

LIFEBLOOD

CHAPTER ONE

SCENE 1

YOUNG JACKIE: “This is a bad idea.”

HUGO: That was probably true, seeing as if there was one thing I was good for, it was a bad idea. Perhaps I should look into if there was some way to monetize that particular talent. Like some sort of reverse think tank where I got paid to come up with ideas that absolutely nobody under any circumstances should ever, ever try. Ever. Were that the case, what I had proposed on this particular night might have been my all time best seller.

YOUNG HUGO: “Come on, Jax, don’t get your sports bra in a twist. Hand me the sack.”

HUGO: She stamped her foot in frustration, which was so out of character for Jackie that it almost made me laugh out loud, if it weren’t for the fact that if I did I’d definitely get slapped about the head for it later. That, and the extra noises might get us caught.

YOUNG JACKIE: “Hughie, come on!”

HUGO: Ironically, the name Hugo means ‘thought,’ though those are things I try, whenever possible, not to have. Or, wait, was that irony, or just coincidence? My father, the English professor — and incidentally also the guy responsible for the name choice — would be severely disappointed that I didn’t know, or at least couldn’t recall just then, the difference. Ah, well. He could get in line to slap me about it if it really bothered him that much. I put my pointer finger to my lips, the inexplicably universal signal for politely inviting your company to shut their gob, and reach my hand down, making an irritating little ‘*hurry up*’ motion with my fingers until I heard the sound of her sighing followed by a grunt as she lept as high as she could and deposited the coarse, old burlap sack into my waiting palm. Just in the nick of time, too, because hanging one-handed some ten-odd feet up a chain-link fence was beginning to give my arm a cramp. My junior varsity baseball coach would have been so disappointed.

YOUNG JACKIE: “This is *really* stupid, Hughie.”

HUGO: She said. But she couldn’t have been too mad at me, seeing as she was dutifully playing look-out, scanning all around us in the night as I worked to get the sack over the fence’s barbed wiring.

YOUNG JACKIE: “Are you sure this is gonna work?”

YOUNG HUGO: “It should. This is how the kids did it in *The Book Thief*.”

YOUNG JACKIE: “The what?”

YOUNG HUGO: “That book we read for English class.”

YOUNG JACKIE: “I’m not in Honors English, dickhead. We read *The Hunger Games*.”

YOUNG HUGO: “Then just - I don’t know - pretend we’re breaking out of the district or whatever to go hunting.”

YOUNG JACKIE: “If we get caught I’m telling them you held me hostage.”

YOUNG HUGO: “Sure – whatever – you do that.”

HUGO: Jackie really was the voice of reason out of the two of us, which maybe wasn’t so surprising seeing as her name meant ‘holder of the heel,’ and that was often what her metaphoric role was any time I was able to drag her into one of my numerous, half-cocked adventures. This was an observation my dad — the English professor, remember? — made early on in our acquaintanceship. He was also, as it just so happened, very obsessed with the meaning behind names. With a lot of fenegaling, I was able to climb up over the fencing without slicing myself open and spilling my guts all over the entrance to the industrial park. It helped that the fence was rusted from the whole place sitting vacant since about three days after the dawn of time. Or, at least, it *had* been vacant since about three days after the dawn of time *until* about three weeks ago, when some fancy-shmancy company had bought it up for their whatever-it-was operation they’d decided to set up right on the edge of Brightridge. But if they thought just by putting their center of operations up on the ass-end of an already sleepy college town, out by the old railroad tracks on a slab of concrete that even the local druggies didn’t bother clambering to, would somehow dissuade idiot teenagers from poking their noses around places they absolutely did not belong, then they hadn’t met a force like Hugo Matthews. Welp, they were about to!

I landed on the ground and turned with a grin bright as day back to Jackie.

YOUNG HUGO: “Alright – Your turn.”

YOUNG JACKIE: “You gotta be out of your mind if you think I’m about to climb over *barbed wire* for you.”

YOUNG HUGO: “What are you gonna do then, huh? Just stand there?”

HUGO: She just glared at me, and for a minute I thought she really just might.

YOUNG HUGO: “What happens if somebody comes by? They’d see you and you’d get caught, and then you wouldn’t even be able to blame it on me because I wouldn’t be there for you to pin it on.”

YOUNG JACKIE: "It's not pinning it on if it's true."

YOUNG HUGO: "Whatever. Come on."

YOUNG JACKIE: "Hughie—"

YOUNG HUGO: "Shh! Before somebody hears us."

YOUNG JACKIE: "Ow!"

YOUNG HUGO: "Suck it up."

YOUNG JACKIE: "Hey!"

YOUNG HUGO: "*Shhh!* Come on!"

YOUNG JACKIE: "Did you at least bring a flashlight?"

YOUNG HUGO: "So they'd see us? Of course not, dummy."

YOUNG JACKIE: "Where are we even going?"

YOUNG HUGO: "I saw a bunch of trucks come and go by the side entrance all day yesterday."

YOUNG JACKIE: "Jesus, you staked it out? You are obsess— *ouch!*"

YOUNG HUGO: "Shh!"

HUGO: I hissed at her as she rammed into me from behind. I'd stopped short when a pair of shadows appeared against the building to our left. Jackie and I huddled up against the ivy-covered remnants of an ancient, industrial air conditioning unit. We listened as a man in a sleek, grey suit walked to the door a few feet from us and began rummaging through his pocket. He was flanked by a stocky, twitchy guy who looked like the essence of a panic attack had come to life and became a person. Specifically, a person who wore cargo shorts with a short-sleeved button down shirt and a vest. But that was neither here nor there.

MR. ELWOOD: "Is the, ehh, *supplier* in place?"

NERVOUS ASSISTANT: "Yes, Mr. Elwood. It arrived just this evening."

MR. ELWOOD: "Any witnesses?"

NERVOUS ASSISTANT: "No, sir."

MR. ELWOOD: "And it's been moved to the center of the complex?"

NERVOUS ASSISTANT: "Yes, sir."

MR. ELWOOD: “Good, good. Then the operation will be underway shortly. Just as soon as we figure out how we want to market this.”

NERVOUS ASSISTANT: “Some sort of pharmaceutical, maybe?”

MR. ELWOOD: “What? Are you insane? Of course not! It’s that sort of dingbat thinking that marks you as an unnamed extra! Do you have any idea how unprofitable pharmaceutical research is?”

NERVOUS ASSISTANT: “Well, uh, I just assumed that—”

MR. ELWOOD: “Assumed that an evil corporation, hell-bent on unbridled financial gain and utterly unsympathetic to the impact said gain will have on the quality of life of those negatively affected by it, would decide to waste our time and resources by hitching our wagon to a field where less than ten-percent of all products researched even make it to market? A field that’s companies almost universally offer patient assistance programs that cover most if not all of the price of the product? Where companies are controlled by third-party administrators? A field heavily regulated, scrutinized, criticized, and scapegoated by governments and private citizens alike? What type of *morons* do you take us for?”

NERVOUS ASSISTANT: “Uh, well, I... honestly, I guess I never considered the actual intricate mechanisms invisibly at play within the industry. Just sort of blindly believed the propaganda employed by political candidates and news media, both of whom probably focus on the handful of bad-faith actors that make for snappier headlines and energized calls to action in favor of reporting with any real nuance.”

MR. ELWOOD: “Of course they wouldn’t! That doesn’t sell papers.”

NERVOUS ASSISTANT: “Who buys newspapers anymore...?”

MR. ELWOOD: “It was a figure of speech. Now come on, it’s damn cold out here and— G-d damn it! That was my last cigarette.”

NERVOUS ASSISTANT: “Sorry.”

MR. ELWOOD: “It’s idiots like you that make capitalism so easily corruptible. You’re the lifeblood of America... Speaking of idiots, go check in on the night watchmen. We had to hire some slack-jawed yokels until our regular detail gets down here, and I don’t trust any of those yahoos as far as Thumbalina can spit.”

NERVOUS ASSISTANT: “Uhh, yessir.”

HUGO: We held our breaths as Captain Bipolar Wardrobe walked by, and waited as we heard the Suit – Elwood, the other guy had called him – insert a key into the lock and struggle to get the door open despite the rust sealing it shut since the mesozoic era.

YOUNG JACKIE: “That was too close.”

HUGO: Jackie said as she pushed me off her and dusted herself off. It was mostly theatrical. Any of the grime that had just gotten on either of our jackets would take three trips through the wash and an exorcism to take care of.

YOUNG JACKIE: “Can we go now? You heard what he said - they’ve got security guards!”

YOUNG HUGO: “Yeah, but the guy who went to check on them went the other way. Did you hear what the first guy said about something being moved to the center of the place? That’s got to be this way - come on!”

YOUNG JACKIE: “Are you nuts?”

HUGO: Probably a little, but I didn’t tell her that.

Sticking to the shadows was easy, but the building lights all around the installation were dim and flickered and the illusion of figures popping out from around corners or peering through windows made Jax and me jumpy as a pair of caffeinated bunny rabbits that were also tweakers. As we got further into the park, there was a strange, low thrumming noise and occasional rumbles set to an irregular beat. The sounds grew louder, and the ground below our feet began to shake ever so slightly. Suddenly, there was a blinding light as around the centermost building a huge set of work lights were switched on. Jackie and I scrambled backwards as quickly as we could, and when we heard shouting up ahead, we were certain we were made. Jackie grabbed me by the hood of my sweatshirt and dragged me backwards, but I was frozen to the spot and gaping up at the side of the building.

YOUNG JACKIE: “Hughie, come on we gotta go—!”

HUGO: she hissed in a shrill panic, managing to pull me back a few feet. I grabbed her by the elbow with one hand and pointed up with my other. As her gaze whipped round and shifted to follow my line of sight, she froze in place, too. Like we were playing some silent, fucked up game of follow-the-leader.

HUGO: About two stories up, by a narrow brick building, something huge was moving — wrapping long, spindally vines along the third story window at a growth rate several hundred thousand times too fast to be happening naturally. As the trailing creeper plant’s vines curled around the window pane, one pierced the glass and it shattered. The vines recoiled, as if pained, and moved back. A dark, viscous liquid oozed out from it. And that’s when I realized: they weren’t vines, they were *fingers*...

HUGO: And then I woke up.

SCENE 2

HUGO: “Jesus, what a dream. I haven’t thought about that night in- pfft... and it’s been, what, 15 years? Half a lifetime ago, now.”

I ran my palm over my face as I sat up, and was quickly overcome with nausea and a splitting headache. *Great. A perfect start to the day.*

IKE: “For a bartender, you sure can’t hold your liquor.”

HUGO: I looked up. No wonder my bed had felt so uncomfortable. Because it wasn’t my bed in my bedroom in my apartment, but was, in-fact, the couch in the family room at my parents’ house. My dad - the English professor, remember? - stood, leaning against the half wall, looking fresh as a daisy and holding two mugs of what I could only hope was coffee. He took a sip from one as he walked in and handed me the other. “Thanks,” I said blandly, and took it from him. He went and sat in the old armchair across from me, and looked out at the room. It was an organized mess of half packed cardboard boxes, with rolls of tape and sharpie markers strewn about like the aftermath of a Mardi Gras in an Office Max. On the coffee table were piles and piles of video tapes with handwritten labels. ‘*Hughie’s first Halloween,*’ ‘*Junior Prom,*’ ‘*Cape May, 1992,*’ ‘*Honeymoon - Hughie DO NOT watch this under any circumstances, love mommy & daddy,*’ you know, that sort of thing. We’d been up all night watching old home movies, and when we got into the ones old enough to have Mom in them, the liquor had come out. First to toast, then to numb the pain, then finally to knock us both the hell out. It seemed like this was maybe a ritual Dad was more familiar with, judging by the way he was taking the hangover. “How late were we up?” I asked him.

IKE: “Oh, don’t know. Two, three?”

HUGO: *Damn.* I checked the clock on the wall. 7AM. No wonder I felt like shit. The only thing 7AM was good for in my book was getting up to take a piss. Seeing that I wouldn’t be much for conversation for the next few minutes, Dad plucked the remote off the armrest and turned on the TV.

WEATHER REPORT 1: Good morning. It’s a bright beautiful day this Tuesday morning, though it looks like as we go further into the week we might be getting some significant snowfall Thursday into Friday, with winds picking up and temperatures dropping as we go into the weekend. Keep an eye out for black ice on the roads following sundown as a cold front moves in from the west—”

HUGO: “When are you heading out?”

IKE: "A half hour, or so."

HUGO: "All packed for the conference?" He nodded.

IKE: "You sure you're okay watching the place while I'm gone? Not that I've got time to ask anybody else."

HUGO: "I'll be fine. Grew up in this house, after all. More worried about you, honestly, what with this snow storm they're predicting over the weekend."

IKE: "Worst case, I book an extra night or two at the hotel and wait it out. I'm sure I won't be the only one with that backup plan."

HUGO: "You got your presentation all together?"

IKE: "Sure do."

HUGO: "Remember to email yourself the PowerPoint this time?"

IKE: "Christ, Hughie, you ever gonna let me live that down?"

HUGO: "Probably not."

IKE: "Yes. Backed it up to the cloud yesterday morning and emailed a copy to myself and my contact at the conference. Though that reminds me, I've got my cue cards on my desk in the office."

HUGO: He rose from his chair. "You know you can make notes in PowerPoint now, right?"

IKE: "Hm, just not the same."

HUGO: "You got any painkillers in there?"

IKE: "I do, actually."

HUGO: I got up and followed him down the hall and into the modest study, which was made even snuggier by the towers of half-packed boxes all stacked haphazardly. Dad grabbed his notes before he went digging through one such box. As he did, I wandered over to his desk. Despite the room being half empty, somehow the workspace was twice as cluttered. I picked up the nameplate that was face down atop a stack of old academic journals. 'Professor Dwight Matthews,' it read, and I felt the corner of my lip twitch up into a brief smile. I could count on one hand the number of times I heard somebody call Dad 'Dwight.' Or I guess maybe I couldn't count them at all, depending on your position over whether 'zero' counted as a number or was merely a placeholder, an argument I'm told still gets quite heated in certain academic circles. "You going to miss it?" I asked him as I set the memorabilia down. "Teaching?"

IKE: "Sure. Teaching, the house..."

HUGO: "Then why leave?"

IKE: "Sometimes you just got to move on, son."

HUGO: That was the romantic answer. The real one, the one I already knew but also knew he'd never admit, was that Jericho University was hemorrhaging money and had an expiration date that convenience store milk could run laps around. He'd kicked around the idea of being an adjunct or doing a couple of asynchronous courses for an online school, but despite his surprising proficiency with the ever changing tech scene, my dad was stubborn as they came, and we both knew it wasn't going to happen. He loved the classroom too much to make the switch to virtual.

IKE: "Here."

HUGO: He threw me the bottle of Advil.

IKE: "Nice catch."

HUGO: "Thanks." I popped a few and as I went to set the bottle down, I noticed a small digital recorder laying at the top of the trash can Dad had balanced precariously on his office chair. "Wow, get a load of this old thing," I said, reaching down for it. I held it to my lips and turned to the window, sticking my fingers through the blinds and looking out. "This is P.I. Ike Matthews. If you're finding this recording, it probably means I'm wearing concrete shoes at the bottom a' the harbor. Johnny Cortez and his mooks are after me. A few just tried to pop me in the alley on my way into the office. I gotta get to Cheryl before his men do..." I didn't know anybody named 'Johnny Cortez' or 'Cheryl,' of course. They just sounded like sufficiently cliché enough names for a fake mafia boss and his fake mafia probably-cheating-on-him soon-to-be-ex wife. I looked over to see my dad rolling his eyes as he went about tucking his cue cards into the inside pocket of his blazer.

IKE: "Having fun?"

HUGO: "Loads. What do you even have this thing for? From your days as a journalist?" Once upon a time, Dad had been a bit of a small town big shot, working for a few of the local papers and even winning a few awards for some of his stories.

IKE: "Hardly. Back in those days, the best we had were mini cassette recorders, and the tapes only lasted about 30 minutes on each side. That little sucker, though, can take a micro-SD card. Think I've got a 64 or a 128 in there. Records ridiculous amounts so long as the battery doesn't give out. Used to use it to record my lectures. Here, you like it so much?"

HUGO: He dug through one of his drawers, pulled out a triple-A battery, and handed it to me.

IKE: "You keep it."

HUGO: “Golly, thanks! Will you sign it for me?” He didn’t dignify the barb with a response. I stuffed the battery into the recorder and the recorder into my pants pocket.

IKE: “Alright,”

HUGO: Dad said, patting himself down for his wallet and keys.

IKE: “Well, I might as well hit the road. Going to get stuck in the morning rush either way. Remember to check the thermo—”

HUGO: “—To keep an eye on the thermostat and turn off the water and drain the pipes and double-lock all the doors if I decide to leave and stay at my place. I know, Dad, I used to live here, remember?”

IKE: “If I didn’t, you’d certainly keep reminding me ... Alright, I’ll call you when I get there. I love you.”

HUGO: “I love you too, Dad. Safe travels.” Dad poured the rest of his coffee into a travel mug and hit the road for his speaking gig, and I fell back asleep on the couch for another couple of hours. “*Shit! Overslept!*”

SCENE 3

WEATHER REPORT 2: “As of right now, it still looks like snow will be developing throughout the night on Thursday evening leading into Friday mid-morning. Expect steady snow beginning in the afternoon, tomorrow on the P.M. commute, and gusts of wind going into the night that will drastically decrease visibility. This could result in blizzard conditions.”

HUGO: “Damn. Going to be a slow weekend. Wonder if Sean will let us close early Thursday night ... Yeah, yeah, we get it. What else is on?” As I drove, I found my thoughts returning to the strange dream I’d had that morning. *Was it a dream?* I asked myself, *Or was it a memory?* Things from that night were fuzzy, as was the case with any memory you left stuffed in a shoebox on the top shelf of your brain marked ‘Trauma: Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!’ I remembered my bright idea to sneak into the park late at night, convincing Jackie to tag along, and that something had spooked us once we were there. But why couldn’t I remember what it was? What had we seen? Jackie and I never really spoke about it after that night. Just got out, snuck back into our houses, and carried on with our lives... “Hey! What- what the hell?” As I made the turn into the back of the parking lot, I saw a pair of cop cars with their lights on parked outside Maguire’s, the bar-restaurant where I worked. While police outside a bar wasn’t the most uncommon thing in the world, it was at 10AM, especially at a place that didn’t even open till lunchtime. I parked in my usual spot, got out of my car, and walked over. “Damn it, it’s cold! ... Jesus Christ...” —I saw that the large display window that used to read ‘Maguire’s’ in large, gold lettering was broken, with what looked like a fire hydrant having been ripped out of the

ground and thrown through it. Chairs, tables, and barstools were kicked over and strewn about on the sidewalk. Bottles of booze were smashed and broken glass littered the parking lot. Some waterworks employees clad in bright neon safety vests and baggy pants stood along the sidewalk trying to shut off the water flooding the road. I spied the owner talking to one of the police officers and walked over. “Hey, Sean, what the hell happened?” Sean — the owner, and your stereotypical potbellied Irishman — regarded me with a weary nod as I came up behind him.

SEAN: “Hugo, I’d say ‘good morning,’ but nothing’s good about it so far. And Officer Peterson here was just taking me and Eileen’s statements.”

HUGO: “Is everyone alright?”

SEAN: “I’m fair enough, all things considered, though Eileen might be about to bite that poor girl’s head off.”

HUGO: I turned to where he had gestured, and saw a pair of women standing a few feet closer to the busted up window. One I easily recognized as the owner’s wife, and the other was— “Jackie!” They both turned as I came over.

JACKIE: “Hughie. I thought this was where you worked. It’s, uh, it’s good to see you. I wish it were under different circumstances.”

HUGO: “What are you doing here?”

JACKIE: “Officer Peterson called me out.”

HUGO: “Oh, right, right.” Jackie had gotten her undergraduate degree at a public university in the city, then moved back to Brightridge to get her masters at Jericho. Now she was a guidance counselor or something for the kids at the local high school, and I think did some moonlighting at the university’s career center, along with whatever work she had helping out the BPD. “What did they need you here for?”

JACKIE: “It seems like this little incident-”

EILEEN: “Little incident?”

HUGO: Mrs. Maguire interrupted, pointedly.

EILEEN: “You mean this act of *vandalism!*”

JACKIE: “Yes. Yes, of course, Mrs. Maguire. I didn’t mean to suggest otherwise,”

HUGO: She looked back to me.

JACKIE: “One of my students was involved.”

HUGO: She chinned to where one of the cop cars was parked, and I noticed for the first time two silhouettes sitting in the backseat, heads bowed, unmoving, seemingly asleep. If I squinted, I could almost make out their faces. They looked young. Probably no older than sixteen or seventeen, tops. “Yikes.”

JACKIE: “Yeah.”

HUGO: “So they know they did it?”

EILEEN: “Of course we do! My husband caught them himself this morning, passed out behind the bar. It’s a wonder the sight alone didn’t give him a heart attack! Hugo, tell them about his heart condition! When I think about what may have happened if Sean had-”

JACKIE: “Easy, easy there, Mrs. Maguire. Your husband is fine and no one was hurt, there’s no need to torture yourself with what-if’s.”

EILEEN: “Really, Ms. Adler, I just can’t-”

JACKIE: “I know.”

HUGO: Jackie offered her a tight lip smile. Mrs. Maguire stared at her a moment longer, her eyes shifting briefly to the patrol car behind her, then shook her head and went off to join her husband talking to Officer Peterson. We watched her go. “Sorry about that,” I said, “Eileen can be a bit much sometimes.”

JACKIE: “You should’ve seen her when I first got here.”

HUGO: “I don’t doubt it.” I looked back to the patrol car. “You said you know one of them?”

JACKIE: “Yeah. Dax Kennedy. Their parents took them out of school on Friday. Enrolled them at Eos over the weekend.”

HUGO: “Damn, no kidding? What for?”

JACKIE: “Dax’s family is very... *traditional*. And when they came out to their parents a few weeks ago, well...”

HUGO: “Shit.”

JACKIE: “Yeah.”

HUGO: “No other issues or outbursts or whatever?”

JACKIE: “None.”

HUGO: *What were the odds of all this?* I asked myself as I shook my head. I hadn’t seen Jackie in months, and hadn’t thought about Eos much at all for years. In the decade and a half since

they'd opened up their operation, the parent company, Lilith & Co., had quickly and quietly poured money into some kind of new-age behavioral health center, with several adolescent intensive inpatient units, that was eventually dubbed *Eos: New Horizons*. Out on the edge of town, the industrial park had been converted into a clean and beautiful campus, and the photos that started showing up by check-out counters around town all had it looking like the sort of deluxe rehab centers celebrities and millionaires out in California would go to. Their methods were a heavily guarded trade secret, but nobody could argue with their results. The kids sent there were pulled out of school to attend their inpatient programs, and after a couple weeks they were released back into the community like wounded baby birds nursed back to health by kindly volunteers in a feel-good documentary. The ones that used to play before we all collectively decided to burn the planet alive and ourselves along with it. The thing was, the kids who went into *Eos* came back... *different*. And not just different like 'Yes, the intervention worked. Here is your newly nice and stable child who you managed to fuck up enough to require corporate intervention.' No, this was different like 'borderline cult brainwashed.' The kids would be quiet and reclusive for months after they were back in school. Eventually they'd start acting a little more like themselves, but it had always seemed a bit off. A bit hollow, like they were reading off a script of what their personalities were *supposed* to be like before they'd gone in. Junior lobotomies, we'd called it in high school when a couple of our classmates were among the first to be enrolled in the 'revolutionary' program. Not to mention how the out of pocket fees were rumored to be obscene. But none of that stopped parents in every local county from throwing their money and their problem children at the organization, so long as it promised the return of polite little robots in teenage skin suits in 14 days or less. "You said there were other kids involved?"

JACKIE: "One. Michael Martin, from a township over."

HUGO: "You know him?"

JACKIE: "No. But I'll make some calls. See if I can't get in touch with his parents. Neither of them had cell phones on them. I don't think they're allowed at *Eos*."

HUGO: "Any idea why they chose Maguire's to bust up?"

JACKIE: "Probably for the convenience. And the alcohol. Judging by what's out here in the street, it's a wonder they didn't drink themselves to death,"

HUGO: she said, and motioned around us where there was enough broken glass to make you think a bomb had gone off in a window manufacturing plant.

OFFICER PETERSON: "Hey! Adler!"

JACKIE: "I'd better go see what he needs."

HUGO: "But, wait—"

JACKIE: “I’ve already said more than I should have. HIPPA and all.”

HUGO: “—that doesn’t make—”

JACKIE: “—It was good seeing you, Hughie. Take care.”

HUGO: “I... You too, Jackie.” She walked off, and I glared at the ground like it owed me money. Something wasn’t adding up here. Jackie was right, the number of broken bottles all around would have suggested a small hoard of culprits, not two recently committed teenagers who probably had a tolerance the size of the thimble piece in Monopoly. Maybe they’d been chucking the bottles, full, out into the street after they’d broken in. Not like drunk teens are opposed to a little rampant destruction on somebody else’s dollar, but that didn’t seem right here. For one thing, the parking lot didn’t *smell* like alcohol. And there were no puddles or splash marks by the shattered glass, and no weather had started yet to have washed away what would have been the thick smell of dozens of bottles of beer and hard liquor. And then there was the fire hydrant. How the hell had two, scrawny kids from the burbs managed to rip that thing out of the ground on their own? As I continued to roll around the questions inside my head, there was a sound behind me that I could only describe as that of a hundred cats all throwing up simultaneously. Okay, that’s a lie, I could also describe it as a sort of nasally, little pompous voice that gives the impression the owner was a personal trainer who thought too highly of himself, but those two definitions are sort of the same thing when you really think about it, wouldn’t you agree? I turned around and saw Jimmy Masterson strutting like a peacock in the height of its mating season - which happened to be in late February, but don’t ask me how I know that - over towards Jackie, Officer Peterson, and Sean and Eileen Maguire.

JIMMY: “Jackie, honey, how you doin’?! It’s *great* to see ya’!”

JACKIE: “Jimmy. What an... unexpected surprise.”

HUGO: Jimmy was a personal trainer – See? I told you he sounded like one – who Jackie and I went to highschool with. More importantly, he was one of the first kids in the area to have gone to Eos, when his parents were at wit’s end and couldn’t take his bullshit anymore, and had become something of the center’s unofficial spokesperson over the intervening years. It shouldn’t have really been a shock that he’d show up to something like this, with the center’s reputation surely about to be more or less on the line, but Jimmy was sort of like an off-colored button down with a stain on it that also didn’t quite fit right that you for some reason kept in the back of your closet never quite getting around to throwing away or donating. In other words: you forgot about him until he turns up, ugly, loud, and uninvited, on a day when you were sort of in a rush already and also at the end of your rope and therefore really could do without the added aggravation. So, you know... a personal trainer. When we were in school, Jimmy had been something of an atypical ‘bad kid.’ His folks were rich and, as a result, he was utterly spoiled, got whatever he wanted, and didn’t give a rat’s ass about school, the law, or really anything. The kid had been a nightmare who luckily I rarely had to deal with thanks to being largely in the

honors and AP classes, but poor Jackie had endured him in just about every subject that didn't have a remedial alternative. I think they might have even dated briefly, which surely didn't help with the professional airs she was attempting to put on as the protein-shake-disguised-as-a-human-being pulled her into an unrequited little one-armed hug.

JIMMY: "Listen, I just heard about the kids – Mike and Dax – what a shame!"

OFFICER PETERSON: "We haven't even finished taking witness statements, how the hell did you hear about this already?"

JIMMY: "Oh, you know how it goes. The trees have ears and the fields have eyes, right? Listen, Sean, right? Your place? Me and the partners at Eos are so - and I mean *so* - very sorry about what happened. And look, we wanna make it up to you? See, these kids, they just are having a bit of trouble adjusting to the New Horizon's method and, *hey!*, that ain't their fault, right? But that don't make things any easier on you and your lovely wife, so—"

SEAN: "Just offer us the hush money already and shut your mouth, would you?"

JIMMY: "Eyy! I like your style, big man! Excellent, excellent. Yeah, that's too funny. But yeah, okay, okay, cuttin' to the chase: we would love - and I mean *love* - it if yous two could just avoid any mention of the center when the news crews rock up here, yeah? I mean, we do a lot of good work for this community, right? And it would be a shame, just a real shame, if this little incident were the first some folks were hearing about our wonderful organization, you get what I'm saying...?"

HUGO: Shit. If Eos was getting involved already, then they must've really fucked up. And the situation was only going to get more locked down from here once money and favors started flowing. Taking one look at the inside of Maguire's, I could already tell Sean and Eileen would be more than happy to take as much cash as they could weasel out of Lilith & Co. before putting the entire incident to rest, and I couldn't even blame them for it. I squinted again to stare at the kids in the back of the patrol car. I didn't know anything about the one, but the other, who Jackie knew? What were the odds a good kid who was just looking for some acceptance from their overly-religious parents would break out of an intensive inpatient unit to go on a B&E bender with somebody they didn't even know from the next town over, all less than 96 hours after getting admitted? Nothing about this felt right to me. And there was an itchy little feeling in the back of my mind like a mosquito had just bitten me in the brain. So I swallowed my pride, turned around, and called out. "Jimmy! Hey, Jimmy is that you?"

JIMMY: "Hughie? Is that you! Heyyy buddy, that's right, you work here, don't you? How ya been? Man, I am so sorry about all this. You- you weren't in there when, ah, anything went down, right?"

HUGO: "No, I just got here, but thanks - I'm doing well."

JIMMY: “Ah, okay, okay,”

HUGO: He sounded far too relieved about that.

JIMMY: “Well, still, I’m sure this all sucks but, ahh, *hey!*, seems like you’re probably about to get the night off, yeah? Ain’t that right, Mr. & Mrs. M?”

SEAN: “I could use some help cleaning up and finding something to cover that window. When the snow starts over the weekend it’ll ruin the carpet if we don’t find something to—”

JIMMY: “Whoa, hey, say less! I’ll have some of the center’s staff come down here and clean up. You won’t have to lift a finger.”

EILEEN: “That’s... very kind of you.”

JIMMY: “Of course, of course! Don’t even sweat it. It’s the *least* we can do. And hey, our boys are used to cleanin’ up after crazy kids, right? Leave it to the experts. You, the Missus, and your employees take the day, yeah?”

SEAN: “I- uh- well...”

HUGO: *Damn it.* My options were slipping away. If Sean told me to kick rocks now I’d be frozen out, no question. One thing school never quite managed to teach me was how to keep my nose out of business that wasn’t mine, but that same nose was telling me that something here stunk to high heavens, and I couldn’t let it go. I looked around and noticed Jackie had pulled her phone out of the work bag hanging off her shoulder and was looking down at it, and that’s when I got an idea. A really, really stupid, bad idea. You know: the kind I’m good for. “Uhh, well, in that case,” I interrupted Jimmy who had again begun brown nosing Sean and Eileen, and I mean really it was getting indecent at this point, “Jackie, could I talk to you for a minute?” She seemed surprised, but was likely absolutely fine with any excuse to get away from Jimmy.

JACKIE: “Oh, uhm, sure.”

HUGO: We walked a few steps away, back towards where my car was parked and where the building was blocking the worst of the wind, which had started up pretty badly, as if nature itself was trying to blow Jimmy Masterson the hell away from here to be some other county’s problem.

JACKIE: “What’s up, Hughie? You know I can’t really talk anymore details about this.”

HUGO: “No, yeah, I get that,” I said as I awkwardly shoved my hands into my pants pockets. “Not work related. I actually just wanted to ask if you wanted to hang out? Since, you know, I just found out I’ve got the day off? And we haven’t seen each other in ages.” I watched her face go from stunned to flattered, and felt like the biggest bag of dicks this side of a going-out-of-business sale at a sex shop.

JACKIE: “Oh! I - I mean, I would like that! But, uh, I’m probably going to have to go with Officer Peterson down to the station for when they interview the kids.”

HUGO: “Oh, right, yeah. I forgot about that.” That was a lie. I didn’t. In fact, I was counting on it. “Well, maybe after? We could meet up tonight?”

JACKIE: “Uh, well...”

HUGO: “Hey! Actually, you know what? I completely forgot: I’m house sitting for my dad while he’s out of town.” Not a lie, I had forgotten that part, but it actually worked out. “We should meet up there! Come on, we can have a picnic in the basement like when we were kids! Watch movies, play Stratego.”

JACKIE: “You still have your Stratego set?”

HUGO: “Yeah, I’m sure my old man hasn’t thrown it out yet! And he’s getting ready to sell the place, too. Come on! It’ll be our last chance. Like a going-away party.” Jackie bit her lip to try and hide a smile, and I watched her eyes go off, first to Officer Peterson, then to his squad car, then back to me.

JACKIE: “Yeah... yeah, I think I’d like that. I- *oh!*”

HUGO: She startled as I gave her an awkward and unexpected hug. “Awesome! I can’t wait. I’ll see you tonight!” I said, and started off towards my car.

JACKIE: “Hughie- I-”

HUGO: “I gotta run to the supermarket and pick up something to make!” I called out behind me.

JACKIE: “You don’t have to—”

HUGO: “Of course I do! See you tonight!” I got into my car and stared at the steering wheel for a minute before I checked my pockets. My wallet and keys were there, but I was now absent one old lecture recorder, courtesy of Professor Dwight Matthews. “Shit, I’m an asshole.”

END CHAPTER ONE