’t...you? I can...smell...it.”

“Very funny,” Marty snarled.

“You’re smoking...pot...too,” Kip sputtered. “I know it, and Dad knows it. *Everyone* knows—”

“No! I’ll tell you what,” Marty said, taking hold of Kip’s throat and applying steadily increasing pressure. Pinpoints of white light shot like tracer bullets across Kip’s vision, but his fear of dying had transformed into a weird, detached sensation.

“You’d better stop messin’ with me,” Marty said, lowering his voice to a growl. “‘Cause I’m pretty damned sick and tired of you and your bullshit. You know that?”

“The...feeling’s...mutual,” Kip said, his voice no more than a squeak.

“You know,” Marty continued, “every night before I go to sleep—do you know what I wish for?”

Kip tried to speak but couldn’t, and that seemed to satisfy Marty.

“Every night I wish...you might even say I *pray* that it had been *you*, not mom, who died. Do you realize that?”

Kip tried to move his head, but Marty’s vise-like grip pinned him to the floor. The fringes of his vision were closing in with swirling waves of blackness. His pulse was hammering wildly in his ears. Mixed with his present terror was the horror of remembering what he had seen that day. And the darkness that was filling his field of vision, the blackness that spun in from all sides, was that same blackness that blocked from his memory what he had really seen that day his mother was killed.

Now, pure, stark terror gripped him as he struggled beneath his brother’s crushing weight. His feet thrashed on the floor, beating out a muffled tattoo on the carpet. His hands fluttered like wounded birds, trying to claw his way free. From far, far away, miles away, he heard the sound of running

water. When his father called to Marty once again, the voice of his voice reverberated, growing louder rather than fading in echo.

“You’re a real dick-head, you know that?” Marty said, his face so close to his brother’s their noses touched. His voice rumbled like thunder.

Kip’s only reality was his brother’s bloodshot eyes and the surging blackness that was sucking him down. And at the bottom of that blackness—he knew—something was waiting for him.

Something... Many *things*...

Cold and dark, silent and swift.

They were waiting to sink their claws into his flesh...waiting to tear him to shreds...waiting to leave him—like they left his mother—a twisted mess of fleshy ribbons and exposed bone.

“What are you doing?”

The voice suddenly exploded into Kip’s awareness. He didn’t even register it was his father’s until Marty rose from his chest, and air came crashing into his lungs like a tidal wave. He rolled onto his side, his chest burning with pain as his first exhalation turned into a sputtering cough.

“He was giving me shit,” Marty said, standing up slowly and brushing his knees clean.

“Watch your language,” Bill said automatically. “And that’s no reason to start beating on him. God damn it, Marty. I’m getting sick and tired of you fighting with him all the time. Kip, what happened?”

Kip slowly twisted into a sitting position, convinced his chest would never be the same. His ribs felt crushed, and it hurt just to take a breath. Tears stung his eyes, and he was conscious of a spreading wet spot on the front of his pants.

“He was...picking on me,” Kip said, gasping for breath. He moved his hands to cover where he had wet his pants. “Like he always does.”

Bill turned on Marty and backed him up against the living room wall. Jabbing Marty’s chest with the tip of his forefinger, he fought hard to control his anger.

“I’ve had more than enough shit for today, you understand?” he shouted. “I am sick and tired of you two constantly niggling at each other like...like you’re still little kids. When are you two ever going to grow up?”

Kip scrambled to his feet and, twisting to one side so his father and brother wouldn’t see his wet pants, started toward the stairs to go up to his bedroom.

“When you guys were little,” Bill went on, “I could understand that every now and again you’d get on each other’s nerves, but at your age, for crying out loud.

You’re fifteen years old, Marty. Leave him alone, will you? If you have so much energy on whatever, go out for the football team and take it out on the field.”

Marty looked at his father with a haughty frown. “He works my nerves, Dad. Honest to God, don’t start it.”

“But you’re the older brother,” Bill said. “It’s up to *you* to *stop* it. You can’t go through life just pounding the crap out of your brother whenever you feel a little hostility.”

Kip had been slowly edging his way up the stairs, but once he was halfway up, he suddenly darted the rest of the way and left the two of them downstairs. He’d heard it all before, and he knew that—like always—it wasn’t going to change a single thing. Marty would still pound him down whenever he got the chance. That was just the way it was, and he figured that sooner or later he would just have to accept that.

Kip flung open the door to his bedroom and hurriedly undid his pants, sliding them and his underwear off, and kicking them into the pile of dirty laundry by his bureau. His eyes caught his collection of metal fantasy figures, and he was held by the small, gray shape of a knight with his sword raised high over his head.

Standing by his bed, naked from the waist down, Kip closed his eyes to stop the flood of tears. ~~his mind, he saw the figure of the knight, looming tall, raising his sword up high, and then swiping down with a whistling swoosh to strike off Marty's head.~~

The stomping of Marty's feet on the stairs broke his fantasy of revenge, and Kip grabbed for a new pair of skivvies as Marty's footsteps came down the hallway and paused at his door.

"What's a matta, baby?" a pitiful sounding voice said from behind the door. "Is the baby crying?"

Kip said nothing as he scrambled to pull on his clean clothes, fearful Marty would open the door and see him half naked like this. He realized that, at least up until five years ago, Marty would have said, "Is *mama's* little baby crying?"

"Is the baby all upset now?" Marty said, followed by several mock snuffles.

"Leave me alone, or I'll tell Dad."

"Oh? And what will you tell him?" Marty cooed.

"That big bad brother made little brother pee his pants?"

"Get bent!" Kip shouted, hoping it would mask the sound of him running his zipper closed.

He tensed, waiting to hear the sound of his bedroom doorknob turning and to see Marty with bloodshot eyes glaring at him from the doorway; but the footsteps continued down the hallway, and Kip knew that—for now, at least—he was safe. But he wouldn't be...not for long...not unless he did something about it. And boy, oh boy, did he have a plan that would make them all—maybe even Marty—sorry.

5

After changing his pants, Kip went down and helped his father finish getting supper ready. The meal wasn't very inspired—just hamburgers, peas, French fries, and salad. Marty muttered something about how they would have been better off eating at McDonald's, but other than that, there was little dinner conversation beyond the ordinary questions about school and what they had planned for the weekend.

Bill and Kip were still only halfway through their meals when Marty slammed the last trace of hamburger bun into his mouth, gulped a final swallow of milk, and kicked his chair back.

"I guess I'll head out now," he said, his voice muffled by the food.

Bill glanced at him and then at the clock over the refrigerator. "I realize it's the weekend and everything, but I'd still like you home by eleven."

Marty snorted as he shrugged into his jeans jacket, wiping his mouth on the sleeve.

"Where're you going, and who are you going to be with?" Bill asked.

He was getting used to Marty's grunts and non-answers, but he still tried to communicate with him, even though, deep down, he feared it was already too late to reach him. He tried not to imagine that, a few short years, Marty would be looking and acting like Woody. With Kip, at least, he had fewer worries, and he found it a little ironic that it was Kip, not Marty, who was seeing a psychiatrist.

"Just out," Marty said, leaning halfway out the door. "Maybe a movie or somethin'. With the guys."

"Home by eleven. I mean it," Bill repeated, tapping his watch, and then, with a slam of the screen door, Marty was gone.

Bill and Kip finished eating, cleared the table, and stacked the dishes in the dishwasher. They, too, had their long stretches of silence, but theirs were different if only because they had shared that dinner five years ago.

On the drive back from Portland this morning, Bill—as usual—had tried to find out what Kip and

Dr. Fielding had talked about. He hadn't probed too much, but he tried to show genuine interest in what Kip was going through, the things he was trying to sort out. But for whatever reason, Kip held him back, never saying much. Maybe it was all just part of growing up, and he was thinking he had to handle it by himself. The teenage years were definitely when you first started feeling the weight of the world on your back.

While they cleaned up the kitchen, Bill again attempted to start a conversation, but this time it had more to do with his own plans rather than with Kip's doctor appointment. Still, he sensed there was a strong and direct connection between the two, and if he could just break through this barrier—invisible, but oh, so strong—he knew it would help both of them. He knew he and his youngest son directly shared their grief over Lori's death, but until they expressed it, until it was fully vented, it would gnaw on them like a rat chewing through a grain bag.

But at every turn in the conversation, it seemed as though Kip clammed up. Whenever Bill mentioned that afternoon five years ago—whenever he even *hinted* at it—Kip's face would pale, his lips would tighten, and his eyes would darken with a fear-filled overcast. Bill decided not to mention where he planned to go that evening. Kip said he wanted to get his homework done right away so he could enjoy the weekend, so Bill left him working away at his desk while he got into the car and headed out to the building site he had abandoned five years ago.

Driving down Main Street, Bill took a left onto Beech Street, and then turned left at the Baptist Church onto Kaulback Road. It was known locally as Mosquito Cove Road because nearby Deerfield Swamp was an active breeding ground for the pests, especially this time of year.

It didn't take long to move from thickly settled town to dense woods. Four new houses had gone up in the last five years, so that made a total of seven on the road between the church and Bill's construction site. Still, no matter how many houses were built, Bill owned nearly twenty acres on the wooded side of the road, with Eagle Hill backing him. Unless there was a massive attempt to drain Deerfield Swamp—something the local environmentalists would *never* allow—no houses would ever be built on the other side of the road. So Bill felt pretty secure that he and the boys would maintain their privacy once the house was finished.

That was why he was driving out there this evening: to check out the property and—after five long years—start mentally preparing himself for starting to build. He had only been out there a couple times after Lori died, but he had decided that the mourning period *had* to be over. It was bad for all three of them to keep clinging to the tragedy as if it was the only thing that gave their lives meaning. With summer coming, he was more than tired of living right on Main Street in Thornton. Even if he and Lori would never share their “dream” house, he wanted more than anything to get on with building the house and getting the hell out of town.

Even more than that, he honestly thought that starting work on the house again would give all three of them a new focus, something to *do* together as a family. This was critical, and Bill knew that if he didn't start actively pulling them together now, the pressures all around them would surely unravel them once and for all.

The asphalt road turned to dirt about a quarter mile before his property line. In the rearview mirror, Bill watched the plume of dust kicked up by his back tires. The trees leaned out over the road, embracing the dust with their cool, green shade, spiked by the golden rays of the setting sun. He slowed the car, anticipating the turn into the rutted dirt driveway. The weight of the car heaved over the bump, and the frame scraped against a half-buried stone. Bill stopped the car at the foot of the driveway and killed the engine.

Swirling dust floated into the open car window, making him cough. Then, waving one hand in front of his face, he snapped open the door and stepped out. Pocketing the keys, he stood for a moment, surveying the site.

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