

Dolan's Son

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Chapter 1

Unemployment had its advantages. Jim Dolan had no set schedule and enjoyed the little odd jobs around the house. The software company had paid out a large severance in cash and stock to its engineers during the layoffs. He estimated he could go three or four years before he even began thinking about another job. He wasn't sure if the IT or admin staff had received anything, but Jim hadn't made any friends in those departments in his four short years at the company so he wasn't concerned about them. The job had kept him socially and mentally limited which made it hard for Jim to forge relationships at the company or in the neighborhood. All lunch and happy hour conversations focused on his division's project. His wife eventually forbade work talk from the dinner table on the nights Jim made it home for dinner.

Jim's only other topic of discussion was children. He wanted them. In the two months since his layoff, it was all he thought about. He and Marcia had been trying for just over a year, but had no luck with conception despite all the books, specialists, tests, diets, calendar markings, and positions they tried. Jim was not one to give up easily. That's why he had been so valuable at his job. He could assess complicated scenarios, break them down to their basic components, research precedents, weigh outcomes, and make decisions more quickly than anyone in the division. He took pride in his persistence.

Marcia eventually grew tired of the numerous "changes in process" Jim implemented almost weekly. They fought more often. Jim woke up each morning wondering if she would smile at him or add another day of the silent treatment. When she slept, all the anger was gone from her face. He remembered why he loved her and why she would be the perfect mother for their children.

Jim started the coffee and opened the living room curtains then went back upstairs to see if Marcia was awake.

Her eyes opened when he sat on the edge of the bed. Jim brushed the hair from her forehead. "Morning."

"Morning," she said.

Speaking terms today. Jim smiled and kissed her. "Breakfast?"

Marcia rubbed her face and turned away from him. He couldn't tell if she was going back to sleep or giving him the shoulder.

"Donuts?"

She remained still.

"It's early, yet," Jim said. "They'll still have fritters if we get moving."

"You said the magic words!" She kissed him and jumped out of bed. Today would be special, Jim was sure of it.

The Dolan's house was one of three in a rectangular cul-de-sac at the far edge of a suburban development. The place was carefully chosen for the school district, proximity other families, and a backyard big enough to shag fly balls or set up a junior-sized soccer field. Jim's property bordered his two neighbors on the sides. Several acres of wooded area owned by the county ran along the back of his yard. He loved the place. When he stood on the back deck, he imagined everything kids could do in that yard.

Marcia came out through the glass doors the led to the deck. "Ready."

"Ok," he said. "I'm starving."

Jim turned to go when the neighbor shouted after him. "Nice to have a quiet morning. Isn't it?" Robert Gruber, retired Navy commander, stood on his own side of the fence in the backyard.

"It was quiet until just now," Jim said.

"What's that?"

"I said mind your own business, Bob."

"I'm trying to, Dolan. Maybe if you closed your windows I wouldn't have to listen to all your squabbles."

"Squabbles?" Jim took a step forward, but Marcia put a hand on his arm.

"That's enough fun for today," she said.

"Have a nice day, Gruber." Jim put on a mugging smile then he dipped Marcia and kissed her full on the lips.

As they left, Marcia punched Jim's arm. "You're terrible."

"What?"

"One day you'll give him a heart attack and then you'll feel bad."

"I promise you that if I ever cause that man's death, I won't feel bad."

The fritters were fresh and perfect. They grabbed coffee and brought everything back home. Their morning conversation ranged from kids clothing styles to advanced learning programs. Jim had researched home-schooling extensively. Marcia wanted their kids to be social creatures who went through public school as she had.

"What if they get bullied?" Jim asked her.

"Like you did? You're stronger because of it."

"It was not a pleasant experience."

Marcia showed all her teeth when she smiled and it softened Jim every time. "But if you hadn't been picked on all those years, you wouldn't be so well equipped to handle Mr. Gruber," she laughed. "And you wouldn't be so driven to reach your goals."

They cleaned up after breakfast. Marcia took their car into the city to do some shopping. As sweet as she was, Marcia was shy and didn't have any close friends. She did all the things women do together, but she did them alone.

It was during these afternoons that Jim relied on his neighbor to the North, Tom Anderson, to listen to his plans. Tom was the county pet control officer and worked nights. He slept until noon and came by the Dolans' on a daily basis. He was taking his messy divorce hard and the loneliness that accompanied it even harder, but he didn't wear it on the outside. Jim liked him and kept him company. Marcia liked him, but wished he spent more time at his own house. Even Gruber liked Tom, but he wouldn't dare express it while Jim stood by.

"It's my Friday," Tom said as he presented a twelve pack of cheap lager at the front door. "Beer time."

"Too early for me."

"Don't leave me hanging."

"Marcia and I are working on the yard when she gets back."

"That's the problem with not having a job, you don't appreciate the weekend." Tom pulled a can from the box.

"It's Tuesday."

"One beer."

"Can't, brother."

Tom let his hands drop. "That's cool."

"You can still use the TV if you want."

"Nah. It's about time I get one of my own. Deb took the big screen." Tom turned to go. "But I guess you know that."

Jim snatched the beer from Tom's hand. "One beer."

Tom's face brightened and he pushed past Jim on his way to the living room.

Tom dropped into Jim's over-stuffed armchair. He hit the power on the remote and cracked his beer.

Three hours, two ball games, and five beers each later, Jim heard the automatic garage door. Marcia appeared in the living room a minute later. Jim read disapproval in her expressionless face. "Hey babe. Get anything? Anything good?"

"No! Total bullshit!" Tom shouted at the television.

"Are you drunk?" Marcia asked quietly.

"No way. I'm good," Jim said. Then he made an effort to stand. He succeeded on the second try.

"Smells like a bar in here."

"We're good. Let's get on the yard," Jim said. "Tom. You ready?"

"Get on the yard?" Hands went to hips.

"Work on it. Like we planned."

Tom popped the last can open. "Jimmer. We're out." That's when Tom noticed Marcia for the first time. "Hey Marsh! Can you make a run?"

Marcia pushed her lips together. "Ever wonder why your wife left, Tom?"

Tom blinked, but couldn't make the connection.

"Marcia, baby. It's just a couple of beers." Jim's words didn't come out as clearly as he'd hoped. Marcia dropped her purse and keys on a chair at the edge of the room and left. "Great," Jim said. Tom's focus was back on the TV.

After looking around the main floor of the house, Jim found Marcia in the bedroom upstairs. She was crying.

"Oh, jeez," Jim said, moving to her side on the edge of the bed. "This isn't the first time I've had a few with Tom, but it's not a regular thing, either. Right?" Jim smoothed her back with the palm of his hand.

"It's not that." She wiped her eyes with a tissue from the bedside table.

Jim waited for her to elaborate. But she didn't. "Well?"

"You've changed."

"What do you mean?"

"Since your layoff."

"It was a reduction in force."

"You used to be so focused on projects. Now you don't seem to want anything." Marcia dabbed at her eyes.

Jim kissed Marcia's neck. "I still want you, honey." His head was fuzzy from the beer.

"Ha," Marcia huffed, unconvinced. "I get more attention from Norton in finance."

"He can't get it on like I can," Jim growled while nuzzling into her neck. She pushed him back and stood up.

"Wrong."

Jim's mind went blank. "What did you say?"

"Nothing, forget it." Marcia took another tissue and blew her nose.

"Norton? From the company?"

"It was a bad joke." Marcia drew in a quick breath and let it out as if to reset the conversation. "The yard?"

"Fuck the yard, Marcia," Jim said, standing up.

"Jim," Marcia said. She put her hands on Jim's chest.

"We're trying to have kids and you start an affair?"

"No! Don't you trust me?" Marcia pushed away.

Jim raised his voice to get his words in over hers. "I can't believe this."

"You're drunk. You never could hold your booze."

"I bet fucking Norton in fucking finance can hold his!"

"He can drink five beers without throwing a fit!"

Jim's voice went up an octave. "You had drinks?"

"And he notices me in conversation," Marcia cried. Tears streamed down her face and off her chin.

Jim could feel tears hot on his cheeks, too. They were both yelling. Surely Gruber would have something to say about it.

"Fucking Norton in fucking finance sounds like a rock star! What else can he do?"

Marcia turned away, exasperated and out of energy for this. "Just drop it."

"Yeah? What else can he do?"

"I don't know! I never --"

"What else?!" Jim screamed an inch from the back of her head.

She faced him with a quick spin. "He's not fucking sterile!"

Jim stepped back as if slapped. The buzzing in his head stopped instantly. There was no sound in the room. In the house. In the city. Only the blood rushing past his ears.

Marcia recoiled. "Jim. I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean that."

Jim breathed heavily through his clenched teeth.

"Jim."

Jim lunged at his wife. He tore her skirt from her waist. He spun her and pushed her onto the mattress. Marcia rolled away and scrambled to her feet. Jim reached for her, but stumbled and crashed to the floor. She grabbed some sweats that hung from a chair and ran from the room.

Chapter 2

Jim had no idea how much time had passed between when Marcia left and when Tom found him sobbing on the floor. If Tom noticed the shredded skirt, he never mentioned it. He helped Jim to his feet, put him in the shower, pulled him from the shower, dried and dressed him in a track suit and bath robe. Tom brought Jim to the kitchen and made him scrambled eggs and toast with coffee. He poured them each a cup. Jim ate in a daze.

The two men sat at the table through the night without speaking. When morning broke, Tom cleared and washed the dishes. "You want to wait longer?" Tom asked.

Jim looked at him, but didn't speak.

"Okay," Tom said. "I'm going to grab some zee's on the couch. Hit me if you need anything." Tom dried his hands and crossed the kitchen.

"Thanks," Jim said.

"No problem."

The next two weeks passed in a limbo state of half asleep, half awake for Jim. Tom checked on him and made sure he ate. Jim tried to call Marcia twice a day. Sometimes more. He rarely left a voicemail and when he did, it was brief.

Tom cleaned up around the house and did his best to engage Jim in idle conversation. They watched sports and Jim refused the beer Tom offered. Every couple of days, Tom made Jim shower.

"Why are you doing this?" Jim asked.

"What?"

"Cleaning and laundry."

"So you're ready when she comes back." Tom had a matter-of-fact way about him that Jim envied. But he rarely made eye contact when he spoke.

"She's not coming back," Jim said.

"She's not like Deb," Tom drank from his beer. "She'll be back."

"I still expect the cops to come for me."

Tom looked into his beer can. "That bad?"

"Yeah." Jim stared at the television. Men in pressed pants and Polo shirts were playing golf. Jim couldn't remember if they were watching a golf tournament or a movie about golfers.

After four weeks, Jim had all but given up. He hadn't stepped foot outside the house since the attack. He couldn't wipe the image of Marcia's face from his mind. She was afraid of him. Some nights he dreamed he heard the front door opening. The first few times, he ran downstairs and found the house empty. When week five came around, Jim remained in bed when he thought heard the door, but listened to the silence that followed in case Marcia spoke. He stayed awake and in bed until Tom showed up around noon. He didn't tell Tom about the dreams.

It was Friday of week five at seven in the morning when Jim heard a real knock on the door. He had spent that night on the couch. Jim expected the police. He got Bob Gruber.

"Morning, Dolan."

"Gruber."

"Anderson does a good job on your lawn." Gruber never broke eye contact when he spoke. "What's he charge?"

Jim didn't answer, but he held Gruber's stare.

"Must be a good friend to help out a lazy son of a bitch like you."

"Get to the point."

“Haven't seen your wife in a while,” Gruber said with a level voice. Jim swung the door closed, but Gruber stopped it with quick jerk of his hand. Jim noticed for the first time that Gruber was a strong man. Much stronger than he looked. “I saw her leave here last month.”

“And?” Jim maintained his hold on the door.

“And I know Anderson brings you food.”

“How is any of this your business?” Jim asked as he pushed his face towards Gruber's.

“It's my business when a man of your character brings down my property value,” Gruber replied steadily.

“What are you talking about?”

“I want you gone, Dolan,” Gruber said. He released the door and straightened his impeccably pressed shirt. “And a single call to the neighborhood association will make it happen.”

“Good luck with that,” Jim said and closed the door.

Tuesday of week six Jim woke up in the living room again. The TV was on, but the sound was muted. The house was dead quiet. He had no idea what time it was, but it was light outside. Jim sat up and saw Marcia sitting in the chair by the wall. He couldn't be sure he was awake.

“Hey,” she said.

Jim stood up slowly, but didn't approach her. He instinctively smoothed out his t-shirt and shorts. He didn't take his eyes off her. Even if she was a hallucination, he didn't want to miss it. Marcia stood. Her belly was slightly larger than normal. Jim noticed and he opened his mouth, but no words came.

“Yes,” she said. Then she smiled. “I'm pregnant.”

“Oh God, Marcia.” Jim put his hands to his face. Marcia went to him and hugged him. Jim's legs went weak and they dropped to the couch, still holding each other. They stayed there for a long time.

“I'm so sorry,” Jim started, but she cut him off.

“No. I should have never said those things. They weren't true. I don't know Norton in finance. You mentioned him once. That's where I got the name.” Jim looked at her, speechless. “I just wanted you to be jealous of something,” she said. “To want me more, I guess.”

Jim sat back on the couch. “I'll never forgive myself for what I did.”

“We'll find forgiveness together.” She smoothed his hair with her hand. “Cafe Mingo? I'm starving.”

Jim looked into her face and hope trickled into his chest. “I should change,” he said. Marcia frowned a little as they stood up and she looked him over. “What's wrong?” he asked.

“I thought you might fall apart without me.”

“I did. Tom is responsible for everything you see here.”

“The yard looks better than ever.”

“He even showered me for the first couple weeks,” Jim said.

“Wow. Okay. Let's save that conversation for after dinner,” Marcia laughed and headed for the bathroom.

Jim changed into khakis and a nicer, cleaner shirt. They went to Mingo without a reservation and were seated within minutes despite the full house. Marcia's order was slightly wrong so the manager covered the whole check. The evening went off like it was written in a script. Jim felt he might actually climb out of this hole after all.

Chapter 3

They talked mostly about baby names. Amber for a girl, Kyle for a boy. When Jim pressed for details of prenatal care, Marcia gave vague responses. She said she had been seeing a specialist.

“It's a little early to show, isn't it?” Jim asked.

Marcia shrugged. “I've been taking supplements. They said it might produce advanced growth in the first trimester.”

“I'll say. I think you've gotten bigger since we started dinner.”

“Don't be silly. And how would you know what I'm supposed to look like?”

“I've done a lot of reading.”

“Everyone is different, Jim.”

The server offered dessert menus. Jim was about to suggest their favorite tiramisu when Marcia doubled over and winced in pain.

Jim leapt to her side. “What is it?”

“I'm okay,” she said. “Just a cramp. It's--” Her face squeezed shut again. She let out a loud moan. The other diners looked on.

Jim helped Marcia to her feet. He gestured to the server who came right over. Jim handed the young man his credit card. “Run it for whatever.”

“But the tab is covered,” the server said.

“Add the tip. I'll come back for it later.” Jim walked Marcia out the door.

As he set her down in the passenger seat, Marcia seemed to be past the worst of the pain, but her eyes were glassy and unfocused. Her skin was pale. “Jim?”

“I'm here, baby.” Jim clicked the seat belt across her lap.

“Jim, listen.” Her voice was soft, dreamy. She hadn't had any alcohol at dinner. Jim searched his memory for something about these symptoms. Maybe an article about prenatal supplements or a report on eating carb-heavy Northern Italian cuisine covered something about what was going on here. “Jim, please.”

Jim rushed to the driver's side and started the car. “Which is closer? Emmanuel? Or Good Sam?” Jim asked, backing the car out of the parking spot.

“No hospitals,” she said weakly. “Call the specialist.”

Jim gunned the car into the suburban traffic and turned right at the light without stopping. “We don't have time. I'm going to Good Sam.”

“No!” Marcia grabbed his arm and clutched it hard enough to cause Jim surprising pain. He looked at her in shock.

“I'm fine,” she said. But she was still pale as a ghost. “Take me home, please. We'll call my specialist along the way.” He turned his eyes back to the road and her grip loosened on his arm. “The number is in my...” Jim thought Marcia had passed out, but when he looked at her he saw that her eyes were open. She lay motionless, slumped slightly forward, held up by her seatbelt and the car door.

Jim thought for a quick minute. The hospital was the right thing. Surely, the emergency room could at least ease the pain until she could get home. Jim cut across two lanes and headed in the direction of Good Samaritan Hospital. He could apologize later.

Jim rushed into emergency services. He explained his wife was pregnant and unresponsive. Two men lifted her from the car and placed her into a wheelchair. She didn't fall over slack, but sat bolt upright. They wheeled her into a private examination room. Minutes later, a doctor entered. He placed his stethoscope on her back and chest. He checked her blood pressure.

"Her signs are strong," the doctor said. "Can you explain to me what happened?"

As the doctor checked Marcia's eyes Jim ran his hand through his hair and said, "She was fine. Then she complained of pain. Then this."

"This what?"

"She was in the middle of a sentence and just went quiet. Catatonic, I guess."

The doctor lowered his face level with Marcia's. "Marcia? Are you awake? Can you say hi to me? Mrs. Dolan?" No response. "She appears to be about 27 weeks," the doctor observed, standing upright.

"Seven," Jim said.

"Seven what?" The doctor said, confused. "Months?"

Jim wanted to avoid any scrutiny until he understood more about whatever supplements she was taking. She looked as though she might snap back to normal any second. "Yeah. That's right." The doctor eyed Jim's changing expression. Jim got the feeling the doctor suspected him of something, but didn't know what.

"At first glance, I would say she's lost a lot of blood, but there's no sign of internal bleeding and her pulse and b.p. are normal. We should do a localized CT scan to check her brain for anomalies." Before Jim could ask any questions, Marcia moaned. Not in pain, but a flat, low vocal noise. Her face remained expressionless. Her eyes unfixed and unblinking.

The doctor watched her steadily. She moaned again. "Have you seen this behavior before?" he asked.

Jim shook his head slowly.

The doctor slung his stethoscope around his neck. Marcia's moans lasted several seconds. Then she was quiet for thirty seconds to two minutes. Then she moaned again. A low tone, as though she was exhaling with her vocal cords engaged. Without looking away from Marcia, the doctor spoke to Jim. "Does your wife have a history of mental illness?" Jim felt a catch in his throat. He could read the implication in the doctor's grave face. "Please have a seat, Mr. Dolan. I'll be back in a few minutes." The doctor left Jim alone with Marcia.

She continued to moan. The doctor had left the door ajar on his way out. Through the crack, the people in the waiting area stole glances toward Jim's room. He pushed the door closed. Jim put his hands on Marcia's back. She was warm, but not sweaty. He was overwhelmed with the urge to feel her arms around him. Jim smoothed her hair. She moaned. She was still seated in the wheelchair, staring into nothing. "Come on, baby," he said. "I'm taking you home."

Jim wheeled the chair out through the waiting room and into the parking lot. He lifted her into the car.

Jim called Tom on the drive back to the house. "I need your help," Jim said as he maneuvered through light traffic.

"I'm on duty. I don't get off until six a.m."

"Can you get out now? I'm kind of screwed here."

"It's a busy night," Tom said.

"How many animals are loose on a Tuesday?"

"You'd be surprised."

Jim hung up. He wasn't sure he could get Marcia into the house on his own. He wished he had stolen the wheelchair. Fifteen minutes later, when Jim approached his house, he could see Tom waiting in the driveway.

"Took you a while."

"Thanks for coming," Jim said as he climbed out. He shot a look at Gruber's house, but it was dark. Hopefully, they had gone out. "Help me with her."

They carried Marcia up to the master bedroom and laid her carefully in the bed. Tom stood back as Jim pulled the blankets over her. "Why is she moaning?" he said.

"I don't know." Jim touched her face. He tried to remember if he had seen her blink at all since falling into this trance.

Just then, as if she heard his thoughts, she blinked. Her eyes met his. "Jim?"

Jim kept from showing too much. He didn't want to scare her. "Yes, honey," he whispered, fighting the lump in his throat. "I'm here."

"What happened?"

Jim faltered as he searched for the words.

"You fainted," Tom said. "Maybe a hot flash or something."

Jim took a deep breath. "That's right. You fainted at the restaurant."

Marcia sat up a little in bed. "Did you call the specialist?"

Jim headed down the stairs with Marcia's phone. Tom followed. When Jim reached the living room, he looked to Tom for courage. Tom dropped into the armchair and flipped on the television, apparently unaffected. Jim paged through the call log until he saw an entry that read, "Specialist." He selected it and pressed send. After the first ring an older man answered. "Good evening, Marcia," he said.

"We need you here immediately."

Silence.

"Hello?" Jim said, adjusting the phone against his ear. He checked his signal. "Can you hear me?"

"Who is this?" the voice said.

"Jim Dolan. Marcia's husband."

"There must be some misunderstanding."

"Aren't you the specialist? There's something wrong with my wife."

Another stretch of silence followed. Then the man said, "Marcia clearly specified she had no husband."

"What?"

"It was a requirement of the procedure."

Chapter 4

Jim held Marcia's hand while she slept. She seemed to be back to normal although it occurred to him that he didn't know what normal was anymore. She had been gone two months, apparently undergone some fertility procedure, and didn't spend any money doing it. Jim had kept an eye on the statements and found only a few meals on the credit card. No lodging at all. Jim had many more questions, but having her back was enough for now. He felt lucky that she would take him back under any circumstances, but not only was she back, she was pregnant with his child.

Jim stroked the back of Marcia's hand. The doorbell signaled the specialist's arrival. Jim had asked Tom to keep an eye out and bring the specialist to the bedroom when he arrived. A moment after hearing the door open, Tom entered the bedroom with a man carrying a large leather satchel.

"Wow," Tom said when he saw Marcia. "I think she's gotten bigger since you brought her home."

"Thank you for your assistance," the man said. Tom took the hint and went back downstairs.

The specialist was a stout man of maybe sixty. Jim's first thought was that he resembled a high school teacher. His clothes were baggy and he looked exhausted. His thin white hair was pressed neatly to the sides of his head, but that was the only indication he did any kind of grooming. He smelled like tobacco, but not cigarettes. Jim didn't get a rise in confidence from the hunched man with a five o'clock shadow, but before he could protest, the specialist took over.

"How much do you know?" he said while removing his coat and dropping it on the floor.

"Excuse me," Jim tried. "Who are you, exactly?"

"How much has she told you?" The man moved past Jim and sat on the next to Marcia. He checked her pulse and eyes.

"She's finally asleep. Maybe you shouldn't --"

"She's not sleeping," the specialist interrupted. He reached into his bag and pulled out a handheld device with a paddle attached. The man pulled back the blankets and lifted Marcia's blouse. Jim hadn't changed her since he brought her home from the emergency room. He watched the specialist press the paddle attachment against multiple areas on Marcia's abdomen and read the screen on the device.

"Sonogram?" Jim asked. The man did not respond. "Is the baby ok?"

The specialist looked Jim in the eye. Then brusquely put away his equipment. He stood and made for the door. Jim seized the man's arm.

"You're not leaving without telling me what's going on."

"You know too much already."

"I don't know anything!"

"What about your friend? What does he know?"

"Nothing! Nobody knows anything! Except you."

The specialist took a long look at Jim. Then he shook his arm loose from Jim's grip. "Marcia Holland was a perfect subject. We --"

"Holland was her maiden name."

"I see that now. We didn't have time to run the standard checks so we took the risk. Clearly, we've made a mistake."

"Who is we?" Jim pleaded. "What is your name?"

"I shouldn't have come." The man turned to go when Marcia let out a long, low moan. He looked at Marcia and squinted slightly. Jim could see that he was holding back something.

"Is this normal?" Jim asked. "After your procedure?"

"When did it start?"

"Earlier tonight. At the restaurant. Before the hospital."

The man shot Jim a look. "What hospital?"

"Good Sam. What's that got to do with it?" The specialist ignored Jim and left in a hurry. Jim chased him down the stairs. "Wait! You can't just leave!"

Without a word, the man went out the front door and left it open behind him. Jim made to follow him to his car, but caught sight of Gruber. Jim stopped and watched the specialist drive off. Gruber looked on from his front porch. The old codger was racking up evidence to take to the neighborhood committee. Jim backed inside and closed the door.

He had hoped the specialist would bring answers, but Jim only had more questions. As much as he wanted to take Marcia back to the hospital and live with what comes, he was worried they might blow everything out of proportion. Or worse, apply some treatment that clashed with the mystery procedure and jeopardize the child. She had been fine fifteen minutes earlier, she could be fine in another fifteen.

Jim took several steps toward the living room when his front door burst open and the specialist rushed through. He held the handle of a large, black case and took the stairs two at a time. "Hey!" Jim shouted. He leapt up the stairs after the man.

In the bedroom, the specialist frantically pulled electronic components from the case. He assembled it on the floor as Marcia moaned louder. "Mr. Dolan," he said. Jim met the man's eyes. "Towels. Everything you've got."

"What's happening?" Jim's head was swimming. He couldn't make sense of any of this. It wasn't how he imagined pregnancy would go after all his research. All he needed was one solid answer to give his mind a foothold. But he wouldn't get it tonight.

The specialist worked furiously connecting the boxes and wires. "You downstairs!" he bellowed. Within seconds, Tom appeared in the doorway.

"Yeah? Here."

"Towels." The specialist directed Tom with a stern point. "All of them. Now!"

Tom returned with an armload of towels in an instant. He set them down by the foot of the bed while the specialist wrestled with locking connectors and color-coded sockets. All the while, Jim stood open-mouthed in the middle of the room. Everything moved too fast for him to process. The man held up a power cord. "Outlet," he said.

Tom grabbed the cord and went straight to a wall socket behind a chair near the door. Tom knew the house so well because his own was a carbon copy. Jim was no use at all. At the moment it was all Jim could do to keep from vomiting while these men tended to his moaning wife.

The specialist attached five sticky-pad sensors to Marcia's body then he powered on the gear. Multiple screens lit up and displayed vital signs among other waves and graphs. Jim identified the handheld sonogram from before, but now it was integrated with the other equipment. For a brief moment, Jim was distracted by the incongruity of an unkempt senior citizen operating a million dollars worth of advanced biological monitors on his bedroom floor.

"Dolan!" the specialist yelled. Jim blinked and looked at him. "Undress your wife." Jim tried to speak, but the words froze in his throat. "Remove her pants and underwear. Now!"

"What about the baby?" Jim asked, confused.

"It's coming!" The specialist jumped to his feet and faced Jim.

Jim couldn't move.

"You!" the old man barked and pointed at Tom. "Pants off! I need to prep!" He lifted a small, plastic bin out of his pocket and went into the master bathroom.

Tom took an uncertain look at Jim. When he took a step toward the bed, Jim snapped out of it. He went to the bed and pulled the covers back. He removed Marcia's slacks. As he reached for her underwear, Tom made for the door. "Stay, Tom," Jim said. "We may need you." He completed the task.

The specialist returned from the bathroom scrubbed, gloved, and masked. "In the case. The restraints."

Jim pulled a pair of bundled straps from the case and he and Tom began to unravel them when Marcia's low moans stepped up in pitch and volume. "What's happening?" Jim asked, raising his voice over the moaning.

"Forget those," the specialist said as he got into position. "Get ready."

"For what?"

"Anything."

Jim went to the side of the bed and held his wife's hand while clearing the hair from her sweating face. Her eyes were glassy, unblinking and unfocused as they were when this began. Jim searched his brain for any sequence of events that may have caused her to wake up earlier that evening. If he were troubleshooting a software bug, he could track every instance of code that led to a specific result. But here there were so many variables. Was it a kiss? The amount of light in the room? A timed array of sonic stimuli? Surely it wasn't random. There was some explanation and reason. A cause for the effect.

He kissed her cheek.

Jim looked at the specialist. The old man watched the screens intently. "What are you tracking?" Jim asked.

"Vitals, mostly," the man said. "It's possible that --"

Marcia suddenly clenched Jim's hand with such force that Jim let out a grunt. She stopped moaning and for a split second, they locked eyes. She was back. But Jim wasn't relieved. Her eyes were filled with a level of fear he had never seen before.

He shot a look to the specialist. The man's eyes were locked on Marcia. Tom stood and froze. Jim put his face next to hers. "I'm here, baby."

"Jim," she said. She took a deep breath and let out a long scream. It shook Jim to the core.

The specialist spun from the monitors and focused on Marcia's cervix. Marcia rocked and twisted. Jim had seen plenty of live birth videos during his research and while painful, they were never violent like this.

"Hold her!" the man commanded while he struggled to keep her legs apart.

Jim did his best to keep Marcia's torso down as she writhed on the bed. Her screams were now short bursts mixed with Jim's name. He found a strange comfort in that. Her alert recognition of him made the scene something he could handle. Even in her suffering, he felt at least he wasn't alone.

Marcia kicked the specialist off balance. Jim yelled to Tom, "Grab her legs!" Tom responded by backing away, his eyes fixed in horror on whatever was happening between Marcia's legs. "Tom! I need you, buddy."

Tom shook the vision from his mind and hurried to the bed opposite Jim. He did his best to hold Marcia's legs apart, but there was a lot of blood now, and his hands slipped from her knees several times before he obtained a decent hold.

The specialist quickly strapped on a set of clear goggles and got back into position. "Push, Marcia! Push!"

Marcia groaned as she strained. Jim wiped sweat from her forehead. "Push, honey. Good girl." Then Jim heard the cry, strong and clear. Marcia expelled air from her lungs in relief. Then she looked at Jim and laughed in tears.

"It's a boy!" Tom yelled, standing up proudly. He was covered in blood from his shoulders to his knees.

The specialist said nothing. He knelt on the floor at the foot of the bed with the infant and unceremoniously cut the umbilical. Jim watched as he wiped the newborn's body of fluids and wrapped him in a clean towel. He took a small rinse bottle and cleared the child's face. Jim noticed how gentle and confident in his movements the old man was. He could see the man's eyes behind his goggles. They were void of emotion. Observant.

The specialist stood cradling the baby whose crying diminished to almost nothing. Jim faced the old man. After a brief hesitation, the man extended the bundle toward Jim.

"Your son," he said.

Jim took the baby into his arms. He turned to show Marcia, but she was sleeping peacefully. He looked into his son's eyes. "Kyle," he said. Tears streaked his cheeks. For a moment he was lost in the boy's face. Hours old and he seemed to be looking straight back at Jim. All that had happened up to this point was insignificant. Something to laugh about at a high school graduation party or in a wedding speech. Jim saw Kyle's whole life stretched out ahead of him. He would do anything to protect his boy.

When he looked up, both Tom and the specialist were gone.

Chapter 5

Jim Dolan grew up in a family of workaholics. He was left alone more often than not. During these hours alone, he studied. Jim never simply read a book. He took notes then edited the notes and looked for patterns. Then he assessed the patterns and used that information to decide what next to read. By the time he was ten years old, nearly every decision he made was based upon research and weighed outcomes. Like a living chess game. Jim wasn't a rigid, robotic person, but he was uncomfortable doing anything without knowing as much as he could about the subject. Buying a mattress, planting a garden, working out at the gym, Jim read up on every possible angle.

Friends had told Jim that all the studying in the world on raising a child won't prepare you for the wave of experience when you hold your first born child. It was true. Even knowing it would be the case, Jim was overwhelmed by the power and persistence of the feelings he had as he looked into Kyle's face. Joy and doubt mixed in a swirling mass of confusion. He had never known such complete love, but the swelling in his chest was restricted by the crushing weight of responsibility.

Jim felt a small pang of guilt at internally insulting his loyal friend and neighbor, Tom, but the thought made him feel better, if Tom can do this, I can do this.

Tom had a 16 year-old boy named Cameron. Cam lived with his mother now, but visited for a weekend once in a while. It was supposed to be every two weeks, but Cameron had sports and friends so Tom didn't hold him to the schedule. And even if he wanted to, it would mean talking to Deb which was something he went to absurd lengths to avoid.

Jim couldn't imagine it. As he sat in his armchair with Kyle asleep in his arms, he couldn't imagine giving up his boy for any amount of time. Tom often said you can get used to anything, but Jim didn't get used to life without Marcia and he believed he would never want a life without Kyle.

Tom let himself in the front door, his arms loaded with bags. He dropped the first load in the entryway off the living room and went back out for a second load. He left the door open. Jim silently watched him return and leave again for another load.

"How much stuff did you get?" Jim yelled after him. Kyle stirred in his lap and Jim winced at his own lapse in attentiveness. Sleeping infants brought a new set of conditions into life in the house. He tightened the bundle in which Kyle was bound and made soft shushing sounds while rocking Kyle a little.

When Jim looked up again, he found Bob Gruber filling the front door.

"Morning Dolan," he said.

"Gruber."

"Quite a commotion last night."

Jim held Bob's stare and spoke softly to keep from disturbing the baby. "Sorry if we kept you up."

"Oh don't worry about me," Gruber said. "I sleep like a..." Gruber spotted the bundle in Jim's lap for the first time. "Well. What's this?"

"His name is Kyle," Jim said, standing.

"Strong name. I didn't know your wife was pregnant."

"She was."

"In fact, I thought she had left."

"She came back."

"Hmmm." Bob Gruber chewed over something. "Anderson helping you out?"

"It's nap time, Bob," Jim said, quieter this time. "Can we pick this up later?"

Gruber squinted at Jim. "Someday you'll pay for all this."

"All what?"

Gruber looked up the stairs and leaned slightly forward as though he might learn something just by looking. Jim checked Kyle. The boy was awake, but instead of fidgeting and looking all around the room, Kyle's eyes were fixed on Bob Gruber. Jim brushed Kyle's forehead. Kyle's focus remained on Gruber.

Tom pushed in past Gruber. "Behind you, Bob."

Bob Gruber left without a word.

Tom laughed, "He bitched constantly when me and Deb fought and we were two doors down." Tom began to poke through the dozen or so shopping bags. "Did he threaten to file with neighborhood association?"

"As a matter of fact, he did."

"Hot air," Tom said, pulling out a stuffed bear and waving it. "The guy used to be in charge of a Navy destroyer back when. Now he just needs something to keep him pissed off or he feels useless. Don't let him get under your skin."

"I'll try." Jim bounced Kyle absently. Kyle gurgled happily in his arms.

Tom had gone all out; diapers, outfits, wipes, powders, toys and more. He cracked open a box and held up its contents. A baby monitor.

"How did you get so good at all this with only one kid?"

"I made a lot of mistakes, my friend," Tom said. "Some of them I'll never forget. It's like I can still see the effects in Cameron from that one time I ran out of baby powder and tried baking soda." Tom reflected for a moment. "Seemed like the same stuff to me at the time. Absorbent. Good for odors."

"Thanks for all the help. It's been a crazy ride."

"No problem," said Tom. "How's Marcia?"

Jim blinked. He hadn't checked on her since the birth. They had cleaned up. Changed sheets, moved the specialist's abandoned equipment, showered Marcia, and put her to bed. She had fallen asleep instantly. That was twelve hours ago. Jim still hadn't slept and he was pretty sure Tom hadn't either. But somehow, Tom seemed so much more together. They had made the decision to wait a day before going to the hospital so everyone could rest. Marcia was no longer moaning so Jim was less concerned they would submit her to a psych evaluation. "Do you need some sleep?" Jim asked.

"Oh, I'm good. I have a shift tonight, I'll catch some sleep in the truck."

"You're going to wait until work to get some sleep?"

"Hah. Yeah."

Jim held Kyle out toward Tom. "Could you hold him for a bit? I'm going to check on her."

Tom came over to the chair and traded places with Jim. He held Kyle like an old pro. "He's not crying or anything."

"Yeah, he hasn't cried at all since last night."

"Has he eaten?"

Jim thought back. "I guess he hasn't. Maybe we should--"

"Check on Marcia," Tom interrupted. "I got this."

Jim entered the bedroom expecting to find his wife sound asleep. But she wasn't. She was sitting upright in the middle of the bed, eyes and mouth wide open, frozen in an expression of terror. She silently stared into nothing.

"Marcia? Honey?"

Marcia didn't move. She made no indication she knew Jim was in the room.

Jim took another step toward her. Her stillness was such that she could have been made of wax. Jim felt a chill. "Marcia?"

The clatter of silverware on the kitchen tile came from downstairs. Marcia blinked and closed her mouth. Her face instantly turned sleepy as though she had just woken up. "Oh wow," she said. "I feel like I've been asleep for a week."

Jim went to her side. "Are you okay?"

"A little light-headed and sore, but that's nothing surprising." Marcia noticed Jim staring at her intently. "What?"

"Just... I just..." Jim hesitated. Marcia would never go for what he was about to propose. "It's been a strange couple of days. Maybe we should get you checked out."

"I feel fine. I don't need a doctor."

"Okay, but under the circumstances. I mean it seems like there was a lot of blood and--"

She stood and walked to the bathroom off the master bedroom. She ran the water in the shower. She raised her voice from the other room. "Can you take care of Kyle today?"

"You're not coming down?" Jim watched the open door for a response.

"I need to take a bath and rest."

"But we should maybe stop in for a quick check-up. It seemed like you, uh..."

Marcia appeared in the door. "Like I what?"

"Like you lost a lot of blood. Or something."

Marcia squinted. "You want me to get checked out because I lost some blood?"

"Seemed like quite a bit." Marcia went back into the bathroom without a word. Jim stood up from the bed and headed out of the room. "Have a good shower, honey," he said, stopping at the door. "I'll check on you in a while."

Downstairs, Jim found Tom feeding Kyle puree from a jar. "He loves the turkey and ham," Tom said. "Not so big on the peas."

"What about the formula?"

"Won't touch it."

"Isn't that weird? He should be on formula for weeks."

Tom laughed. "You're new to this. Pretty soon you'll figure out that you just have to roll with whatever works." Jim stared blankly for a moment as Tom spooned baby food into Kyle's waiting mouth. "This is a human being," Tom said. "Not some computer program. You gotta be flexible. And get used to it soon, I think this kid has grown since you went upstairs."

Tom was right, Kyle did seem bigger. Jim was impressed with Tom's ease at all this. Jim was worried sick about Marcia, concerned about Kyle, and still nagged about the situation that had gone down in his bedroom the night before. This was nothing like the books said it would be. Life isn't a perfect series of predictable events, but Jim was way off the map now. He was operating under a new, closed system with its own rules. He was becoming increasingly concerned that any outside influence would disrupt whatever fragile peace he had achieved. All he had to do was watch the system closely for changes. Then he would adapt.

"I'll take him." Jim reached for Kyle.

"She's not coming down?" Tom handed the boy over, but then stood there shifting his weight instead of going to the TV as he normally would.

"No. Why?"

"Well," Tom stalled. He wasn't good with eye contact at the best of times, and now he seemed to be counting every item in the room by looking at it. "You need to take him to her."

"She's still resting."

"No man," Tom said. He walked past Jim to the bottom of the stairs and looked up. Then he looked to Jim and pointed to the top. "She needs to see the baby or she can get really bummed out. And that shit will last a long time."

Jim saw Tom was upset and he couldn't remember ever seeing that before. "Okay," he said. "I'll take him up."

Jim approached the bedroom uncertain of what he might find. He entered cautiously. Marcia was in bed, showered and awake. "Honey? It's me and Kyle. He wants to say hi."

Marcia turned onto her side and faced away from them.

"Come on, sweetie. Take a look at our son." Jim sat down on the edge of the bed at Marcia's back.

She didn't respond. Not the slightest shrug.

"It's important, Marcia," Jim continued. "Just one glance." Jim stroked the top of the baby's head. Kyle's eyes were fixed unblinkingly on his mother's back. "He's looking right at you. He's waiting to see his mother's face."

"Don't," Marcia said. "Take him back downstairs."

"Honey, he's--"

Marcia bolted upright and screamed, "Get him out of here!" She dropped back to her side and yanked the covers over her head. Her back was to Jim again. She shuddered and made whimpering sounds as though she were crying. Or laughing.

Chapter 6

"Take a seat, Mr. Dolan," the reception desk nurse said as Jim handed her the forms he had filled out. "Have we seen you and..."

"Kyle."

"Little Kyle here before?" The desk nurse smiled and extended a coochie-coo finger out toward Kyle's face. He reached for her, but Jim turned away before Kyle could connect.

"No," Jim answered. "We're new to this clinic."

Jim found a spot in the busy waiting room and sat Kyle on the floor between his legs. He handed the boy a set of keys to keep him occupied. Though he was barely a week old, Kyle had developed at an alarming pace. He appeared to be closer to one year than one week. Jim had been to other clinics, hospitals, and homeopaths in the days since Kyle's birth. He hadn't slept much and hadn't eaten normally, either. Neither of them had, but it didn't seem to affect Kyle. The boy never cried or cooed. Jim knew it was unusual, but that didn't change his responsibility to the child. None of it did. Not the rapid growth, the eerie quietness, nor the look in his eyes that could only be described as *knowing* changed the fact that Jim had a living being in his care. People wouldn't understand that Kyle was special. Jim would protect him from that, too. He never listed Kyle's birthdate on the forms. He claimed he didn't know it. All he wanted was a brief moment of clarity.

Jim bounced Kyle on his knee as they waited. The small waiting room had seating for ten or so, but only three other people occupied the seats. An elderly couple sat quietly. The woman turned the seam of her cuff in her fingers while the man stared at the wall. The other person was a woman in her 30's who flipped through a magazine and stole glances at Kyle. Kyle never smiled or cried, but when something caught his attention, he fixated. The woman winked and blew kisses to Kyle. Jim smiled through the fatigue. "This is Kyle," he said.

"He's precious," the woman returned. "I love kids."

"Mr. Dolan? Jim Dolan?"

Jim looked up and saw a middle-aged woman with a clipboard at the edge of the waiting room. He stood, picked up Kyle, and approached her. Jim felt scrutiny from the others who still waited. "That was fast," he said.

"Right this way," the woman said and turned to lead the way.

They stepped through a series of doors and entered a small office. The woman offered Jim a chair. He sat with Kyle in his lap. It was clearly an office and not an examination room. The woman wasn't wearing any clothing that would indicate she was a medical professional.

"Is there a problem?" Jim asked.

"Mr. Dolan," she started, but then paused and took a folder from her desk. "May I call you Jim?"

"Sure."

"Jim," she opened the folder. "It appears you have made several clinic and hospital visits in the past week-- "

Jim interrupted, "Yeah, it's because my son hasn't been--"

"With different children."

Jim held his mouth open for a moment before responding. "Excuse me?"

She closed the folder. "My name is Kathy Martin. I'm a claims analyst." She wasn't wearing a clinic branded nametag like the other employees.

"Analyst?"

"I represent a network of primary care facilities. We became aware of your operation yesterday. Are you working alone?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Ms. Martin," Jim said. He took care to keep his voice even for Kyle's sake. It had become clear in the days since his birth that the boy adopted Jim's stress levels.

"Insurance fraud is a very serious crime." Ms. Martin opened the folder again and read some numbers. "You've made eight medical visits in five days at a different facility each time. Each time with a different boy. No birthdates given, no social, no other details at all."

Jim made to protest, but the woman cut him off. "Each time the boy checks out normal and you're unable to answer basic questions about the child's diet, behavior, or even place of birth."

"It's a complicated situation. The mother brought the baby to me--"

"Your wife."

"Yes, Marcia, my wife. But she went through pregnancy and birth away from home and--"

"I see that here. That much is consistent in your story. But each boy you bring in is different in weight, hair amount, and obviously, age."

Jim sat forward on his chair. "I'm sorry, but I fail to see how any of this is fraud. I don't get a check from any company." Kyle looked back and forth between Jim and Ms. Martin.

Ms. Martin set the open folder on her desk and adjusted her suit with a tug at the bottom of the jacket. "There are many methods of defrauding an insurance company that we haven't altogether figured out, yet." She smoothed her pants and folded her hands in her lap. "But we identify suspicious activity as a preventative measure." Her eyes landed on Kyle. Kyle stared back at her. She tilted her head and squinted slightly at Jim. "If he's the same child each time, may I ask why you brought him to all these places if he checks out?"

Jim looked down at the boy and touched his head. Kyle had a lot of hair, now. Blonde. Jim had hardly noticed it coming in. Now here it was. He spoke to Ms. Martin in a quieter tone. The full weight of his situation on the tip of his tongue. "He's not eating properly. He was doing okay for a couple days on pureed meats, but then he stopped. I don't know what else to do." Kyle went back to playing with the keys. "He won't eat," Jim repeated. "I'm sick about it."

Ms. Martin watched Jim and Kyle. "Let's have it," she said. "The truth."

Jim sagged back in his chair. "Kyle is special. Different. His growth and maturity rate is off any chart I can find. I'm trying to learn more about him without causing any alarm."

"I see," said Ms. Martin. She turned and closed the folder.

"The thing is," Jim pressed his lips together and assembled the strength to get this next part out. "Kyle was born last Thursday." He waited for the reaction that would surely come.

Ms. Martin eyed Jim, but said nothing.

"I know what you're thinking," Jim continued. "And no, I don't think you are the one who was born last Thursday."

A slight smirk crossed the woman's face, but it didn't last. She squared her shoulders to Jim and straightened her back. "Anomalies are part of medicine, Mr. Dolan," she said with an aspect that suggested the conversation had come to an end. "But insurance companies aren't in the business of handling anything that doesn't fit neatly into their box. They have become aware of you and are freezing your coverage until the situation can be further investigated."

"What?!" Jim uncontrollably stood up with Kyle under one arm. His voice was raised. "How long will that take?"

"Eight to twelve weeks," replied Ms. Martin flatly.

"Twelve weeks?! At this rate he'll die of old age!" Jim shouted. Kyle began to cry. Jim instantly cradled Kyle and returned to his seat. He bounced the baby in his arms. "How will I care for him? My child?"

Ms. Martin stood and gestured to the door. "I'll be in touch, Mr. Dolan," she said. As Jim rose and turn away from her, she added in a softer voice, "I will help you if I can."

Jim pulled into his driveway. As he lifted Kyle from the back seat, he saw Bob Gruber on his front walk talking to another man. The man was very short, barely five feet tall and fat. He wore a bright white suit and his hair was styled up like a Southern evangelist which, Jim would soon find out, he was.

Gruber pointed in Jim's direction and the little man turned to look. He put on a smile that seemed bigger than his face and waved enthusiastically for Jim to join them. Jim hitched Kyle higher onto his hip and went into the house.

Tom was reclined in the arm chair watching billiards. Jim set Kyle on the floor where a blanket and some toys were scattered. "Do you watch everything on that channel?"

"If it has balls and holes," Tom said. "I'm in."

Jim went to the front window and looked out past the drapes. "Who's that guy talking to Gruber?"

"Sonny Williams," Tom said absently. "He heads up the church the Grubers go to."

"Have you met him?"

"Couple times. The Grubers have him over to dinner once in a while. He'll talk to everyone he sees. Nice guy."

"I bet," Jim said. He couldn't help but think that Sonny's visit today was no coincidence. Gruber was dying of curiosity about the goings-on inside the house. The moaning, the late night activity, and the series of increasingly older babies Jim carried as he came and went were enough to push Gruber into overload. "Did they try to come in?"

"Here? No."

Jim stared at the back of the front door and expected a knock any second. After five minutes of waiting to the soothing voice of the billiards commentator, Jim shook it off and stood up. "Can you watch him a minute?" he said. "I'm going to check on Marcia."

"No prob," Tom said with a thumbs up.

Jim stepped quietly into the bedroom and he saw Marcia was awake. She looked at him. She sat upright against the headboard. She was pale and her breathing was labored and she gotten so thin. Tom claimed he had been able to get her to eat while Jim was out during the day, but Jim hadn't witnessed intake of any kind.

"Hi," she said.

"How are you feeling?"

"Tired."

Jim was worried about her, but she seemed so unsettled in his presence that he had slept on the couch in the living room on the nights that he slept at all. He sat down next to her in the bed and took her hand. "I'm sorry," she said, barely above a whisper. "I'm so sorry."

Jim saw that the words had taken the last of her energy. He stroked the back her palm with his fingers. "Don't apologize. We'll get through it. I promise." She smiled with dry, cracked lips. Her eyes were sunken and dark. Jim took a breath and set his jaw and spoke with measured

caution. "I want to bring someone in to see you." Marcia closed her eyes and pulled her hand away. "Honey," Jim said. "I need you well again." He pulled her hand back to him. She offered no resistance. "I miss you. I miss you like crazy."

She looked at him and squeezed his hand. Jim almost didn't feel the change in pressure. "The specialist," she said.

"He doesn't answer. I've called every day since..."

"Ok," her voice scraped in her throat. "Keep trying?"

"Yeah, I will." She closed her eyes again and let her head fall back against the headboard. She sunk down a little in the bed. Jim got up to go.

"Jim?"

He turned and went back to her side. "Yes, honey?"

"Can I see him?"

"I'll call him right now," Jim said standing again. "My phone is downstairs."

"No. Our son."

Jim discovered the living room empty. The TV was still on, but no Tom or Kyle. Silverware clanked in the kitchen. He hurried in and found Tom leaning against the counter, eating ice cream from the carton. Kyle sat in a plastic high chair in the middle of the kitchen, eagerly shoveling something sticky and red into his mouth with his little bare hands. Jim froze. "Is that raw hamburger?"

"Yeah," Tom said, pointing with the spoon. "He can't get enough of it."

Jim charged toward the chair and startled Kyle as he grabbed at the meat. "This will kill him!"

"How?" Tom asked, confused.

"E-coli? For starters!"

"Oh, this stuff is good. It's fresh ground from a rancher guy I know. He'll be fine." Jim stood dumbfounded. He watched Kyle pick up all the little bits and put them into his mouth.

"He's eating," Tom said cautiously. "Isn't that what we wanted?"

"What made you think he would eat this?"

"He told me."

Jim shook his head to clear the fog. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah! I had him in my arm and I opened the fridge. He pointed right at it and said, 'meat.'"

"Meat!" Kyle shouted.

Jim blinked in awe. "I don't know how much more I can take."

"Kids are amazing, aren't they?" Tom took another mouthful of ice cream.

"Christ sake, Tom!" Jim's voice cracked. "The boy is eight days old! He's talking! What is going on?"

"Easy, buddy." Tom held up his hands as though he could steady Jim from across the room. "Take it as it comes." Jim dropped to his knees. "Oh man," Tom said. "What do you need? Want a burger? A cooked one?"

Jim looked up. Both Tom and Kyle were watching him. "They cut my benefits. I can't get Kyle checked. Or Marcia."

"They have free clinics. Take her there."

"It's complicated."

"Nah, they make it easy there."

"No, with Marcia." Jim faltered then took a breath. "She's hiding something. She doesn't want to see a real doctor. Only that specialist."

Tom nodded. "He won't answer?" Jim shook his head, still kneeling on the floor. "Let's run his plates," Tom said.

Jim looked up. "What did you say?"

"I got his plates the night he was here. I'll get the sheriff to run 'em." Tom set the spoon and carton on the counter and reached out a hand to Jim. "Get up. Nothing good happens to a man on his knees."

Chapter 7

Jim parked the car in front of a 1940's apartment building. It wasn't run down, but it wasn't fancy. The brick building sat in the middle of the block with duplexes and other rentals lining the rest of the street. Jim had imagined something less cozy, less residential, but he was getting used to unreliable expectations. He sat in the car with the motor off and went over his questions.

Tom had cooked Jim a burger, called the sheriff to run the plates, and agreed to watch Kyle while Jim hunted down the specialist. Tom said the man's name was Phillip Spanton. That and an address was all the information he could get. Apart from a couple parking tickets, Spanton was not a law-breaker. The lack of info frustrated Jim. He ached for answers. He ran through the questions again in his head. He was worried that if he didn't have his head straight, this opportunity would be wasted. Jim closed his eyes.

Sleep deprivation wasn't anything new. When he designed software at his job, Jim would stay up for days only catching one hour cat naps when his eyes got tired. But that was in an arena of known quantities and clear results. The added stress of unpredictable variables and broken routines exhausted him and made his mind foggy. His temper flared easily and he wanted nothing more than to sleep, but when he did images flooded his brain. Visions of his moaning wife sitting upright in the bed, mouth hung agape, staring into the unknown.

When he opened his eyes, Jim saw a man standing half a block down the street. He was in silhouette, but Jim could see from his posture that it was the specialist. Spanton cradled bags in his arms. He was either on his way back from the grocery store or... Jim couldn't think of any other possibility. The mysterious specialist was just a man.

Spanton stood frozen. He had already spotted Jim and held himself uncertainly as though he might turn around. Jim made the first move and stepped out of the car. He stood still, watching Spanton. When the man didn't move, Jim raised his hand in a slow wave. "Dr. Spanton?" he said. "It's Jim Dolan." Spanton relaxed and stood upright and continued toward the apartment building without hurrying. On the front step, he set his bags down and fished in his pockets for keys. Jim watched him from across the street. Spanton looked back and called to him. "Come in, Mr. Dolan."

Inside Spanton's apartment, Jim felt unsettled. He couldn't focus his thoughts. While he waited in the car, he had carefully gone over his questions and made a mental response tree. If Spanton said he couldn't talk about what happened to Marcia, Jim would launch a different line of questioning. If Spanton said he knew nothing, Jim was ready for that, too. He thought he had predicted every possible angle Spanton could take, and that he could stay calm and get some information. But Jim was already thrown off. He expected the specialist to resist his visit. He had imagined the man lived in a different neighborhood, a wealthy area, maybe. As he looked around the apartment, Jim realized instantly that he wasn't dealing with some international super scientist.

The apartment was neat and furnished. Nothing fancy but everything comfortable and well-used. Jim burned at the thought of this man, Spanton, living out his normal life so casually while he struggled in vain to make sense of his own. Someone was responsible for what happened to Marcia, for Kyle's abnormalities. Jim took a breath and tried to lower his pulse while Spanton put away his groceries in the tiny kitchen just off the main living room.

"Would you like a drink?" Spanton asked, folding the last paper bag and tucking it into a cabinet.

“A drink?”

Spanton produced a bottle from the cupboard. “If any man looked as though he could use a drink, it’s you.” He poured a generous amount into each of two glasses.

“Dr. Spanton,” Jim did his best to temper his voice. “My wife is seriously ill and -”

“Phillip is fine. I’m not a doctor,” Spanton said. He sipped his drink and held out the other toward Jim. “I was. But now I’m not.”

“No thank you,” Jim said as patiently as possible. “Mr. Spanton, please. Marcia is -”

“It’s great Scotch. Doctor’s orders.”

Jim slapped Spanton’s extended hand much harder than he meant to. The glass flew across the room and crashed into a framed photograph of a desert landscape. A shower of broken glass dropped to the floor. “Listen to me you son of a bitch,” Jim said, managing to keep his voice steady. “Marcia is dying. As I stand here in your living room, my wife is dying.” Spanton stared back, eyes wide. “Something you did is killing her. Do you hear me?”

After a moment of shocked silence Spanton said, “The boy?”

“He’s growing, no, maturing unnaturally fast.” Spanton nodded slightly as Jim spoke. “And he only eats raw red meat.” At this, Spanton looked up at Jim and squinted. “He hasn’t been sick or hurt. He never cries. Rarely sleeps.” The thought of Kyle’s smile and his unruly blonde hair calmed Jim. Exhaustion washed over him.

Spanton noticed. “Let’s sit,” he said. Jim took an armchair and Spanton sat on the couch opposite. “What are the symptoms? With Marcia?”

“She won’t eat. Won’t come out of her room. She goes through periods where she stares and moans.”

“Moans,” Spanton said.

Jim began to feel emotions rise in his chest. He pushed them back down. “Tell me everything.”

The old man downed his drink and looked into the empty glass. Elsewhere in the apartment building, a door opened and closed. There were no other sounds. Jim kept his eyes on the specialist. He was clean-shaven, his hair was neat and trimmed, and he appeared to be rested. A far sight better than the night at Jim’s house. An open hardcover book lay on the coffee table between them. There was no television or stereo in the room. When Spanton hadn’t moved for a few minutes, Jim thought he might have fallen asleep.

“Spanton.”

Spanton’s shoulders fell. Without looking up he said, “I’ll tell you what I know.” He tilted his glass toward Jim. “Refill first?” Jim nodded and sat back in the chair.

Spanton went to the kitchen and Jim heard the clinking of bottle and glass. The room went quiet. Jim craned his neck to see if Spanton had left, but his shoulder was visible in the kitchen. Spanton downed a full glass while hunched over his counter. When he returned to the couch, he carried the bottle and glass with him. “I’d offer you another,” he said. “But that was my last clean glass.” He gestured to the smashed and dripping picture frame. “And I know you have to get back to your wife and son.”

“Tom is with them,” Jim said. “I have time.”

“Ah, the dog catcher.”

“What of it?”

“Nothing. He was invaluable at the delivery. Kept his wits together under stress.”

“He’s good that way. You’re stalling. Tell me what you did to Marcia.”

“She came to us. Remember that when you hear what I’m about to say.”

“She never would have submitted herself to something harmful.” Jim tried to keep his voice level, but it wavered.

“One would think not,” Spanton said, sitting back and taking a drink. “But women will go to great lengths to get pregnant. Far greater than any man would.” He waited to see if Jim would interrupt again, but Jim only stared back.

“I lost my license, I was an OB/GYN, but I lost my license in a fraudulent malpractice suit. When you’re in the gynecology profession, you’re required to manipulate very sensitive areas and it’s more or less up to the patient as to whether or not you’re a pervert. I lost one such case and closed my practice. The legal fees cleaned me out.

“A man approached me about a medical trial. In the street right in front of this building. He said I would be hired as a consultant so I didn’t need a license. He knew about my history and my position as a researcher before I opened a private practice. Not surprising, information is easily obtainable, but unsettling to know someone is paying attention. It goes without saying I took the offer. Debts and whatnot. The next day I had my own lab in an office park building in the suburbs.”

“What’s the address?” Jim interrupted sitting forward.

“It doesn’t matter,” Spanton responded quickly, his open hand palm up. “They’re not there anymore. You wanted everything, I’m giving it to you.”

Jim kept quiet, but he stayed on the edge of the chair.

“This was three years ago,” Spanton continued. “The directive I received, via email no less, was to monitor tissue samples for abnormalities such as degeneration or tumors. Even now, I’m not sure what the goal was. They didn’t give me the bigger picture, which isn’t uncommon when working on a patent.” Spanton emptied his glass and poured himself another. “I had a competent assistant. A middle-aged woman. We didn’t talk casually ever. I saw some people entering and exiting the building at the lunch hour, but I never learned what anyone did nor did I ever make direct contact with any supervisor. Lab techs brought the samples in every few hours. The tissues were not human, pig maybe. And I submitted all reports through email. The pay was high for a research position so I stayed with it.

“About fourteen months ago some men, lab techs, installed some new equipment, then brought me a live, pregnant pig. An email followed asking me to monitor the fetus and report back. I did so. Later in the day, they came for her.” The specialist hesitated.

“Later in the day? Is that normal?”

Spanton shrugged. “Hard to say.”

“Where did they take her?”

“I don’t know. I never saw the rest of the facility. They most likely euthanized her since the pregnancy had reached a specific phase.”

“But that was when you knew the focus of the research had shifted?”

Spanton rubbed his eyes. “I didn’t think about it at the time. I was only looking for abnormal cell structures. All the cells I studied were normal even though they multiplied at an accelerating rate.”

“Didn’t that make you wonder?” It took everything Jim had to be patient.

“You see a lot of wild things in the world of research, Mr. Dolan. There were dozens of pigs. All pregnant. I did my part of the job.”

“What you’re saying is you have no idea what they did to Marcia. I’m wasting my time here.”

“Maybe you are.”

Jim stood from his chair. He wanted to threaten Spanton, but with what? Physical harm? "I'll expose you," he said after a few stammering attempts. "Expose the whole thing!"

"It's gone." Spanton set the bottle on the table. He showed no concern. "They closed it."

Jim thought through his web of responses. He didn't have one for this scenario. "You can't close a whole company," he said.

"Yes. You can."

"Where did the money come from?"

"No way of telling. Payroll company handled the checks. Law firm sets up the corporation and the accounts. They hire one person who hires three people. Each of them hires five. In no time you have sixty people operating a high end research facility across the street from a floor tile showroom. I don't know the man who appointed me. I showed up and performed my duties."

Jim could feel his opportunity to find answers slipping away. He checked his watch. Much less time had passed than he thought. He would have to get back soon so Tom could go to work. He wanted to see if Marcia was feeling any better. Worst of all, he wondered how old Kyle would be when he got back. He had missed Kyle's first words. Now he hoped that Tom would think to record video of Kyle's first steps. For all Jim knew, Kyle would be reading when he walked in the door tonight. Then something occurred to him in a flash of clarity. "If you were watching pigs grow, how did you end up in my wife's phone? As the 'specialist?'"

Spanton pursed his lips then made an expression that fit somewhere between a smile and a grimace. "A mistake on my part."

Jim tilted his head and slowly sat back in the chair. "Mistake?"

"A man came into my office and offered me a transfer and a raise. I would no longer work the lab but instead answer pregnancy questions. He gave me a no frills cellular phone and said I should keep it on me day and night."

"You did all this for money?"

"Mr. Dolan, you have to understand I thought I was helping people." Spanton finished the last of his drink and set the glass on the coffee table next to the bottle. "As I'm sure you are aware from your professional experience, the less a company tells its employees, the happier they are. They come up with their own reasons for deriving satisfaction at work. If you tell them their only purpose is to make the shareholders happy, they'll gradually become less productive. If you tell them nothing, they'll retain pride in their work forever. Without question. That was me. I was glad to help people again."

"You watched pigs in their pregnancy then were asked to answer human pregnancy questions and you didn't see any connection?"

"Seems ridiculous now, doesn't it? Marcia wasn't the first to call. I talked to dozens of women a day. After a few weeks I stopped going to the office and worked from here, or at the park. This went on for six months. Just talking to pregnant women on the phone. The checks kept coming. I performed no examinations until several weeks ago." Spanton ran his fingers through his thin hair. "She had called many times before, Marcia. I recognized her voice instantly. This last call she asked for my name. That was a first."

"Did you tell her?"

"I told her to call me Phillip. She said she had been involved in the company's process and I was listed as the pregnancy specialist. It was the first I had heard that title. She had a question that required me to check her. It sounded as though her pregnancy was much further

along than the women I had previously assisted. She was worried about something, but I couldn't be certain without seeing her. So we agreed to meet.

"I went to a small condo rented for her by the company. She looked fine, but she was concerned about losing her appetite and the pains in her abdomen. I examined her in her room, unorthodox I know, but she refused to leave the apartment. She was resolute on this point."

"Was she scared?" Jim asked. He was hanging on every word now even as it became clear that Spanton was not at the center of this. He was a side player who had broken ranks.

"Not frightened as much as guarded. She wouldn't explain and didn't want to go back to the lab under any circumstances. I took her behavior to mean that she was hiding something from them. You, I suspect." Spanton looked over Jim with mild curiosity. "I believe she was anxious to return to you."

Marcia had spoken so little since the birth that Jim found himself wanting to hear everything he could about her. The experiment itself was a distant distraction. "Did she say something about me?"

"She said nobody knew where she was, but they might come looking."

Jim felt his heart collapse deep inside his chest in an avalanche of shame. He lost control of his voice for an instant and let out a short groan.

"I see. You weren't looking." Spanton sat forward on the couch and poured some Scotch into his glass then picked it up and extended it to Jim. "It's good stuff," he said.

Jim took the glass and drank half in one swallow. Then downed the rest.

Spanton continued. "Long story short, she refused to go back to the lab because she was afraid they would terminate the pregnancy. She told me they went through great lengths to keep the mothers in the study separated, but she overheard a woman in the hallway. The woman was screaming."

"In pain?"

"She was screaming 'Don't take my baby.'" The two men sat for a moment in silence. Jim set the empty glass on the table.

"Your mistake was visiting her?"

"No," Spanton said. "I promised that her baby would be born. That was my mistake. She can be very persuasive, your wife. She said, 'You're a doctor. You preserve life. Save my baby, Phillip.' I imagine you know the power of her voice."

"Oh yes," Jim said distantly. The liquor unfocused his mind. He could see her face. The sound of her voice near his ear. The inevitable image of the fear in her face as he stood over her. He flinched at the memory.

"Dolan? Still with me?"

Jim nodded slowly. Then he asked, "How did she get home?"

"They wanted her to come in, but she had been stalling them. She asked me to file a false report stating she had miscarried. If what she said was true, the company wouldn't allow the pregnancy to go to term. So I filed the report. She left that day. With your son."

Jim took everything and processed it. He couldn't find anything to hang onto.

Spanton watched Jim for a moment. "Then I got a call from you. I hadn't been to the lab in months, but I drove there in the middle of the night and grabbed whatever I could carry. The place was deserted and my access card worked. I came to you with very little notion of what I would find. I could only assume what was happening based upon the growth of the pig fetus and from answering the questions of mothers.

“A few days afterward, we were notified by an email that the company was closing operations. Our final check would include a bonus. I went by there yesterday and it’s already rented to another company. And today you arrived. I should have parked farther down the block, I guess.”

Jim’s shoulders sagged. He had a clear picture now, but it meant nothing. “You have no names? No contact information at all?”

Spanton reached over to an end table covered in opened mail and magazines. He flipped through a small stack of envelopes and selected one. From it, he pulled a paycheck. He tore off the stub and handed it to Jim. “Maybe this is a place to start. But I don’t know what the payroll company can do about a boy who grows too fast and eats raw meat.”

Jim stood up and put the pay stub in his pocket. “I’ll take anything I can get. And thanks for helping Marcia. With Kyle.”

“I’m not sure I did her any favors. It’s possible they wanted to terminate the pregnancy to protect her. To save the lives of all the mothers involved.” Spanton rubbed his face. He chewed over something in his head.

“Is there something else?” Jim asked.

“Hmm? Oh, no. Just the booze making me fuzzy.” Spanton stood and showed Jim the door. “Be with her, Jim. Make her as comfortable as you can.”

Jim left. He drove home hoping Kyle’s aging had slowed down just a little.

Chapter 8

It was just after 9:00pm when Jim pulled into his driveway. There was a car parked there that he didn't recognize. He hurried up the walk and through the front door. Inside, Tom and another man stood in the foyer, talking. The tall, thin stranger wore wire rim glasses and kept his pattern baldness shaved short. Jim instantly registered the concern in the man's face.

Jim opened his mouth to speak, but Tom cut him off. "Hey Jim, glad you're home. This is my buddy Alan. He's a doctor."

Alan reached his hand out and Jim took it. "Doctor?" Jim asked.

"I'm a veterinarian," Alan said. "Tom asked me here." He paused between words and checked with Tom often while speaking. "This is very awkward for me."

"You examined Marcia?" Jim asked, hopeful. "And she was ok with that?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Alan replied checking with Tom for support.

"She told me no outside doctors at all," Jim laughed. "I think she's worried they'll lock her up in the nuthouse and take Kyle from us. Where is Kyle, by the way?"

Alan started a few times then pushed his lips together. He looked to Tom.

"She hasn't said anything, Jim," Tom said at last. "I'm not sure she's in any shape to talk."

"What?"

"She's fully catatonic." Alan held an exam bag in one hand, with the other, he gestured upstairs. "I took some blood..."

Jim didn't wait to hear the rest. He charged up the stairs two at a time and froze to a stop at the bedroom door. Marcia sat upright in the bed, her back against the headboard. She stared straight ahead. She still wore the nightgown she'd had on for the past two weeks. Jim had removed it and washed it a couple times over the first few days, but hadn't since. Now he felt a pang of shame that he hadn't done it before the vet came to see her. Marcia had lost a lot of weight in the days since the birth. Her face was sunken and her skin milky grey. It appeared to Jim that her hair might be thinning as well. Marcia was at death's door.

"Marcia? Honey?"

Marcia turned her head slightly at the sound of his voice. That was promising. Not completely catatonic then. Jim raised his hopes that he could get through to her. He took a few careful steps toward the bed. Marcia's eyes were distant and unseeing. She wasn't completely facing him, but the head movement wasn't coincidental, Jim was sure of that.

He stepped closer to her.

His mind was racing. His focus since the birth had been Kyle. The boy changed so fast and never seemed to sleep. When he had a free moment Jim showered, ate, or grabbed some sleep for himself. Even so, Jim had checked on Marcia everyday multiple times. He wondered if he had checked so often that he hadn't noticed the gradual changes. She had spoken to him earlier that day and he didn't remember her looking this bad. Spanton had told him the pregnancies were terminated. He had said they were aborting fetus growth to protect the mothers. From this.

He reached out to touch her arm, but hesitated. Contact with her might start the moaning again if she was in this state. But touching her had brought her back, too. Regardless, Marcia needed serious medical attention and he had been a fool to wait in hopes that she would recover. Jim placed his hand on Marcia's arm.

Marcia opened her mouth wide and let out a howl that increased in pitch and volume.

"Marcia!" Jim grabbed his wife's shoulders and shook her. She was a skeleton with skin in his hands. He shook her again. She howled again and didn't stop. It was as though her lungs

had infinite capacity. Jim shouted her name over and over. The eyes that had shown Jim so much tenderness couldn't see him. She continued to howl in impossibly long intervals, but the light in her eyes had gone out. Jim sat on the bed and hugged her.

"I love you," he said.

A commotion of raised voices came from downstairs. Jim stood up and listened. One voice was obviously Tom. The other was gruff, older.

"Gruber!" Jim sprinted from the bedroom to the top of the stairs.

Tom was doing his best to keep the larger Gruber from going up. "Bob! Settle down."

"There's something unholy in this house!" Gruber bellowed. He looked up and locked eyes with Jim. "Dolan! By the glory of God I will put an end to your rituals!"

Jim was about to respond when he caught a glimpse of Kyle in the gloom of the living room. In a rage, Jim flew down the stairs and grabbed Gruber with such force that Gruber was stunned into silence. Jim shoved the burly old man out the open front door and into the yard. Gruber fell backwards and slammed down onto the lawn with Jim still on top of him.

Jim stood and pointed down at Gruber. "You stay out of my house! Stay away from my family!" Gruber got to his feet slowly. He kept his eyes on Jim, but said nothing. "I swear to your God that I will kill you. You step one foot in my yard and I will kill you."

Tom grabbed Jim by the arm. "Hey buddy. Let's go back inside."

"What you're doing to that woman," Gruber said in a low voice as he pointed to the bedroom window of Jim's house. "To your wife. Is unnatural. And I will not stand for it." In the moment of silence that followed Gruber's threat, Jim realized Marcia's howling had stopped.

"Daddy?" Jim and the other men looked at the doorway. Kyle stood there, arm outstretched toward the back yard. Jim ran across the yard and the driveway to where he could see behind the house. Fifty yards away, where the yard met the woods, Jim saw Marcia disappear into the treeline.

"Marcia!" he screamed. He sprinted across the backyard toward the woods and crashed into the darkness of the trees shouting her name. His eyes adjusted to the dark and he could just make out a white shape a few yards away, but as he thrashed his way in a panic through the undergrowth, the shape grew dim and slipped away. He cried out again. There was a slight incline in the ground and soft earth made it difficult for Jim to get a stable foothold. He fell to all fours more than once and the thorns and branches clung to his clothes. When he looked again, she was gone.

"Marcia," he said, not shouting anymore. He stood in the dark, listening. The trees rustled. Jim strained his ears and looked in all directions. He couldn't be sure how far he had come or which direction would lead him home. Leaves and dirt clung to the sweat on his face and arms. His skin itched where blood trickled from dozens of tiny scratches. Over his shoulder, he caught a flicker of white against the trees in the distance. He strained his eyes to see into the darkness and the flicker of light came and went again from the same spot. Then it appeared and remained, sweeping back and forth frenetically. A flashlight.

"Jim!" It was Tom calling out. "Jim Dolan!"

"I'm here," Jim said just above a whisper. His lungs and throat burned. He tried again. "Here!" The light grew bigger and Tom's face appeared out of the darkness. Where Jim had struggled his way through the brush, Tom moved easily. His feet never slipped or slid and nothing snagged his clothes. It was painful to swallow past his ragged throat, but he managed to keep his voice steady. "She's gone."

"We'll find her," Tom said as he approached. "We'll get her back."

Jim's legs trembled with fatigue. He wasn't sure he could take another step without collapsing. Tom steadied Jim and they made their way out of the woods, across the yard, and into the house through the back door. Jim said nothing until he sat at the kitchen table and took a sip from the water Tom handed him. "I've let this get out of hand," he said. "I should have taken her to the hospital weeks ago."

"No use thinking that way."

"Where's Kyle?" Jim tried to stand, but his legs weren't ready. He dropped back into the wooden chair. "Did you leave him here alone?"

"No, he's fine," Tom said.

Jim could tell he wasn't getting the whole truth. "Who is he with?"

"I left him with Bob."

Jim's anger renewed his energy and he stood. "Gruber is in my house?" His voice cracked. His throat stung fiercely. He couldn't push it any further.

"He's a good man, Jim," Tom said. He picked up his flashlight and pulled the keys to his truck from his pocket.

"You're leaving?"

"I have a shift tonight."

"Can't you stay?"

"I don't have a savings, man. I gotta run as fast as I can to stay in the same place. If the county figures out they don't need a night shift for animal control, I'm done." Tom cracked the back door open then turned back to Jim. "Bob is only in your face because he's worried about your wife. If you make up with him, get on his good side, the guy will stop a train for you."

"Okay," Jim said quietly. He stared at the table in a daze.

"Okay what?"

"I'll talk to him. Patch things up."

Tom nodded. "Alright then. We'll all watch a game together tomorrow." He stepped through the back door and closed it behind him. Jim wondered if all night shift dog catchers understood people as well as Tom.

After fifteen or twenty minutes at the table, Jim felt he could face Gruber. This was as good a time as any to take his earful. He had no energy to put up a fight. Jim stood and made his way toward the living room. The television was on, but the room was empty. He went upstairs. They weren't in Kyle's room either. Out of some need to confirm Marcia's absence, Jim looked into the master bedroom. She wasn't there. The covers were pulled across the floor as though she held the corner of the blankets in her hand as she walked away and let go at the door. Jim hadn't slept in their bed since the birth. At first, it was to watch Kyle and let Marcia get rest. Then on the night he tried to sleep next to her, she had stared at the ceiling and moaned. He had gone back to the couch and the moaning stopped.

It crossed Jim's mind that Gruber most likely took Kyle to his own house. Through the large, Southern-facing bedroom window, he could see the Gruber residence. Lights were on both upstairs and down. Jim took the stairs slowly. His legs weighed too much to move any faster. When he reached for the knob on the front door, he saw his arm was still filthy with dirt and blood from his run through the woods. He thought it might not set the right tone to amend relations if he looked so rough. He turned and made for the main floor bathroom to clean up. Gruber had watched Kyle this long, he could wait another fifteen minutes.

After opening the door and flipping on the light, it took Jim a full minute to comprehend what he saw. Gruber's leg hung over the side of the tub, his shoe and sock still on. The wall of

the shower was splattered with blood. Kyle stood crouched on Gruber's chest, his face covered dripping blood, and clenched chunks flesh in both hands. The boy appeared to be around six years old now. And he was eating Bob Gruber.

Jim couldn't react. His mind had no response at all. Not fear. Not disgust. Even when Kyle looked at him with uncertainty on his face, Jim had no feelings about what he saw.

Then Kyle spoke. "Daddy?" he said in a clear child's voice. "Are you mad?" Jim met Kyle's sharp blue eyes. Marcia's eyes. His round face was full of innocence and craving for approval. Emotion swept over him and made him nauseous and dizzy. He steadied himself against the door frame.

Kyle put his hand to his mouth and chewed on Gruber's remains while keeping a tentative eye on Jim. Jim took a shaky step forward to get a better look inside the tub. Gruber's face remained whole. His eyes were half-mast and his mouth partially open. The rest of him had been stripped to the bone. His rib cage jutted out and the organs and entrails were untouched. Most muscle tissue and skin from the torso and upper limbs had been consumed. The blood that hadn't pooled up in small pockets on the body ran down the tub drain. Jim put his hand to his own mouth and squeezed his cheeks. Kyle watched him carefully. Then Jim noticed Kyle's teeth as though he had never seen them before. They were pointed and the uppers and lowers fit together neatly in his mouth. And there were way too many of them. "Are you mad?" he asked again. "He wasn't supposed to come in the house, right?" When Kyle didn't get a response, he stood straight up on Gruber's corpse and looked as if he might cry. "Right? Daddy?"

Kyle, though covered in blood and much older than Jim had last seen him, was still a beautiful boy. Jim didn't know where it came from in the sight of all this horror, but his heart suddenly filled with love for his son. He cleared his throat. It took two tries, but at last he said, "I'll be in the living room. Come get me when you're full and we'll clean up."

Jim pulled the door shut and walked down the hall. He sat down in his armchair in front of the television. The sound was down and the picture flickered light across Jim's face. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath then let it out slowly. It was nearly midnight. Outside, an elderly woman called out for her husband.

Chapter 9

Jim awoke with a start. It was morning. He sat upright in his chair and looked around the room. No sign of Kyle. The TV was off. Jim stood and hurried to the bathroom. Bob Gruber's chewed, pink skeleton was in the tub, but all the blood was gone. The tub and the rest of the bathroom had been cleaned. After walking through to the main floor without finding Kyle, Jim headed upstairs. Kyle was seated on the floor in his bedroom building with Legos. He had showered and put on clean clothes. Kyle looked up when Jim spoke. "Good morning."

"Hi," Kyle said.

"I thought you would wake me up when you got full."

"I tried to, but you were pretty zonked."

Jim laughed. He had the feeling that he was babysitting someone else's child. The only familiarity came from his face. Kyle was clearly Marcia's son. Same eyes, same jaw, same nose. Jim looked for himself in Kyle's face, but he couldn't see it. "Zonked? Where did you pick up that one?"

"Tom. He's funny." Kyle's voice was high-pitched, as it should be, but he was articulate. He didn't overly enunciate, but didn't run his words together either. It made Jim feel even more like a stranger.

"Can I come in?"

"Yeah, but there's nowhere to sit," Kyle said. "Except the floor."

"That's fine with me," Jim said as he sat down cross-legged. "We'll have to shop for some chairs."

"I don't know." Kyle continued sticking the little plastic blocks onto his structure-in-progress.

"Don't know what?"

"We don't have to get anything for in here. There are chairs downstairs."

"We should update this room," Jim waved around the place as cheerfully as he could.

"You're not a baby anymore. We can at least get you a real bed. A big boy bed."

Kyle rolled his eyes. "Dad," he said with exaggerated annoyance. "Come on."

"Why wouldn't we? It'd be fun to shop for stuff." Jim didn't know how long he could keep up the act. There were many elephants in the room: Gruber's murder and flesh free carcass in his downstairs tub, Kyle's aging, his ability to talk and apparently bathe himself, and Marcia's whereabouts.

Kyle made the first move. "Is mom coming back?"

"I don't know, Kyle. She's been sick."

"That's what Tom said."

"Do you and Tom talk a lot?"

"He talks to me all the time. He always has. But I only started talking yesterday."

Jim had read about child prodigies claiming to remember their own births. If this was the case with Kyle, Jim wasn't sure he wanted to know. "Do you want to go look for her?" Kyle thought for a moment turning a little yellow block over in his delicate hands. He nodded. "Ok," Jim said. "I have a couple of questions for you. Do you have questions for me?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want to go first?"

"Tom said Mom was really pretty before I was born. Is that true?"

A lump filled Jim's throat. He choked it back and took a breath.

"Sorry," Kyle said. "Tom said I should go easy on you at first."

"Thanks, Kyle. I'm okay."

"You say my name a lot."

"Do you want to be called something else?" Jim asked.

"Tom calls me 'Ace.'"

"Do you want to be called that instead?"

"Not by you. That's Tom's name for me. You need to come up with your own nickname."

"Ok. I'll come up with something," Jim said. He didn't want this to go the wrong way, but he knew he was in over his head. "This feels like the first time we've really had time to talk."

"We had time before. But you didn't talk." Kyle said flatly.

"Well, I--"

"I guess because I didn't talk."

"I'm sorry. I--"

"Tom talked to me all the time even when I couldn't talk back," Kyle said. Jim realized his temperature was rising. It was like the beginning of an argument with Marcia. She knew exactly how to push his buttons and find his faults. That ability appeared to be hereditary. Jim took another deep breath. Kyle noticed and lowered his head. "Sorry. I need to go easy on you."

"It's okay, buddy. I'll get better at all this. Can you help me out?" Kyle nodded. Jim shook his boy's knee. "Yeah?" Kyle smiled and nodded again. "Is 'buddy' okay? For a nickname?"

"That's a good one. I think Tom would approve."

"Tom's a pretty good guy. He calls me Buddy sometimes." Jim paused. He relaxed. He had envied Tom for knowing his boy so well. Jim hadn't considered that even before Kyle could talk, he could listen. "Anything else?"

"Your turn."

Jim had a thousand questions. He wanted to ask something simple, but everything else clouded his mind. The question came out before he could filter it, and it came out as a statement.

"Your teeth."

"They're not like yours," Kyle answered.

"No. They aren't."

"They came in a long time ago, but you can't see them if I don't smile." Kyle pressed two of the building blocks together then pulled them apart again. "So I try not to smile."

Jim nodded. "Well, you can smile around here. We're safe in our home." He picked up a block and pressed it between his fingers. Kyle put out his hand and Jim handed him the block. Kyle clicked it into place on the building. "What are you making?"

"A space station."

"Pretty cool. Where did the blocks come from?" Kyle smirked and dug through the box of loose mini bricks. "Ah, Tom. Of course."

"My turn?"

"Yep. Hit me."

"Do I get a birthday?"

Jim blinked. "Of course you do. Why wouldn't you?" The reason behind the question hit Jim too late.

"I think I'm aging after I eat," he said. "If I gain five years every time I eat like that, how many days will it take until I'm eighty? Fifteen?" Kyle held his hands out, palms up. "If I don't eat every day, twenty?" He waited looking at Jim, but when Jim only stared back, Kyle shrugged. "No use in fixing up any rooms if I will barely make it into next month."

"Wow," Jim said. "That is too much to think about for a boy your age."

"Okay, I'll think about it in a couple days when I'm a grown-up."

"Hey. I don't know what's going on here, either." Jim raised his voice. "You're not the only person with problems. Tom's ex-wife is taking him for every penny. He never sees his son. My two-week old boy just ate my neighbor and there's a mob of religious nuts forming on his lawn."

Kyle stood up. "But you said you wanted him dead! I was helping!"

Jim lowered his voice and gently took Kyle's arms in his hands. "I did say that, yes. But I didn't mean it. I was trying to scare him away."

"It didn't work. He came into the house after you left."

"I know," Jim said. "Tom asked him to. When Mom left."

"But then he started digging around. He went into your bedroom and found blood on the wall."

Jim looked steadily at Kyle. "He did?"

"Yeah, I tried to stop him, but he didn't pay attention. He went to the phone and called the police. I ran into the bathroom and knocked down everything I could reach. He came running in and I tripped him with the cord for the hair dryer. He fell into the tub. I grabbed his face and pulled at his throat until he stopped moving. I was so hungry. I'm sorry if that's not what you wanted."

Jim let his hands fall. He sat in a daze. In the few moments they had been talking, Jim had wiped the image from his mind. He had shut out the severity of their situation. Even though he had seen the child eating, it felt like a dream. He had no emotional reaction to it. The skeleton in his downstairs tub might as well have been a sack of laundry.

He reached again for Kyle's arms and pulled the boy toward him until he sat in Jim's lap. "I don't care if you live twenty days or twenty minutes. I love you. I want to spend time with you."

"Tom said that, too. A lot."

"Which part?"

"That you loved me," Kyle said. His head down.

"I do, buddy," Jim said. "No matter what."

Jim held Kyle in silence for a few minutes. Then the boy stood and turned to face Jim. Kyle's hair was long, blonde, and curly. It hung across his eyes at first, but he brushed it aside. "Do you think we can help Mom?" he asked. "Even if we find her?"

"I don't know."

"Isn't there anybody who knows about us?"

Jim didn't know what to say, how much Kyle should know, but Kyle made the decision for them both. "You talked to the specialist, right?"

Jim stood and took Kyle's hand. "Let's get some lunch and you can tell me everything as you know it."

They sat at the kitchen table. Jim made himself a sandwich, but Kyle wasn't hungry. Jim listened carefully as the boy revealed everything he knew about himself and the situation. He understood that he had been part of some growth experiment. He knew that his birth had made Marcia sick. As they sat at the table, Jim could see the back yard. He desperately fought the urge to ask Kyle if he wanted to go kick the soccer ball around. Kyle spoke like an educated adult with a child's voice. He had the ability to process complex emotional and intellectual scenarios

and outcomes, but he wasn't wooden like a robot without feelings. He understood everything and wanted answers. It was Jim who wanted to forget it all and play in the yard.

"Dad," Kyle said.

"Yeah?"

"Should we go?"

"What?" Jim snapped out of his daydream. "Yes, let's hop in the car." He grabbed his coat from the back of a chair and searched for his keys. Instead, he pulled out Spanton's pay stub.

"What's that?" Kyle watched him hold the sheet. "It's blue. Is that something from the doctor?"

"It's from the specialist."

"Wasn't he a doctor, though?"

"Not anymore," Jim said. He got in trouble. But he came here to help mom." Kyle took the stub and looked it over. "That company has been shut down. There's no way to find out what they were really doing."

"You checked the internet?" Kyle asked. Jim nodded. "They must have ordered their equipment from somewhere."

"Are you getting smarter by the minute?"

"If you ate a hundred pounds of protein in two hours, you'd get smarter, too."

"I'll try it sometime."

"What's this number?" Kyle held out the sheet, pointing to a line item.

Jim took a look. "That's his take-home pay. More than I've ever made."

"Why did they subtract all these numbers?"

"Taxes and social security."

"That's a lot."

"Yeah. Pays for schools and roads."

"All this?"

"That one," Jim pointed to a number toward the top of the sheet. "Is probably health insurance. In case he got sick."

"Do we have health insurance?"

"Yes, but they won't let me use it."

"Because of me?"

Jim tightened, but Kyle picked up on it and he forced himself to relax. "Yeah, buddy. They think I'm bringing in a different boy every time because you're growing so fast."

Kyle nodded. "If he had insurance, maybe we could talk to Kathy Martin."

"Who?"

"The insurance lady from that clinic last week," Kyle said.

The sensation hit Jim in the chest. Pride.

Chapter 10

Jim drove. It was late in the afternoon and their chances of finding Kathy Martin at her office were slim, but it felt good to be out of the house. More so with Kyle in the car with him. Kyle tried to find a radio station, but wasn't able to make any combination of knobs and buttons produce sound other than static.

"Here," Jim offered, reaching for the controls.

"I'll figure it out," Kyle said. Jim retracted his hand. Kyle turned off the noise and turned to look out the window. "Is the world a big place?"

"Yes."

"Is there anyone else like me in it?" Kyle asked without looking away from the houses and small suburban businesses going by outside the car.

"I honestly don't know," Jim said. "Maybe somewhere. But everyone is unique in some way."

"Unique?" Kyle turned the blue paystub over in his hands.

"Yeah, it means special."

"I know what it means. I was thinking it was the understatement of the millenium."

Jim couldn't help but laugh. "Ok. I take it back."

They rode in silence until they reached the clinic parking lot. Kyle pointed. "There she is!" Jim spotted her stepping into her car. He pulled in and blocked her from behind. Kathy looked in her rear view mirror and impatiently got back out.

"Excuse me!" She shouted, waving. Then she recognized Jim. Her eyes went from him to the boy of seven or eight next to him. She tensed, but her face showed no expression. Jim stepped slowly out of his car.

"Hello, Ms. Martin," he said tentatively. "We thought you might be able to look at something for us." Jim turned to Kyle and nodded. Kyle climbed out and approached Kathy Martin. She remained still, and Jim could sense her uncertainty. She looked as though she might run back to the building. She flinched slightly when Kyle extended the blue sheet toward her.

"What's this?" she asked as she reached to take it.

"A paycheck," Kyle said. "From the man who performed my birth." Kathy glanced at Jim and Kyle continued, "I remember you. You offered to help us. Do you remember me?"

"Yes. I remember." She put the paper in her pocket without looking at it. "But I'm not legally allowed to give you any information. How do I know you didn't steal this from his mail?" She raised her voice. "Please leave at once or I'll call security!"

Jim opened his mouth to speak, but Kyle spoke first. "Thank you, Ms. Martin," he said. He walked back to the car, climbed in and looked to Jim patiently. Jim stood confused.

"I'm asking you to leave, Mr. Dolan. Now." Kathy Martin pointed directly at Jim.

"Come on, Dad," Kyle added.

Jim sat back in the car, put it in gear, and pulled away. As he rolled through the parking lot, Jim could see Kathy Martin watching them. "Damn," he said under his breath.

"She'll help us."

"You think so?"

"Know so," Kyle said.

Jim pulled out into traffic. He got a last glimpse of Kathy Martin. Her eyes were fixed on them as they drove away. "I don't know. She seemed pretty upset. And she kept our only lead."

Kyle played with the zipper on his jacket. Zipping slow, then fast, and listening to the change in pitch. "It was an act. She'll take it home and run a search. We'll know something tonight or tomorrow."

Jim stopped at a red light and took a long look at Kyle. "Can you... " He paused and chose his words carefully.

Kyle didn't wait, "Can I what?"

"See the future or something? You know?" Kyle stared at Jim, eyebrows raised, for a full ten seconds before bursting in laughter. A young boy's high-pitched giggle. The sound of it filled Jim with emotions he couldn't track. For that moment, the weight lifted, and Jim felt there were no two other beings in the universe beyond him and his son.

"No, Dad! That's stupid!" Kyle twisted his face and shook his head.

"How should I know?"

"It's pretty obvious she was just putting on a show for the security cameras. Not a very good actor, either."

"She fooled me," Jim said. He checked his blind spot and changed lanes. "I thought she might report us."

"No way. She wants to know what's going on as much as we do."

"How can you know that?"

"It's all over her face!" Kyle shook his head again. "You're funny."

Jim wanted to ask if Kyle could read minds, if only to hear him laugh more, but wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer to that question. Instead, he went with, "Are you hungry?"

"Always."

"I could use a bite. Mind if we hit drive-through?" Kyle shrugged. "Have you had french fries? Or a chocolate shake?"

"No," Kyle said, staring out the window, studying this corner of the world. Strip malls and churches and car dealerships. "Are they good?"

"Depends on where you get them, but yeah." Jim turned onto a thoroughfare.

"I haven't eaten anything except raw hamburger and Mr. Gruber since I was born."

Jim winced. "I'm sorry," he said. After a few more blocks he added, "I wish I was better prepared for all this."

"Not your fault." Kyle patted Jim's knee. "You're doing a really good job."

Jim could see the police cars in front of his house all the way down the street. Mrs. Gruber and a group of people stood on her front lawn. A few held signs which Jim couldn't make out from this distance.

"What does 'unholy' mean?" Kyle asked.

"It means they think we're bad people."

"Both of us? Or just me?"

"Both of us, buddy."

Kyle pointed to the crowd. "That one says 'MONSTER.' It's not plural. So it's just me."

"That's what it says," Jim said as he pulled the car into the driveway. The crowd shouted unintelligible streams of anger. He shut off the car and turned to Kyle. "But we're family. If someone is mean to you, he's mean to both of us."

Two police officers approached Jim as he stood from the car. "Mr. Dolan?" the taller one said.

A woman screamed from the crowd on Gruber's lawn. "That's him! That's the devil's child!"

Jim cleared his throat and addressed the officer. "Yes, that's me. This is my son, Kyle."

"May we step inside your house, sir?" Jim looked to the front door. Another uniformed officer and two men in brown tweed blazers stood waiting. "Let's step inside, sir," the officer repeated. He gestured toward the men at the door.

The waiting men stared evenly at Jim as the crowd grew louder. Kyle watched the people on Gruber's front lawn as they screamed hate directly at him. Jim took the boy's hand and pulled him toward the house. Jim led the men to the kitchen. The setting sun made the room glow a dim orange, but Kyle flipped the switch and the room turned bright white. "I could make some coffee," Jim said.

"Mr. Dolan, I'm Detective Morgan. Do you know why we're here?"

"No. I don't." Jim couldn't help flicker a glance at Kyle. The second detective noticed and also looked at Kyle.

"Are the people next door causing a disturbance to you and your family?" Morgan asked.

"This is the first time I've seen them doing... that."

"Many of them believe you were that last person to see Mr. Gruber alive," Morgan said, eyes unblinking.

Kyle's high voice broke the silence. "Mr. Gruber is dead?"

One of the uniformed officers put a hand on Kyle's shoulder. "Come on, son. Let's go see what's on TV."

Kyle checked Jim for approval and Jim nodded. The officer and Kyle left the room. No one spoke until they heard the TV come on. "I saw him a couple nights ago," Jim said. "He was watching Kyle for a minute while I did some work in the back yard. In the woods, actually."

"I see." Morgan checked his notebook. "Is it true that you and Robert Gruber argued that night?"

"We always bicker, but nothing --"

"Is it true that you threatened his life on your front lawn?" Morgan asked. There was a noise from outside then something hit the house. Everyone in the room reacted except Morgan. His eyes never wavered.

The tall officer returned to the room. "The protestors are getting pretty rowdy."

"Get them quiet," the nameless detective said. Two uniforms left the house. The commotion subsided soon after.

Morgan spoke. "Mr. Dolan?" He tapped his notebook with his pencil. "Did you threaten the life of Bob Gruber?"

"Don't I have the right to an attorney?"

"Do you need one?"

Jim looked out the window toward Tom's house. He was good in situations like this. "Not in earnest. I mean, I said some things, but I never really meant--"

"I believe you," Morgan said. He closed his notebook and slid it into his jacket pocket. "But you did see him last."

"Have you spoken to Tom Anderson?"

"He's on his shift. We'll catch up with him in a few hours. You mind if we look around?" The bathroom. Jim hadn't looked at it since that morning. He tensed. Morgan and his partner both noticed. The crowd outside began to make noise again.

"Dad?" Kyle said from the kitchen doorway. Morgan had opened his mouth to speak, but now closed it and looked at Kyle.

"What is it, bud?"

“They found something outside.”

On cue, the tall officer strode into the kitchen. He had Gruber’s USS Ronald Reagan cap in a plastic evidence bag. “Detective Morgan. Officer Willis found this near the woods.” Morgan took the bag and turned it over. “He marked the spot, sir.”

Jim risked a look at Kyle. Kyle did not look back. The boy kept his gaze locked on Detective Morgan. His face was calm, but there was something under the surface. Calculations, Jim thought. He fought the urge to catch Kyle’s attention. He wanted desperately to know what the boy had in mind.

“Doesn’t appear to be any blood,” Morgan said handing the hat to his partner. “Do we have a medical on Gruber?”

“Not that I know of,” the partner said.

“Get one. For all we know, the old dodger wandered into the woods. Lots of loud sounds on a Navy ship. He might be soft in the head.” Morgan pointed the men to the front door and spoke over his shoulder to Jim. “Thanks for your time, Mr. Dolan. Please make yourself available if we have further questions.” The crowd outside became louder as the police men opened the front door. Jim could see there were more people on Gruber’s lawn than before, and with them, more signs.

As they approached their cars, a squat man with tall white hair and gleaming teeth waved to the detectives. “Good evening, gentlemen,” Sonny Williams said. “May I be of assistance?” The crowd quieted when Sonny spoke, though his voice easily carried over the commotion. Jim couldn’t hear what Sonny said to the police from the front door. The men stood in a trio at the curb. Sonny gestured to Jim’s house, then to Mrs. Gruber, then back to Jim.

“Dad?” Kyle stood at Jim’s side surveying the scene.

“Yeah?”

“You need to remember something,” Kyle said.

“What’s that?” Jim kept his eyes on Sonny and wondered if he should break into their conversation to get his side heard.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, bud,” Jim said absently.

Kyle yanked Jim’s arm enough to hurt. “Dad!”

“Kyle! What is it?”

“You need to remember something!”

“Ok! What is it I need to remember?”

“They think I’m a regular kid,” Kyle said.

“That’s good, right?”

“And they’ll never suspect me.”

Chapter 11

By the time Tom showed up the next morning, the police had searched the woods for Gruber, Mrs. Gruber's church group protestors had thinned out, and Jim had established that Gruber's bones were no longer in his house. Kyle was cryptic about where they ended up, but he said they wouldn't be found and Jim believed him.

Kyle stood in the living room and watched the half-dozen of Sonny's flock who were still out on Gruber's lawn. "That lady has bug eyes." Jim joined Kyle at the window. The people looked like they were camped out for a prime spot the night before a parade. Lawn chairs, lap blankets, lunch-sized mini coolers. They wore down coats and stocking caps even though the weather was mild. It occurred to Jim that this was something these folks had done before. They were professionals.

"And that guy looks like a polar bear."

"Which?"

"The fat guy in the white puffy coat."

"Hey, that's not nice," Jim said bumping Kyle's shoulder with his elbow. "Maybe he can't help it."

"He could eat less."

"There are a lot of reasons people are overweight besides food. Be nice." The polar bear man noticed them watching from the window. He pointed and shouted. The others stirred in their chairs to see. One grabbed his sign which read "Satan Among Us!" and shook it at Jim and his son.

"They're not very nice to us," Kyle said.

"I wish we could show people the error in their ways, but the world isn't always like that."

"The error in their ways?"

"Yeah, it means--"

"I know what it means," Kyle interrupted. "It just sounds preachy."

Jim smirked. "Preachy, is it?"

"It's not your style," Kyle said.

Tom came from the bathroom drying his head with a towel. "Crazy night, huh?"

"We're naming the new zealots," Kyle said to Tom with a grin. "That's Buggy. That's Polar Bear."

"Zealots?" Jim asked a little louder than he meant to. "Where did you pick that up?"

"I've been reading your books at night."

Before Jim could think of which of his books covered zealotry, Tom chimed in. "That guy could use a shower." He pointed to a thin, raggedy man who held no sign and didn't shout with the rest of them. His arms hung at his sides and he stared directly at Kyle. He was also in Gruber's yard, but stood a few yards away from the rest.

"I could take him the soap dish," Kyle said. Tom laughed out loud and slapped Kyle on the back. Jim went to the kitchen to put some food together. From the sink, he could see Mrs. Gruber in her backyard, standing alone at the treeline, looking into the woods. Jim kept an eye on her as he walked out onto his deck. "Mrs. Gruber!" he called out. After a moment of no response he tried, "Helen?" Mrs. Gruber looked over her shoulder at Jim. From this distance, Jim couldn't read her expression. He glanced to the front yard to see if he had caught the attention of the

zealots, but they were still ranting toward the front of his house. When he turned back to Mrs. Gruber, she was facing the trees again. "Do you need help?" he shouted.

Mrs. Gruber raised her head and screamed at the top of her lungs. "Raaahhhberrrrt!"

Then she screamed the name again.

And again.

She sobbed between yells. Any satisfaction Jim had derived from the death of Bob Gruber was long gone. He felt only shame and pity.

"Hey Jimmer," Tom said from the back door. "Phone."

Jim put the receiver to his ear. "This is Katherine Martin, Mr. Dolan." Jim connected eyes with Kyle who now sat at the kitchen table. "Warren Davis. Tell Kyle I appreciated the gift." She hung up. Tom set a couple of raw steaks in front of Kyle who dug in immediately. "We have a name," Jim said. "Maybe now we'll get some answers."

"That's good," Tom replied. "Because I'm out of steaks." Jim grabbed a notepad from the counter. "If you're making a run, maybe get some dip and beers," Tom added. "And we'll all have steaks. I'll grill ours, though." Kyle finished up the last of his meat. He took the plate to the sink. Tom shook his head. "Damn, we're going to need something bigger. You haven't seen a teenage boy eat and I have. They're bottomless. And this one is growing by the minute."

Jim watched Kyle as he washed his dish and set it in the dry rack. Jim felt a pang of hurt in the center of his chest.

"You look like someone took your lunch money," Tom said.

"He's sad," Kyle answered. "Because he doesn't feel like he gets to teach me anything."

Tom grinned at Jim. "Creepy how he does that thing, huh?" Jim sat in a chair by the table and let all the air out of his lungs. Tom shifted on his feet. "Ok then. I'm going to head back to my place and crash for a few hours. Catch you kids later. Don't let Soapdish and his friends get you down." He tousled Kyle's hair on his way out.

Kyle picked up the slip of paper Jim had written on and left the kitchen. "Kyle?" Jim called after him. Jim sat alone at the table for a few minutes. He looked through the sliding glass deck doors to the back yard. Mrs. Gruber was standing directly outside, staring back at Jim. Her face was pale except for her eyes which were red from the tears that streaked her face. She stood stock still, her hands in fists at her sides. Mrs. Gruber raised her thin, trembling hand and slowly extended her finger toward something behind Jim.

Kyle stood in the kitchen doorway. "She's gone insane," he said.

"Not now, Kyle," Jim said.

"She's been losing her grip for years," Kyle continued. Kyle's hair was longer. His face was longer and leaned out. And he was taller. Much taller. Nearly Jim's height now. "Old man Gruber kept her locked up in the house since her nervous breakdown."

Mrs. Gruber was rigid with fear, but remained on the deck, still pointing. Jim eased out of his chair. "What are you talking about?"

"She lost it like ten years ago. He's been caring for her ever since. He was the only thing holding her together."

"Did Tom tell you this?"

"Some of it," Kyle said. "The rest I figured out on the internet."

"Did something cause it?"

"Their son died. At sea."

"Jesus."

Kyle went right up to the sliding doors. Mrs. Gruber let her arm down, but never took her eyes off the boy. She shuddered as though she might crumble. "She's completely unhinged. All she had was that old bastard." Kyle huffed out a sort of laugh. "It's tragic."

Mrs. Gruber twisted her mouth into a tight grimace. Then she turned and shuffled toward her house. Jim moved past Kyle and slid the door open. They stepped out on the deck and watched her as she crossed into her yard and climbed the stairs to her matching back deck. She looked over her shoulder once before entering her back door which she left open behind her. Jim spoke quietly. "We could help her." They waited a moment. Jim put his hand on Kyle's shoulder and they followed Mrs. Gruber's path to her house. Jim could barely make out her shape in the shadows of her kitchen. Her back was to them and he head bowed. "Helen. I'm sorry," Jim said.

"Peace," she said. "Please God." Jim let his hand slide off Kyle's shoulder. Kyle stepped forward into the Gruber's kitchen. Mrs. Gruber turned to him and put her hand on his cheek.

"Beautiful boy," she said. Kyle took her hand in his.

Jim pulled the sliding door closed and walked back to his house.

Chapter 12

It was nearly 10pm. Jim sat in his chair with the TV on while Kyle read a book on the couch. Something startled him awake. "Everything ok?"

"Yeah. Good," Kyle said.

"I heard something."

"You snored," Kyle said with more than a little irritation.

Jim got up and went to the front window. The cul-de-sac was well-lit and he could see the church people camped wrapped in their blankets in their folding lawn chairs. The group had declined its numbers in the days since they last visited Mrs. Gruber. The yard was littered with debris and forgotten clothing items. Not all the chairs were full. "Hey Kyle?"

Kyle let out an impatient breath. "Yes, Dad?"

"Where's Polar Bear?" Jim waited for an answer, but none came. Jim faced Kyle and tried to remain calm. "I asked you a question."

"Went home, probably."

"But he's been there every day since day one. Why would he leave now?"

"How the hell would I know? Maybe he was banging Mrs. Gruber. Can I just finish this chapter? Then we can go look for fatty zealot."

Jim felt heat rise in his face. "Hey! Since when do you cop attitude? Did you eat Polar Bear?" Kyle kept his nose in his book. "Kyle!"

"No!" Kyle whined. "God."

Jim closed his eyes and took a breath. "You got to be straight with me, buddy."

"Why?"

Kyle was somewhere around thirteen years-old physically and mentally beyond anyone Jim has ever met. Emotionally, there was no way to tell where he was. Jim found himself caught between speaking to him like a child and an adult. Too simple and he's patronizing. Too cold and he could push him away. Jim tried to remember how he felt at this age. He knew that when he was fighting the transition from boy to man that all he wanted from adults was their acceptance. "Why? Because family tells the truth."

"You have platitudes for every occasion."

"What?"

"Platitudes? Know what that means? I have a dictionary right here." Kyle tapped his forehead.

The old frustration welled up in Jim's gut. Only one person had ever been able to push his buttons this way. "Marcia," he said.

Kyle looked up at him. The attitude was gone and genuine concern took its place. "You ok?"

Tom burst in the front door. "Jim! Help me. Out in the truck," he said and ran back out. Jim rushed out behind him. He could see a form in the passenger seat. Tom opened the door and carefully lifted a rigid mannequin figure from the truck. It was skeleton thin and its skin was ash grey. A wave of stench made Jim's head swim and his eyes burn. He stopped in his tracks. Jim couldn't make out what he was looking at. "Need your help here man," Tom said. "She doesn't weigh much, but she smells something awful."

"What is that?"

Tom didn't seem to understand the question at first. Then he said, "It's Marcia, Jim." Tom turned the frail thing so it faced Jim. "This is your wife."

Marcia's skin was rotting on her frame. Her eyes were clouded over. Before Jim could ask if she was alive, Marcia turned her head slightly. Her milky pupils landed on Jim. A rasping chuff came from somewhere inside her. Jim took her from Tom. She was nearly weightless in his arms.

Jim laid her gently on their bed. Jim hadn't slept there since the boy was born. Kyle watched them in silence. As was increasingly becoming the norm, Jim couldn't read what the boy felt. "You don't have to be here," Jim said to him.

"Is she dead?"

"No. Just very sick." Marcia's breathing was shallow and wheezing. She seemed unable to move under her own power. Jim touched her cheek. "She's ice cold. Where did you find her?"

Tom hemmed. "Yeah, that's not really important."

"It was an alley, right?" Kyle asked.

"Look, ace," Tom said. "You're dad's a little shaky on this stuff. Let's keep the mind tricks to a minimum." He squeezed Kyle's neck with his hand. "Deal?"

Kyle nodded. He stepped into the room. Marcia's head snapped to Kyle. Her milky eyes open and blind. She dropped her jaw wide, drew in a long, grating breath and expelled it in a harsh, shredded rattle. Jim grabbed her shoulders and turned her away from him. She continued.

"Hello, Mother," Kyle said. "I'm sorry." He left the room.

Marcia's head dropped back to the pillow, but she still let out rasping breaths. Jim stroked her arm. "There's nothing left of her."

"I didn't think a hospital would do her any good. I've seen a lot of people in rough shape." Tom searched for the right words. "But I've never seen this." He hung in the doorway a moment. "If you're good, I'm going to head out. I'm still on the clock."

Jim nodded. "Thanks for bringing her home."

Jim found Kyle in the living room. He was sitting on the couch, but not reading. Lost in thought. "This isn't the way I imagined your life would be," Jim said. He sat next to Kyle, but didn't face him.

"You mean your son's life," Kyle said.

"You are my son."

"I'm a creation of experimental science. I'm nobody's son." Kyle sat still, but Jim could see the boy's body was taught with rage. The rage and frustration of a teenager, Jim thought. Was he even a month old, yet? Maybe adolescence will pass overnight. Jim put his hand on Kyle's back and it occurred to him they had never hugged. Kyle pulled away and stood up to face Jim. "How can you not be so pissed off that you want to kill everyone? They did this to your wife." Jim blinked, stunned. He opened his mouth, but no words came. "You're just going to sit there? Are we stuck in this house until I die of old age in a couple weeks? Don't you think we should show them what they've done?" Kyle put up exaggerated air quotes. "The error of their ways?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Warren Davis!" Kyle pointed to someplace outside. "He's out there right now. In his huge house. Living as though life is perfect."

"Did you look him up?" Kyle only stared back. Jim stood. "You know where he lives?" Kyle extended his hand and revealed that he was already holding the car keys.

It was nearly midnight when they reached Davis's home, but the lights were on. Jim had expected a large, gated mansion, but here was a newly constructed suburban home. Big footprint with poor use of space. They parked in front and waited. For what, Jim didn't know. They hadn't talked on the drive over, and Jim's mind had mostly been blank. He could still smell Marcia's

stench on his shirt, but it didn't bother him and Kyle didn't mention it. Jim thought about what ground he might gain by confronting Davis. Kyle took the lead and stepped out of the car.

At the front door, Kyle didn't knock or ring the bell. There was a number pad for the keyless lock on the door's trim. Kyle entered a six digit code and the pad light went green. Kyle thumbed the latch and pushed the door open, but didn't step inside. He looked to Jim for approval. "Wife's birthday," he said.

Jim took the first step inside. The wall space of the vaulted entryway held a single art print in an ornate frame. Other than that, it would be hard to tell if anyone lived in the home. Most of the light in the house came from the second floor. "His study is upstairs to the left," Kyle said.

Jim squinted at him and whispered, "How much research did you do?" Kyle walked up the wide, open staircase and Jim followed.

Warren Davis sat at a desk in the large office. The walls were lined with mahogany shelves and carpet was plush and dark. Davis himself was short and sturdy. He studied a folder and marked corrections in some report. He didn't notice Jim and Kyle at the far end of the room. "Mr. Davis," Jim said. A statement, not a question.

Davis snapped his head up, but didn't appear frightened or angry. "How did you get in here? Who are you?"

"I'm Jim Dolan. My wife was part of an experiment at one of your facilities."

"I'm not directly involved with any research. What do you want?"

"I'm looking for answers," Jim said. "What were you trying to accomplish with your lab on Granada and Ellis?"

Davis removed his glasses and sat back. "I don't know of a facility at that location."

"The tests involved pregnancies of infertile women."

"Yes. The tests were designed to promote growth and cellular health before birth. The results were inconclusive."

"You experimented on humans."

"They were voluntary procedures. All documented. At any rate, the pregnancies were terminated before there was any risk to the subject."

"Not all of them," Jim said. He stepped aside. Kyle moved into the light of the room.

Davis stood from his chair and set his glasses slowly on the desk.

Jim continued, "Kyle is four weeks old."

"My God," said Davis. His face showed little expression. Jim had worked with high-powered men in the software industry. They all had a way of maintaining a master poker face in any situation. Jim had envied these men in the past, but in front of Warren Davis, he felt like shaking him until the man broke. "It's amazing," Davis said as he came out from behind the desk. He approached Kyle. "Do you know what this means?"

Jim set his jaw and remained silent. Kyle's face was as serene as ever. Jim saw no signs of anger in the boy. He put his hand on Kyle's shoulder. "Six weeks?" Davis asked. He examined Kyle but kept his distance. "Are you certain?" Jim said nothing. "Is he normal? Of normal intelligence?" Davis spoke as though Kyle didn't understand him.

"He is of exceptional intelligence," Jim said, choking back the urge to scream Davis' face. "My only problem is that he is aging too fast."

Davis shrugged. "We can alter that gene on subsequent revisions. I never should have scuttled that lab."

"Subsequent?" The lump in Jim's throat cracked his voice. "What about this boy in front of you? What about his mother who lies in some kind of waking coma while her skin rots?"

Davis looked at Jim wide-eyed. "The pregnancy never should have gone to term," he said. "I don't know what you expect from me? I'm not a scientist."

Kyle spoke for the first time. His voice came out soft, but steady. "Look upon my works." He stepped toward Davis who stepped back. Kyle pulled back his lips and revealed his razor teeth. "And despair."

"Hold on." Davis instantly became aware of their intentions. He shot looks around the room in search of an exit. Or a weapon. "We're saving lives! Our company saves lives!" He fell back against his desk and slid down to the floor, cowering.

"Tell me who can help us," Jim said.

"Spanton!" Davis blurted. "Dr. Phillip Spanton. He ran the whole thing. I just sent him money."

Kyle stopped, but kept his eyes fixed on Davis.

"Spanton?" Jim asked.

"Yes," Davis said eagerly. He could see he now had a foothold. He righted himself, but remained seated on the floor with his back to the desk. His eyes flicked between Jim and Kyle and back to Jim.

"I talked to Spanton. He wasn't the main person." Jim wished Kyle had been to Spanton's to perceive something about Spanton that he had missed.

"He was," Davis replied. "I hired him myself." Davis slipped into thought, but snapped back. "In fact, the whole procedure was his proposal. Our original plan was to make a fertility drug for women. The advanced cellular growth was all Spanton."

"I wish for your sake that I believed you," Kyle said. He dropped into a squat and came eye-to-eye with Davis. "But the DNA programming you approved comes with a number a side-effects. The most useful of which is a heightened awareness of what people are thinking. And you're thinking this process, if licensed, could make you billions."

"I want to help people have families," Davis said, speaking past Kyle to Jim. "Something I was never able to do."

"There are less convenient side effects," Kyle continued, his eyes locked on Davis. "Dad, I'll be down in a few minutes. I'll be older, but you'll know it's me."

Jim pulled the office door closed and descended the stairs. Davis screamed repeatedly for several minutes. Jim thought about old man Gruber. He hadn't made a sound. Jim worried about what he had taught Kyle. Davis and Spanton had made Kyle a distortion of nature, but who turned him into him into a vengeful killer? Maybe Kyle could be taught reason and forgiveness. Maybe he would learn to be a good person and accept his fate. Jim desperately hoped his son would do the right things even as he consumed the flesh of the man who created him.

Chapter 13

Kyle's hands were on Jim's shoulder. He was a few inches taller than Jim, easily six feet tall now, and had a few whiskers on his chin. "I'm going to have to teach you how to shave," Jim said.

"Dad. Are you listening at all?" Kyle's voice had changed, but not evenly. It was somewhere between boy and man.

"Yes, I'm with you," Jim said. "What was the question?"

"They'll be good," Tom said. "It's just high school basketball. Cameron will look out for him." Tom squeezed the back of Cameron's neck with his hand. "Nobody gets into trouble at a girls basketball game."

Jim looked into Kyle's eyes. "Can you be good?"

"Define good," Kyle smirked.

"It's cool, Mr. Dolan," Cameron said. His eyes were sharp and aware, like Kyle's, but calm.

Jim pulled Kyle into the living room. "I'm serious," he said. "No drinking or fighting. Cam doesn't know anything about this stuff. If you go bragging or something."

"I'm not an idiot," Kyle replied. "You're making a big deal out of nothing."

"You're not an idiot, but you can learn everything in books. You've never been around other kids. They don't think straight most of the time." Jim shuddered to think of all the things he regretted from high school. All those times he wished he knew karate to impress the girls and intimidate the assholes. "The boys most of all. Just do me a favor and keep your head down." Kyle smiled. His dozens of sharp teeth were unsettlingly apparent from up close. Jim gave Kyle a gentle poke in the chest. "And no smiling."

"Okay, Dad."

Jim and Tom watched the boys walk to Cameron's old Honda. "Eleven sharp!" he called out. Kyle waved over his shoulder.

"First time is tough, but Cam's a good kid," Tom said. "No drugs or nothing. He'll be okay." Tom clapped Jim on the shoulder. "So what's the plan?"

"I just want to sleep," Jim answered still watching the car drive away.

"Sleep when you're dead! You need a night out." Tom pushed Jim out the door and pulled it closed.

It had been four days since their visit to Davis. Kyle's growth had subsided 48 hours after that meal. He spent his time reading. Jim had made attempts to engage him in conversation about the NBA or get him into the yard for some soccer, but Kyle wasn't interested. He focused on science and philosophy. They made trips to the bookstore to feed Kyle's habit. Sometimes twice a day. He also read poetry and literature, but craved philosophy and religion.

Tom had been spending time with Cameron while his ex was traveling and he suggested the boys do something together. "Kyle spends too much time in his head. He's got to get out with people his age," Tom said. Then he added, "While he's still his age."

The activity in the neighborhood had calmed down. The people camping on Gruber's lawn were all gone except one. Kyle had changed the man's name from Soapdish to Creeper. He didn't yell and point like the rest when Jim and Kyle walked to the car. Creeper just stared intensely at the boy.

Those who left took their tents and signs, but a few chairs and sleeping bags littered the yard. Jim wondered if their owners were planning to return or if their bones were buried in the

woods behind his house. Nobody came asking for them. After Mrs. Gruber stopped calling, the police dropped the investigations into Mr. Gruber's disappearance and Sonny Williams hadn't made any more waves in the area. Davis had vanished which most papers attested to his fleeing the country ahead of embezzlement charges. Jim and Kyle were in a stretch of days that resembled normal.

Jim looked over at Tom behind the wheel. This was the first time he'd been apart from Kyle since he visited Spanton's apartment thirteen days ago. "Where are you taking me?"

"The best place there is," Tom said. "A bar. With other people in it."

An hour later, they were on their third beer. Tom was explaining the plot of a movie Jim hadn't seen. Tom had a way of shedding life's drama as though it never happened. To look at him, Jim would never think he was going through a bitter divorce. Tom was on the verge of losing his house, his savings, and the rights to see his only son. Tom ordered another round even though they were only half way through the glasses in front of them. "Never know when she'll come around again," he said, winking. He opened his mouth to continue his movie story, but stopped and grinned. "I think you're on someone's RADAR."

Jim followed Tom's eyes and landed on a table of three women dressed for a night out. The one sneaking looks at him was maybe 28, and her two friends were noticeably younger. She held up her empty margarita glass and tipped it in Jim's direction. Jim shook his head at Tom. "I don't think—"

"Exactly! Don't think at all. It'll be just like old times."

"I never had those times," Jim said.

Tom downed his beer and stood up. "Never too late to start." He walked over to where the woman sat. Jim couldn't bring himself to watch the scene. He kept his nose in his glass. When Tom returned, he had all three women with him. They said coy hellos to Jim while Tom found a few extra chairs.

"I'm Sondra," she said holding out her hand. Her face showed experience and sadness beyond her years. But she smiled when Jim mispronounced her name. "Sahn-dra," she said again. "You don't get out much, do you?" Her friends giggled.

"I'm sorry," Jim said. Tom was taking way too long to find two chairs in a bar that wasn't full. The other two girls were riveted on this developing flirtation and left Jim no hope for a graceful exit.

"Don't be sorry, honey," she said. "Have we met? Because you look really familiar." When Jim answered by adjusting in his seat, she nodded slowly. "Yeah, you're the guy from the clinic. I was there for a check-up. You had your son there. No wonder you never get out."

"Excuse me?" He looked for Tom with no luck.

"Kids," she said. "They eat up all your time."

"They eat up everything!" one of the younger girls added.

Tom returned with no chair but instead with five shot glasses between his fingers. "Okay ladies, a little icebreaker for the newcomers." All the women laughed. They downed their shots and hooted. Jim's glass remained full.

Sondra pushed the glass closer to him. "Join the party, Jim." She raised a corner of her mouth. Jim looked at his glass. Sondra put her arm around him and put her lips close to his ears. "I'll make sure you stay out of trouble." Her breath crossed his face and smelled like rum and lime. Jim felt himself relax under the pressure of the woman's arm on his back. Physical interaction was not something he thought much about. Now he realized he had taken it for granted. This stranger's arm around him, her breast pressed against his side. He turned his face

slightly toward her and her nose brushed his cheek. When he looked up, he caught sight of himself in a decorative beer mirror on the wall. Instantly, he filled with shame. He stood and pulled away from Sondra. "Tom, take me home."

"What's going on?" Tom had the two girls engrossed in some story, but now everyone stared at Jim.

"I can't be here. I need to see Marcia."

Tom didn't hesitate. "I'll settle up." He made a line for the waitress. One of the girls sipped at her empty drink. Sondra pulled a slip of paper from her purse. She wrote on it and slid it to Jim. "If you ever get out again, look me up. Even if it's just friends." She closed her bag and her friends followed her through the crowd. Jim thought twice before he picked up the number and pushed it into his pocket.

Despite the alcohol intake and loud talking at the table, Tom appeared stone sober on the drive home. "I hope you know I had good intentions," he said.

Jim nodded. "Yeah. It just didn't feel right with Marcia still alive."

"Is she?" Tom asked. Jim took a deep breath. Tom glanced over while he drove. "Did you ever hear back from Alan?"

"Who?"

"The vet. He took Marcia's blood?" Jim shook his head. Tom pulled out his phone. "Let's call him."

"It's nearly midnight."

"Vets don't sleep. He might have something to tell us." Tom kept an eye on the road as he thumbed through his contacts. He selected and put the phone to his ear. It barely rang before someone answered. Tom handed the phone to Jim and nodded.

"Hello? I can't hear you, Tom," Alan said.

"This is Jim Dolan. We were wondering if you discovered anything about my wife." There was a long pause. Jim checked for phone reception and the bars were full. "Hello?"

"Yes," Alan said. "I think it's best if we follow up with someone who knows more about individual cellular behavior."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I. If I were to guess, I would say her cells are eating each other." The words hung in Jim's mind for a moment. "I don't know how else to describe it," Alan said. "But this is a wide deviation from any kind of science I know about."

Jim thanked the vet and hung up. He looked out the window as they passed Tom's house on the way to his driveway. Someone was standing in the front yard. Jim could see that it was Cam, but there was something wrong. And he was alone. "Stop!"

Tom hit the brakes. "What is it?"

"It's Cameron," Jim said. "He's covered in blood."

Chapter 14

Cameron was unresponsive for twenty minutes after Tom showered him, determined he wasn't hurt, then sat him down at the table with an instant hot chocolate. Jim paced the room, but did his best to keep from grilling the shaken boy. Tom's kitchen was identical to his own with minor differences. The granite countertops were darker and the oak cabinets were lighter. The whole scene gave Jim the feeling he was in some alternate reality.

Tom sat next to Cam at the table with excruciating patience. Jim thought he could bear it no longer when Cam finally spoke up on his own. "We went to the girl's volleyball thing," he began. His voice shuddered as though he was frozen to the bone. "The other school had some guys there from the football team. I didn't know them."

Jim groaned and squeezed his hands into fists. "Is Kyle ok? Where is he?"

Tom held up a hand to Jim but kept his eye on Cam. "What happened, buddy? Tell us what happened."

"We left early and those guys offered us a beer. We said sure and followed them to the parking lot."

"You went with people you didn't know?" Jim's voice cracked.

Cam spoke twice as fast in a higher pitch, "They seemed totally cool. But when we got to the truck, they shoved me."

"What school? Which school?" Jim pleaded.

"The shoved me and I fell and they all laughed."

"I need to know where Kyle is. Right now."

"It all happened so fast," Cam said. His eyes focused on some image far past the walls of the kitchen. "I was laying on the pavement and the next thing I know I'm sprayed with blood from all directions." He looked into Tom's eyes and began to cry. "More blood than I've ever seen."

"Cameron!" Jim pounded the table. Father and son snapped their heads up. "Where?"

The headlights of Tom's truck swept across the parking lot as they turned in. Cameron directed them to the far corner where a row of dumpsters lined the brick wall of the school. Tom slowed to a crawl. Jim made out a single shoe in the lights. It sat in a pool of what looked to be motor oil. It was blood. A lot of it. Jim jumped out of the truck before it stopped moving. He looked between the dumpsters and recycling bins until he found Kyle sitting among the maimed bodies of five boys. He was crouched with his back to Jim, eating ravenously. Low animal growls emanated from somewhere deep in Kyle's gut.

"Kyle?" Jim said. Kyle continued to eat, slurping and jerking his head as he tore meat from the bone. Jim could see all the boys were dead. Their throats had been thoroughly ripped out. Jim looked back to the truck, but couldn't see past the headlights. He wanted Tom here even though he couldn't be sure where Tom's head was. Tom hadn't uttered a word on the drive to the school. Maybe it was best if he didn't directly witness Kyle in action. Things were different when Cam wasn't a part of all this. Things had changed. Tom had reached the end of his rope.

Jim tried Kyle's name again. The boy continued to eat. "It's your Dad," Jim added. Kyle snapped his head around. He sheltered his food with his body and stared intently at Jim. Blood ran down Kyle's chin. He bared his razor teeth. His eyes were jet black.

Jim froze. It was all he could do to keep his composure. "Let's go home, Kyle. Tom will take us home, ok?" His voice failed on the last word. A second attempt to speak lodged in his

throat like a golf ball. He fought against the seizing in his chest. Jim held a hand out toward Kyle, palm up. "Please?"

An expression crossed Kyle's face and he looked at the dismembered bone in his hand. At first, Jim couldn't read it, but then he got it. Kyle was embarrassed. Deeply self-conscious. As though he had been caught in his room with a girl. He looked at the scene around his feet. When Kyle looked back to Jim, he was lost and helpless. Jim took a deep breath and went to his son. He helped Kyle stand. Kyle hesitated and looked around for a place to set the half-eaten forearm. He set it on the ground next to the body to which it belonged.

Jim led Kyle back to the truck. He kept his head down, but the headlights revealed just how much blood soaked Kyle's clothing. He was drenched with it. "We better sit in back," Jim said to Tom through the passenger side window. "He's kind of a mess." Tom looked straight ahead and said nothing.

"You okay?" Cam asked Kyle.

Kyle didn't look up. "Yeah, thanks," he said.

Jim and Kyle climbed into the back of the pickup. Tom drove out of the parking lot. Jim was at a loss. He wanted Kyle to know things would be okay even if they weren't. Kyle had killed people. Jim hadn't registered the gravity of the situation when his focus was constantly shifting, but now he had time to think about it. This time it wasn't mercy or vengeance. This was knee-jerk justice against the follies of other children. How could Jim protect a force like Kyle from the world? Or from himself? Jim leaned toward Kyle who was huddled with his knees pulled up to his chin, but there was too much noise in the back of the truck for any words of reassurance to have effect.

They sat in silence inches from each other, but not touching. Jim resolved in his mind right then that he would find a way for Kyle to live out whatever life he had left. In peace. He thought about the parents of the boys in that parking lot. To what lengths would they go in their pursuit of justice?

The truck eventually came to a stop and the engine shut down. Jim and Kyle climbed out. They were in Tom's driveway. Tom remained behind the wheel and would not look at Jim. His window was rolled down. "Thanks, Tom," Jim said. Tom didn't reply. Jim and Kyle made their way across the narrow patch of grass that ran between their driveways. Jim looked over to the discarded camping equipment and lawn furniture in Gruber's front yard. No people remained.

When they reached their front step, Kyle stopped abruptly and shot a look to Gruber's house. Jim followed his line of sight. He barely made out a human form in the gloom of the front windows. Kyle anticipated Jim's question, "It's Creeper. He's inside Mr. Gruber's house."

"Do you know what he's thinking?"

"Nothing good." Kyle opened the door and stepped inside.

They didn't speak to each other for some time. Jim sat in the living room and gave Kyle some space to get cleaned up. He heard the shower run. He heard it turn off. He listened to the movement upstairs. Jim wanted to check on Kyle, but didn't know what he would say. "How are you?" wouldn't cut it. Just as Jim made to stand, Kyle entered the living room dressed in sweats. "We don't have a lot of time," he said.

"Time for what?"

"The police will come for me."

"How do you know?"

"Someone called them," Kyle said.

"Creeper?"

Kyle didn't reply immediately. Then he said, "We need to help Mom."

Jim blinked. His face flushed hot with shame. Marcia. How long had it been since he had seen her? Days. There had been a time when she filled his every waking thought. When he would have done anything she asked. When a single glance from her made him dizzy. That all ended when Kyle was born. Jim wondered if his parenting experience was all that different from Tom's. When Jim looked up, Kyle was waiting for him quietly. "Sorry," Jim said. "What can we do?" Kyle only stared back. "Is there any hope of relief for her?"

"Come on," Kyle said. He already appeared to be older than when he entered the room. The transformation from the feasting was taking a much more noticeable effect. "The age of the protein source makes a difference," Kyle said. Jim nodded. There were no more private thoughts between them. "Let's go to her."

The bedroom reeked of death. The rotten stench didn't appear to affect Kyle in the least. He walked in past Jim and sat on the edge of the bed. Jim remained in the doorway. "Do you want to say anything?" Kyle asked.

Jim couldn't get his head around what was about to take place. "Say something?"

Kyle turned to Marcia. Her skin was paper thin and paper dry. She seemed to be aware of their presence, but Jim couldn't be sure. Her eyes were completely clouded over. Kyle placed his hand on her upturned palm. Marcia's fingers closed slowly. Jim took a step into the room. Her breath was barely audible in the horrible silence. Kyle spoke, "Every blade in the field, every leaf in the forest, lays down its life in its season--" Kyle lowered his voice to a whisper. "As beautifully as it was taken up."

Jim's legs buckled. He dropped to his knees and was overcome with sobs. Kyle reached for a pillow and placed it over his mother's face. "Wait," Jim gasped, but Kyle continued. "Wait." He buried his face in his hands. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"It's over," Kyle said. "You can't leave her here. And you can't bury her."

"What?" Jim croaked. "Bury?"

"No," Kyle repeated himself. "Burying is a bad idea. You'll have to cremate."

"God no," Jim said. "Why are you saying this to me?"

Kyle helped Jim to his feet. "There's no way to know if she's dead."

"Can you help me?"

Kyle went to the bed and pulled the covers over Marcia's face. The doorbell rang.

Chapter 15

The police came for Kyle just as he predicted. They said they had security camera footage and an anonymous tip confirmed his location. Jim protested with requests for warrants and right for minors, but Kyle calmed him down. As he was hand-cuffed he turned to Jim and said, "Four hours. I'll be a new man by then." The police drove him away.

Jim stood alone in his house. It was quiet beyond anything Jim had ever known. He heard only his heartbeat and the rushing of blood in his ears. He wanted to cry, but found that he couldn't. All the confusion, frustration, and madness of the past two months was gone. He saw himself and all that had happened as an outside observer. He felt a faint sympathy for the man he saw, but nothing more. Jim Dolan was no longer able to see the world with him in it. That part of him was permanently broken the moment Marcia died. Now Jim was only the father of a young man who needed his help. His place in the universe had one purpose. Kyle would not die in jail.

The phone rang four times before a woman answered. Jim cleared his throat. He felt as though he hadn't spoken in weeks. "Sondra?"

"Um, speaking."

"This is Jim Dolan. We met at the bar."

"Oh. Hey. Yeah. Didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"I'm sorry," Jim said.

"In fact, I didn't expect to hear from you at all. Do you know what time it is?"

"No, sorry. Is it late?"

"Very," she said.

Jim's head was clear. Empty. He heard himself say the words, but he couldn't feel himself think them up. "I need a hand with my son."

"Are you asking me to babysit after you walked out on me?" Sondra sniffed in disbelief.

"No. Nothing like that. Can you meet me at the police station in 45 minutes?"

Sondra took a deep breath on the other end of the line and said, "That's not much to go on."

"I'll explain when I see you. If you have an open mind."

"I'll be there," she said and hung up. Jim took a long look up the stairs. He felt no guilt, no sorrow. Yet he stood in the dark of his house for a long time before taking the first step toward where Marcia lay dead.

Jim carried her body to the backyard and laid her on the cedar picnic table. They had kept the table at the opposite end of the yard so meals outdoors felt more remote. Jim considered this for a moment, but felt nothing. It was a dream told to him by a stranger. He went to the edge of the woods and gathered up brush and leaves. He arranged them carefully over and around the blanket that covered Marcia. If she still reeked of rot, Jim didn't notice. All his senses were numb. He drizzled charcoal lighter fluid over the pyre and lit it. He stood back as the flames rose then turned and walked back toward the house. Creeper stared at him from Gruber's rear window to his right. Before he reached his back door, Jim glanced to his left. Tom stood watching from his deck. Jim couldn't make out Tom's face. Habit urged Jim to wave, but he held back and stepped inside.

Sondra was waiting in the police station parking lot when Jim pulled in. "What am I doing here? At three in the morning?" she asked as he approached her. "With some total stranger?"

"My son is inside. I need you to get him out."

“I don’t have any—“

“It won’t cost anything. They arrested an eighteen year old. Kyle will be in his late twenties by now. I’ll explain later. Tell them you need to pick up your cousin for something.”

“Drunken disorderly,” Sondra completed the thought.

“Will that work?”

Sondra nodded. “They don’t book you for that here. They just put you in a cell until you sober up.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” she said. Jim felt a smile pull at his lips, but it didn’t materialize. Sondra touched his arm. “A lot has happened to you since we first met, hasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jim said. “It has.”

Sondra left Jim standing in the lot. His insides were empty. He had nothing left. Not an ounce of hope. Eternity would be this parking lot. No future from here, only the past. Jim tried to remember Marcia’s original face, but he couldn’t. Only the stretched parchment skin and bulging eyes came to mind. He wished himself dead if only to erase that image from his memory. That wretched face and the incessant rasping of her tattered throat. He thought about microscopic organisms and galaxies and how everything lined up to create this moment. A man alone in a parking lot with nothing.

The glass station doors opened and Sondra appeared with a man of about twenty-seven. He wore a full beard and had a thin, strong face. He looked like Marcia’s father. Piercing eyes and a prominent nose. All the baby pudge and uncertainty was gone, but Jim could see that it was Kyle. His son.

“Hello, Dad,” Kyle said in a clear, confident voice. A man’s voice. “It’s good to see you.” Jim came undone. He fell into uncontrollable sobs. Kyle put his arm around him and said to Sondra, “Do you mind driving?”

Chapter 16

Sondra asked for directions. Kyle pointed her right when they should have gone left. “Where are we going?” Jim said sniffing his nose.

Kyle turned. “There’s one person I can talk to about this. I’ve been thinking it over. There may be a way to slow everything down. Not for good, but could buy me a year or something along those lines. How did she get here?” Kyle pointed to the woman driving the car.

“She’s helping me. I’m not sure why.”

“I have a soft spot for hopeless cases,” Sondra said. “My name is Sondra.”

Kyle eyed her. “I remember you from the clinic. How much do you know and how much do you want to know? Turn left here.”

“I know you’re Jim’s son and you have some kind of aging problem. And that your dad is in a hard place.”

“You don’t have a job,” Kyle said.

“No.”

“Divorced.”

“Yes.”

Jim sat forward defensively. “What are you doing?”

“There’s something undecided about her.” Kyle examined Sondra and squinted. “I’d like to know more, but it can wait. Not to say I don’t appreciate what you’re doing. I’m just not sure why you’re doing it. Usually I have a sense about people.”

“So do I,” she said. Kyle nodded and ended his line of questioning.

Jim pressed the buzzer button for Spanton’s apartment. On the second try he answered. “Yes?”

“Dr. Spanton. It’s Jim Dolan.”

“At this hour?”

“I’ve brought Kyle,” Jim said. After several seconds without a response, he added, “He’s in his twenties. I think.” A few more seconds passed and the door lock buzzed.

The first word out of Spanton’s mouth was, “Amazing.” As they walked into the living room, the doctor walked a full circle around Kyle. He pulled at the belt on his bathrobe, but let it fall slack again when he released it. His pale blue pajamas were printed with tiny white birds. “I don’t suppose—“

“I remember you,” Kyle said. “I remember everything. You were gentle.”

Jim introduced Sondra and Spanton offered them seats, but they remained standing. “What can I do for you? I don’t have much in the way of resources or information.” Spanton looked at Kyle. “But I am full of questions.”

“Warren Davis,” Jim spat. “Do you know that name?”

“Of course. He funded the lab where I met your wife.” Spanton showed no surprise or fear. Only elderly concern.

“We spoke to him,” Jim continued. “He said you were behind the experiments.”

“Yes, but I told you that already.”

Jim blinked at the mild confusion of Spanton’s voice. It didn’t make sense that Spanton hadn’t gone on the defensive. “He said what happened to Marcia was your fault.”

“Has she fallen ill?”

“Ill!” Jim screamed. “I had to burn her in my back yard!” Spanton recoiled from the outburst. Kyle stepped forward.

“Dr. Spanton. Dad is saying that Mom fell ill, stopped eating, stopped breathing, but couldn’t die. Her cellular activity continued long after her heart ceased beating. I assume as a result of my genetic modification.”

Spanton adjusted his glasses with a trembling hand as he sat in his armchair. Kyle also sat down. Sondra stood behind Jim and held his elbow. “You assume correctly,” Spanton said. “Her DNA mutated so that her cells were like yours. They fed upon proteins and absorbed energy from any available source, but without your genetic code, they didn’t know they were feeding off their host collective. Her cells didn’t know they were part of the same organism. They grew and adapted on their own. Like a fungus.” Spanton held his mouth agape and looked at Jim. “My apologies. I didn’t mean to imply...” He smoothed the wrinkles in his robe over his knees. “But you’re different, Kyle. Your system can convert any biological energy for use in your body. You don’t actually need to digest in the conventional sense. In theory, you shouldn’t need to even use your mouth. Have you tried it?”

“No,” Kyle said. He remained still. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking Mom was different. She was already pregnant when she called you. She wasn’t artificially impregnated. She wasn’t infertile. She was the perfect subject for the true objective of your research.”

“I don’t understand,” Spanton said. “How could you know that?”

“I don’t understand it myself. I look into your face and I know what you’re thinking. As though the thoughts themselves belong to me. I’ve read volumes about brainwave signals and higher cognitive function in humans versus animals. If I were to hazard a guess, I think I simply hear the electro-static noise in your brain. And I understand it.” Kyle paused as though he had just made a discovery. “Interesting,” he continued looking inquisitively at Spanton. “Now you’re engaged. You see possibilities. Just as Davis had. Though your thoughts are truly about scientific understanding and not financial gain. We are the same that way. What were you hoping to achieve beyond cellular acceleration?”

Spanton shook his head and adjusted his glasses. He took them off and rubbed them with his robe. “I... I don’t know exactly. It wasn’t about acceleration, but growth and adaptation. I felt if the human body could absorb energy more efficiently, people would live longer. They would never get sick.”

“Ah. You had a child,” Kyle said. He tilted his head at Spanton. “Leukemia. Everyone has their mission.”

“If I had been able to keep you.” Spanton held his glasses in his hands. “I might have been able to adapt the genes in the early stages. When I handed you over... I mean, the chances were extremely... I really had no idea.”

“No idea of what?” Jim asked.

“That the boy would live,” Spanton said. “A missed opportunity.”

Kyle addressed Spanton. “I have two problems. And I need you to think about solutions. Problem number one?”

Spanton clearly felt the mood in the room take a turn. He put his glasses back on and shrunk back. “You, uh, your cellular... Consuming energy increases the rate at which you age.”

“And?”

“You’re always hungry.”

“Solutions?” Kyle bared his teeth. Jim felt a slight pity for the old scientist as he first laid eyes on them. Spanton shuddered in his chair.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“My hunger comes with a latent self-inhibitor.”

“You can’t stop eating?”

“What is the largest source of readily available protein-based energy?” Kyle asked patiently.

Spanton didn’t waste a moment thinking about it. “Beef?”

“We don’t have cows around here. I’m talking live sources,” Kyle said. Then he added, “Cost free.”

Realization sank into Spanton’s face as though he were in slow motion. “Of course,” he whispered.

“Solutions?”

Spanton’s shoulders slumped and he stared into space. When Jim thought the doctor wouldn’t respond, he took a step forward, but Kyle held up a hand to stop him. Kyle knew what the old man was thinking, but was waiting for the thoughts to formulate.

What came after was a heated exchange of biology and organic chemistry and genetics between Kyle and Dr. Spanton. Their conversation escalated in intensity and both men were soon on their feet and pacing. Spanton grabbed a notebook and feverishly scribbled notes as Kyle rattled off formulas and procedures. They argued and cross-examined. Kyle never looked at Jim. He had nothing to contribute to the discussion. Sondra pulled Jim by the arm and they left the apartment.

Sondra put her hand on Jim’s back as they stood by the car. “Tired?” she asked. He coughed out a short laugh. She squeezed his shoulder. “It happens to all parents.”

Jim looked at her. “What does?”

“They outgrow you. Eventually.”

Jim closed his eyes and rubbed his face. They stood with their backs leaned against the car. The afternoon was cool and overcast. The street was wet, but when the rain had started or stopped, Jim didn’t know. “I don’t know how much more I can take,” he said.

“You’re doing fine.”

“I’m living by the second.”

“Who isn’t? Just take it as it comes.” Sondra zipped up her jacket and shoved her hands in her pockets.

“That’s just it,” Jim said, looking up at Spanton’s building. “What’s next?”

Jim and Sondra dozed in the front seats of the car when Kyle let himself in the backseat. Jim couldn’t tell what time it was, but night had fallen. “That’s that,” Kyle said.

“You found something?” Sondra asked, a little too expectantly. Jim read in Kyle’s face that he hadn’t.

“My DNA is on its course.” Kyle held Jim’s gaze for a quiet moment then sat back in the seat. “I have twelve days to live.”

Chapter 17

Jim had collected himself long before they drove into the cul-de-sac. The car had remained quiet during the drive except for Kyle indicating where Sondra should change lanes or turn. Jim sat in the passenger seat, listening to the engine change pitch as it shifted gears.

The cul-de-sac had been quiet when Jim left for the police station the night before, but it was now alive with flashlights and picket signs. Sonny Williams was in a bright white suit at the head of the fray. The crowd no longer confined itself to the Grubers' property. They spilled over to Jim's lawn. There were over a hundred of them. They all turned to the car as Sondra eased the car toward Jim's driveway. She stopped a few yards away from the crowd. "Wow," she gasped. "What is this about?"

"They're here for me," Kyle answered.

"Are you the—" Sondra squinted to read one of the picketer's signs. "Demon Spawn from the pits of Hell?"

"That's me."

The crowd realized their car was not coming any further and they moved into the street. Slowly they surrounded the car, chanting and shouting at Kyle. They knocked on the windows and pounded on the hood. Sondra leaned her head back toward Kyle as they spoke. Jim watched them talk, but he couldn't follow the conversation. Deep fatigue had taken its toll. It was as though he was seeing them through glass. Sondra and Kyle appeared to be debating something, but he couldn't hear them. He was struck by the feeling they were connected somehow. They knew each other better than he knew either of them. He was the stranger in the car. The mob outside waited to accost his son and he wasn't involved in the game plan. Where had they all come from? Creeper must have phoned in the cavalry.

"It wasn't Creeper," Kyle said loud enough for Jim to hear. He looked out the passenger window.

"Then how did Sonny end up here?" Jim asked. Kyle faced Jim, but he didn't answer. Jim took a second before he caught up. "Tom?"

Kyle sat back. "Get us to the house, Sondra. If you can." She let her foot off the brake pedal and the crowd shifted back in response. They continued their assault as the car rolled ahead. They knocked on the hood and windows and shouted. They parted as Sondra nosed into the driveway. Sonny Williams waited for them, bathed in the headlights. His suit glowed so bright he appeared to have an aura.

"Do we know him?" Sondra asked.

Kyle spoke to Jim. "Let's just get to the house. We can figure everything out from there." Jim nodded. He barely heard the crowd. Their taunts didn't reach him. Kyle opened his door and pushed himself into the mass. The group immediately stepped back and a hush fell over them. Kyle opened the front door for Jim. Sondra made her way around to Jim's side while keeping an eye on Sonny's wide-eyed followers. Jim stared at the mass of people. The faint smell of burning leaves drifted past his senses.

Flashlights scanned Kyle as he stood next to the car. "He has shown himself," Sonny bellowed. He held his hands up, palms outward. "Behold! The manifestation of evil in our midst."

Kyle moved toward the house, but Jim's feet were full of sand. Kyle stopped when he noticed Jim was slow to follow. Sondra took Jim's hand in hers. "Come on, honey. We'll be

better inside.” The three of them slowly made their way through the parting crowd. Nobody wanted to get too close to Kyle which worked to their advantage.

Sonny smiled and followed them. “God will have his say. Oh yes, my children. I, myself, laid my own eyes upon this child not five days ago. Yet, here he stands, a grown man. An abomination!” Jim stopped and faced Sonny. “Oh yes, James Dolan, you harbor God’s greatest sorrow. An abomination of science. And exhibition in mortal pride. The devil himself among us. He consumed the souls of our children, our friends. His own mother!” Jim raised his fist to swing. Sonny flinched. Kyle moved quickly as a cat and caught Jim’s arm.

“No, Dad,” he said.

Sonny’s smile returned to his face. Kyle stood before him as Sondra pulled Jim back toward the house. “You will face God’s wrath, devil,” Sonny said. Kyle looked Sonny directly in the eyes until the old evangelist withered. His gleaming smile faded to an uncomfortable grimace.

“I know more of God’s wrath than any of you,” Kyle said quietly. “May he forgive us all.”

Someone screamed in the crowd. Creeper emerged with a gun in his hand. “Demon!” he shrieked. “Be judged!” He fired a single shot that struck Kyle squarely in the chest. Kyle clutched at the spot where the bullet entered, but did not fall. Jim made an effort to cry out, but his lungs were empty. Sondra’s fingers dug into Jim’s arm. Creeper didn’t seem certain about what to do next. The cul-de-sac had fallen dead quiet. Creeper stood apart, gun still raised. Sonny was bewildered wordless. Kyle took an unsteady step toward Creeper. He reached his hand toward the pale, unwashed man. Creeper shuddered from head to toe, but stood in place like an animal too scared to flee. Kyle’s right hand touched Creeper’s cheek, his left covered the wound in his chest.

“I forgive you,” Kyle said. He lifted his hand from the wound and light poured from the hole. He placed his hands on Creeper’s ears and pressed inward. The light from Kyle’s body engulfed them both and the crowd was blinded. A shimmering ringing filled the air. Creeper’s scream was drowned out by the sound of energy surging forth. The shockwave that followed knocked Jim off balance. The light vanished and only Kyle remained. Creeper had ceased to exist.

“Behold,” Sonny whispered. He fell to his knees. The entire throng of people followed suit. All knelt on the ground around Jim, Sondra, and Kyle. Kyle’s expressionless face stared back at Jim. Then somewhere in Kyle’s eyes, Jim saw pity. For humanity, for his father, or for himself, Jim could not be certain.

The roar of an engine broke the silence. Tom shouted from his driveway, “Get in! Now!” Kyle moved without hesitation. He grabbed Jim and Sondra and they rushed to the truck. Sirens wailed from somewhere close. The crowd reached out for Kyle and pulled at his clothes. They gasped and cried out to him. Jim took the lead. He and Sondra pulled Kyle into the back of Tom’s pickup. People clawed at Kyle shouting prayers and pleading for miracles. Tom put the truck in gear and it lurched through the mass and across his front lawn. Cam sat in the passenger seat. “He’s not in, yet!” he shouted to his dad.

“Hold him, Jim!” Tom yelled. Jim and Sondra held Kyle’s arms tight. Tom punched the gas and drove the truck into the street. Followers scattered and tumbled away as they released Kyle’s legs. As the truck left the cul-de-sac, Kyle climbed in between them.

Kyle was something new to Jim. He did not know what to say. Kyle put his hand on Jim’s knee. “Thank you,” he said.

Chapter 18

Jim held the spoon to Kyle's lips. The old man refused to open his mouth. Jim put the spoon back in the bowl. "Okay," he said. "Enough for now." Jim stood from the chair next to the bed in the hotel room that had been their home for almost two weeks. They had two queen beds, a tube TV, and a parking lot view when the curtains were open which was not often.

"Did you run out of the good stuff again?" Kyle asked, his voice all gravel and phlegm. "Don't hold out on me."

"This is the same stuff, Kyle. I haven't changed anything."

"Bullshit! You're saving the good stuff. God knows why. My clock has run out." These were Kyle's favorite words now. Jim shook his head and set the bowl on the nightstand. The door lock rattled. The light poured in for an instant and blinded Jim then Sondra appeared. She set two bags of groceries on the small desk next to the television. The TV had been on every second since they arrived with the sound on low. Kyle needed multiple streams of information. If they played cards in a position where he couldn't see the TV, he became restless and argumentative. Kyle didn't sleep at all and Jim slept very little. They talked in long stretches about sports or they didn't talk. Kyle quickly became frustrated when Jim couldn't keep up in philosophy, religion, or science so they kept it to sports. Kyle had stopped reading on the second day. His eyes bothered him and he grew impatient with how long it took to ingest information. By the fifth day, he decided there was no point to learning anything new. Jim tried to help Kyle adjust to his age, but everything changed so quickly. Almost by the minute. Kyle went from mid-twenties to late eighties in twelve days. But Jim did not falter. He kept Kyle occupied and fed him pig's blood and whatever soft protein the boy could keep down.

If Jim took a moment to think about their situation, he would be consumed by the tragedy of it, so he kept his mind on anything else. "No more eating today, then."

"I'm starving," Kyle muttered. "You're starving me to death. You and that woman."

"No, we're not. And her name is Sondra. Be nice. She's done a lot for us." Kyle huffed and sank down into his pillow. Jim was careful to not show any annoyance or frustration with Kyle's rapidly shifting moods. "Want to play Scrabble?"

"You suck at Scrabble!" Kyle blurted. "And poker. And chess." Kyle frowned. "And elder care, for that matter."

"I don't know," Jim said. "Not many people can say they almost beat a mind reader at Scrabble."

"Hah! You have never come close to almost," Kyle scoffed.

"What are you afraid of? You seem to relish winning plenty."

"The only thing I relish is the thought of this nonsense finally coming to an end." Jim nodded and smiled slightly. Kyle glared. "Something about that amuses you?"

"You've become such a senior citizen in only four days. You're human after all."

"That's rich," Kyle said.

"A week ago it was 'dude' and 'cool,' and now it's 'nonsense?'"

"You try being me."

Jim raised his eyebrows. "Is that self-pity?"

Sondra came out of the bathroom. "Hey, hey. Do we need a time out in here?" She pulled a protein shake from the grocery bag and shook it. She handed it to Kyle. "How much time left, honey?"

"Sondra," Jim said.

“Is that something we’re not going to talk about?” she asked. Jim had been aware that today was the twelfth day, but for some reason he assumed Kyle would expire at night even though it made little sense. “He’s old and cranky, but he’s not stupid. Probably knows down to the hour.” Sondra shrugged. She looked at Kyle. “Don’t you?”

“I like her,” Kyle said.

Jim stood and waved his arms. “It’s impossible to know the hour you’re going to die.”

“I can tell you the exact time plus or minus 15 seconds.” Jim and Sondra stared at Kyle. Jim was sure the boy was joking. “I’m aware of the molecular degeneration rate in my body. I have calculated the progressive weakening of my organs and their inability to work together. My kidneys are already gone. Liver is at eight percent. Heart at twelve percent. Oxygen saturation level is declining rapidly.” A pit opened up in Jim’s gut. Things had been good for almost two weeks. So good that even though Jim knew the end was coming, he hadn’t put any thought into the final minutes. “In twenty-three minutes, I will slip into a coma. One hour, eight minutes, and thirty-three seconds later, my heart will stop. One hundred and fifty seconds after that, my brain function will be zero. There will be minimal cellular activity for a few hours after that, but I don’t have mother’s mutation. So yes, I will be dead. Like a normal person. At last.”

The silence that followed rang in Jim’s ears. Sondra sat down on the edge of the bed with her back to them. Then she stood again. “I’ll leave you to, umm...” She cleared a catch in her throat. “Say your goodbyes.”

“Thanks for bailing me out,” Kyle said with a wry smile.

“It was very nice to meet you,” She replied. “I’ll never forget our time together.”

“Nor will I,” Kyle said. Then he added, “Take care of my father if you can.” Sondra pulled the door closed on her way out.

Jim opened his mouth to speak and then closed it.

“You did amazingly well under the circumstances,” Kyle said quietly. “Not bad for a— what was it you did?”

“I was a software engineer.”

Kyle smirked. “That’s something I never learned. Why didn’t you teach me that?”

Jim laughed a little. “It never occurred to me.” Kyle adjusted his blankets and inched down in the bed. “Are you in pain?”

“No.”

“Are you scared?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t give you a normal life,” Jim said. “I wanted to.”

Kyle nodded distantly and Jim could see his eyes were growing heavy. They passed a few minutes in quiet together. Kyle’s eyes slid shut. His breathing fell into an even, labored rhythm.

“Goodnight, son,” Jim said.