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Winter moon: the progress of a novel

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Winter moon:  
The progress of a novel

by

Raymond Fred Heynis, III

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major:  English (Creative Writing)  
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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Raymond Fred Heynis, III

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
This book is dedicated to my true family: Isolde la Cheveliere Beinaime, Tristain le Silencieux Bienaime, Percival the True, Morgain Wolfheart, Bors l'Esprit Conquerant, Owain Coeur du Corbeau, Mordred Damien, Galahad Noctambule, and Dindrane la Fay. “The Quest is Eternal.”

I would also like to dedicate this book to my mother, who has been very patient with me as I pursued a career as a student. See? I told you I'd be done before the turn of the century.
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis tracks the evolution of a novel, Winter Moon, from its earliest conception in a short story and through three drafts. While the short story is as complete as a work of fiction ever is, the drafts of the novel are very incomplete. They reflect beginnings of the novel. The final draft is the longest, perhaps one-third the eventual length of the finished novel.

The short story, "Sins of the Father," represents the genesis of the novel. The characters are the same, though most of their names are different and they are all much older than they will be in the novel. The plot of the short story is rather simple, but it contains the same themes of family, love, and betrayal found in the later novel drafts.

The first draft of Winter Moon is the first, tentative start of the novel. The characters are the same as in the short story, but they are slightly younger. This draft is perhaps the most chaotic, as I varied the point of view and tense from chapter to chapter.

In the second draft of the novel, the characters go through a radical transformation, not only in their names, but also their ages and living situations. Their parents are still alive, for example. Another thing that changes is the setting. Instead of Iowa State University and Ames, Iowa, the story takes place in the fictional landscape of the small town of Weston, Iowa, and the equally small, private Mallory College of Liberal Arts.

Finally, in the last draft, another radical revision has taken place. The characters are slightly older than in the previous draft, and again they are more developed. Also, as one of the main themes of the novel is that "weird things happen in Weston," the town where the novel is set, the first chapter dramatically suggests this theme. By placing the characters in this scene so early in the novel, with little exposition, the characters become more active, and therefore more dynamic. This not only acts to "hook" the reader at the beginning of the story, it also allows the author spare the reader the "setting up the characters and plot" stage, and get on with the business of storytelling.

One thing which has remained unchanged throughout the process is the submerged theme of the Arthurian legends. All the characters are what I like to call the pale, neurotic ghosts of the Knights of the Round Table. When one looks
at some of the names, it becomes obvious which Arthurian characters they are meant to represent: Gavin is Sir Gawain, Percy/Perry is Sir Percival, Lance is Sir Lancelot, Vivien Lake is the Lady of the Lake, and the enigmatic Merle is Merlin. Some characters are less obvious: Izzy/Jessie is Iseult, Tres/Troy is Sir Tristan, and Duke Penn (a character only glimpsed in the last two drafts) is King Arthur.

Though they are doomed to re-live some of their more famous adventures, these characters are not simply reincarnations of Arthur's companions. These are Modern people living in Modern times. And since they are products of Modern times, their ancient characters become confused and in some ways, watered down. Even their stories become confused. Arthur, the magnet who drew them all together centuries ago, is dead before the novel even begins. And of course they can't go wandering about rural Iowa in the late Twentieth Century, slaying literal Dragons. Instead, the Dragons they must grapple with are social and psychological. The question of morality, and especially sexuality, is one such Dragon. The magical elements of the “Matter of Britain” also crop up, especially in the ghosts and other “weird things” that happen in Weston.

Though there are clues to this Arthurian theme throughout all the drafts, the fact that these characters are “pale, neurotic ghosts of the Round Table Knights” is never stated obviously. Instead it bubbles below the surface, as elusive as the hand in the Lake, from which Arthur receives Excalibur. For while the Modern reader may not be consciously aware of it, I believe the themes of the Arthurian legends are a type of Western Universal, bubbling below the surface of every genre of literature in the English language since the time of the Middle Ages.
CHAPTER 2. SINS OF THE FATHER: A SHORT STORY

Introduction

The short story, "Sins of the Father," was written in late November, 1996 for Steve Pett's English 557 class. In that course, we were reading Native American literature and writing fiction inspired by our readings. Throughout the semester, I had been writing within a distinct, fantasy-like genre. The characters and settings were very alien, and the stories were not very well received in the class.

Responding to Steve Pett's suggestion that I write from within my own experience, I decided to take a rather painful incident from my life and fictionalize it. The details of the actual events are unimportant and very private. Basically, I met a young man who was seeking to explore his sexuality, thinking he might be bisexual. As our relationship progressed, he met my best friend, who happened to be in the midst of an unhappy marriage. As she and my new "boyfriend" became friends, they grew very close, and eventually began an affair which has continued ever since.

I should note that she was more than just my best friend. She was actually more like a sister. We had two other male friends whom we considered brothers. Long ago, we had all become disenchanted with our real families, and had formed our own unconventional family unit, with no parents, only siblings.

In Spring of 1994, I met the man who became Tres in the story. And in July of that year, Tres and the woman who becomes Izzy in the story became involved. She told me about it the very next day, which by a sad coincidence was the day we were planning a surprise party for the girlfriend of our other "sibling," Morgan.

Naturally, this was a very upsetting, unhappy time for me, and it was more than two years before I could bring myself to write about it. But in November of 1996, I felt I was ready. Of course, it all had to be fictionalized; my friend was and still is married. Also, I was and am very close to this subject, and I'm very uncomfortable with writing about such personal matters. I wanted some distance between myself and the main character.
So I created a fictional world and peopled it with characters based loosely upon the people in my life. It felt very natural to make these people into my siblings. To account for the fact that our "family" had no parents, I decided to make the fictional parents dead. This also gave me an opportunity to create a parallel story about the father having an affair.

Creating a fictional world still did not give me the distance I felt I needed to write a good story. I wanted to be more objective, allowing the reader to see the pain of the main character (Gavin, who is of course me), but draw his or her own conclusions about the morality of the events. To achieve this distance, I chose to write the story from the point of view of the youngest brother, Percy, whose real-life counterpart was living in Cedar Rapids at the time and therefore not really involved in the events of the story.

The story was not easy to write. In the first draft, workshopped in December, 1996, Gavin came off as a jealous, clinging, and vindictive man who had seduced Tres in the first place. Despite this, it was very well received by the workshop class, and I revised it for another class the next semester. The draft here is a second revision, never workshopped.

"Sins of the Father"

It was supposed to be a surprise birthday party for Lucie, but it turned out to be a weekend of surprises. It all started when I came into town three hours early to surprise Gavin, but he wasn't home. I figured he was buying the cake or decorations, so I let myself in and started playing around with his computer.

I guess I should mention that Gavin is my older brother, and I have a key to his house. It isn't like I broke in or anything. In fact, his house used to be our house, where the whole family lived. Ever since Mom and Dad died, he's the only family left in town. I have no idea how a grad student without a job can afford a four-bedroom house in a college town without taking in borders, but he manages. I'm glad he does though. I hate to think of the Remington family home with strangers living in it.

Anyway, like I said, I was three hours early that Saturday, and Gavin wasn't around. I almost called Morgan, but I didn't want to risk Lucie picking up the
phone and spoiling the surprise. Oh, Morgan is my oldest brother, and Lucie is his wife. They’ve been married less than a year and live in Iowa City.

So then around noon, the phone rang and I answered it. Force of habit, I guess. I grew up here, you know, and even though I’ve lived in Cedar Rapids since I graduated high school, I always think of this place as home. So I just picked up the phone, like I owned the place.

"Hello, Gavin?" said the guy’s voice.

"Nope. Who’s this?"

"Tres. Is this Percy?"

"Yep. How’s it goin’, Tres? You comin’ to the party tonight?"

"Yeah, after work. Is Gavin there? I really need to talk to him."

"He’s not here," I said. "I think he’s out buying decorations -n- stuff."

"If he gets back before one, would you have him call me? After that I’ll be at the Shop. I gotta go. Have him call me, okay?"

"Not a problem, man," I said, and we hung up. Tres is Gavin’s boyfriend. Well, that may be too strong a word. They’ve been seeing each other for a couple months, even though Tres is straight.

I suppose I should explain that, too. See, Gavin’s gay, and he has this uncanny thing about dating straight guys. Well, straight guys who turn out to be not all that straight. Gavin’s had a long series of such guys, and it never ends happily. The not-so-straight guys usually wind up thanking him for showing them their bisexual side, then go off to find another guy. I figured that’s what was about to happen with Tres. Then Gavin will mope around for a couple months before meeting another not-so-straight guy.

I keep telling him to find a guy who’s already gay, but he just smiles and says, “In this town? I’d have better luck getting Christian Slater in bed.”

I guess he’s got a point. I’ve seen some of the local gay guys he’s tried to date. Shallow and dumb as bricks. And most of them are college students, which means they’re only in town for a few years, then they’re history. I don’t blame Gavin for not being interested in them.

Well, there was that one guy, Roger. He was pretty hip. In fact, he was the only one of Gavin’s boyfriends that I actually liked. And he was already gay when they met. They were together for almost two years, but then Roger landed a job in Los Angeles. He begged Gavin to go with him, but Gavin will never leave Ames.
It's sad, really, how he clings to this town. I'm still glad he does, though. It's bad enough having the family spread all over Iowa.

Well, that was a year ago, and since then Gavin's gone back to his habit of dating not-so-straight guys. Tres is the latest.

I was just about to start surfing the internet, when the phone rang again.

"Hi, Percy. It's Tres again."

"Hey, man. Gavin's not back yet."

I was just wondering, have you seen Izzy?"

"Not yet. I was thinking of calling her, though."

"She's not home. She's probably with Gavin. Damn."

"Is somethin' wrong?"

"Everything's wrong," he said. "I'm about to go to work. Have him call me at the Shop, okay?"

"Sure thing," I said, and again we hung up. Now this was getting really weird. Why would Tres want to talk to Iseult?

I haven't mentioned Iseult yet, have I? She's our only sister, a couple years older than me and a couple years younger than Gavin. We used to joke that our parents only had sex once a year or so, and then Mom would get pregnant.

Anyway, Izzy lives in Des Moines with her husband, Mark. He's originally from Yugoslavia, but he's lived in America since he was sixteen. He can never go home. Something about his parents being political enemies of their government. I think they're Communists or something.

So anyway, Izzy met Mark at Iowa State six years ago. He was getting his doctorate in physics, and she was an English major. They met because they were both in student government. They got married when Mark graduated and lost his student visa. It was the only way he could get a green card.

Now that isn't the only reason they got married. They're in love, of course. Don't ask me why. I think Mark's pretty boring. Maybe that's because he's always talking about his quantum theory stuff, and it all goes over my head. Or he talks about politics, which just bores me. He's got a job at Drake University right now, but they're looking for a college that will hire both of them. And the only job Izzy's been able to find is in the tutoring office at Iowa State.

So why did Tres want to talk to Izzy? Did he want her to break up with Gavin for him? I didn't know Tres all that well, but he didn't seem the type to do it that way. Oh well, I decided. I'd just have to wait and see what happened.
At quarter after one, Gavin came home, along with Iseult. They'd been
together after all. Izzy was holding the strings to a dozen or so helium-filled
balloons and a bag of other decorations, while Gavin carried one of those huge
sheet cakes. You'd think there were going to be twenty people at the party,
instead of just the seven of us.

"Hey, guys," I said. "I got here early. Surprise!"
Gavin glared and went to the kitchen. "What's up?" I asked Izzy. I noticed
she was awful pale, like she just heard she was gonna die or something.

"It's a long story," Izzy said, dropping the sack of decorations. "A very long
story. Help me with these." She handed me half the balloons and started tying the
other half to lamps and chairs in the living room.

"Did I do something wrong?" I wanted to know.

"It's not you," she said, as I tied a balloon to a leg of the coffee table. "It's
me."

"Well, what did you do?"
Before she could answer, Gavin came back from the kitchen, rattling his
car keys. "I'm going for a drive," he said, his voice tight.

"Gavin, please," Iseult said. "We need to talk about this."

"Later," he snarled at her. "Percy, I'm glad you could make it. I'll be back
later."

"Hey, Tres called," I said. "He wants to talk to you about something."

"I bet he does," Gavin said, slamming out the front door.

"He's at the M-Shop," I called, but I don't know if he heard me. The next
sound I heard was the roar of his car as he squealed out of the driveway.

"What the hell's going on?" I demanded. "I haven't seen him that pissed
since that prom."

Izzy tried to laugh, but it came out sounding more like an animal that's
been hit by a car. "Funny you should mention the prom," she said.

"Not again," I groaned, suddenly realizing what was going on. When Gavin
had been a senior in high school, he was gonna take this guy to the prom. That
was pretty daring in those days. Hell, it's pretty daring today. Anyway, Iseult was
a sophomore, and three days before the prom, the guy broke up with Gavin and
asked Izzy to the prom instead. And she said yes. Turns out the guy had been after
Iseult for a long time, and she had a crush on him, too. I can't remember the
guy's name.
Gavin was so pissed, he threatened to pull a Carrie White. You know, like what happened in that Stephen King movie, where they dumped a bucket of pig blood on Carrie at the prom. Gavin didn't do it, of course. But Gavin didn't talk to Izzy for months, not even at his graduation party. Then he moved into the dorms at Iowa State, and he didn't move home again until after Mom and Dad died. By then, Izzy was also living in the dorms and dating Mark. I was still in high school.

"You and Tres?" I said.

Izzy wouldn't make eye contact with me. She fiddled with one of those crepe paper streamers and didn't say anything for a while.

"How could you?" I asked.

"I didn't plan it," she finally said. "Believe me, this is the last thing I wanted."

"How did it happen? When did it happen?"

"Last night. But it's been building for a while now."

"How long?"

"Almost since the moment we met."

I sat on the sofa and let go of my last two balloons. They drifted up and bounced against the ceiling a couple times, then were still. "Start at the beginning," I said. "And don't leave anything out."

"Three months ago, I guess," Izzy said, still fingering the streamer. "Okay, you know I've been working at the tutoring office, and Gavin's still working on his MA."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Skip to the parts I don't know."

"Well, we started having lunch together in the M-Shop, and that's where Tres works."

"You're still not telling me anything I don't know."

"Just be patient," she said, dropping the streamer and sitting in a chair across from me. "Gavin was still pretty broken up about Roger leaving, and he didn't know if he'd ever get over it. But then he met Tres."

"Yeah, and he fell instantly in lust, even though Tres is straight. So how--"

"Will you just let me tell the story? Tres isn't straight. At least, he wasn't sure at the time. He thought he might be bisexual, and he flirted with Gavin. But Gavin was still pretty insecure, and he wasn't sure Tres was really flirting with him. So he asked me what I thought, and the three of us started spending time together, so I could figure out what was going on."
"Still nothing new," I interrupted. "Gavin told me all this last month."

"But what you don't know is that I was attracted to Tres. And even though he was interested in Gavin, he was attracted to me, too."

"What about Mark?"

"He doesn't know anything about this," Izzy said. "And I hope he never will."

"But you're married."

Well, I know that," she said, exasperated at my interruptions. "But things haven't been all that good between us since we got married and moved to Des Moines. All our friends are up here, but he never has time to go out. And we never talk anymore."

"So you decided to sleep with your brother's boyfriend. Again."

"Will you stop saying it like it was some evil plot I had all along? It just happened."

"Nothing just happens," I said. "You had a choice. You always have a choice."

"That's not how it felt last night." Izzy's eyes were starting to tear up, so I slid a box of Kleenex across the coffee table to her.

"I'll stop being mean," I said. "Just tell me what happened."

"We were supposed to go to a movie last night," she said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "It was a double date, but Mark backed out at the last minute. I was gonna back out, too, but Gavin insisted I come along. He's still a little afraid to be alone with Tres.

"They haven't even slept together yet, you know," she continued. "Tres still isn't sure he's bisexual, so they've been taking it real slow."

"That doesn't sound like the Gavin I know." Gavin's never had a problem landing one of his not-so-straight boys in bed.

"It's partly my fault, I guess," Izzy said. "I know how much Roger hurt him, and so I've been trying to get Gavin to slow down a bit. You know, let them get to know each other before they have sex. Maybe then Tres would stick around a little longer than the rest of them."

"Sounds like a good idea to me."

"It is a good idea. And it might have worked, if I hadn't spent so much time with the two of them. But patience isn't something Gavin does well, so I've been trying to help him."
"And then last night?"

"Right, last night. Mark stayed home to grade a bunch of papers. He doesn't like having his TAs grade them, so he does it himself. So it was just Gavin, Tres, and me. We took my car and went to see Sympathy for the Devil. Have you seen it yet?"

"Last week," I said, steering her back to the important subject. "What happened after the movie?"

"We went for coffee and talked for a few hours. I knew something was up, because Tres was a little distant. Gavin didn't seem to notice. Then Tres said he had to get up early, so we left. I dropped Gavin off first, and he and Tres had a little good-night kiss.

"Anyway," she continued, "I drove Tres home, when he told me he really needed to talk to me. So we went into his apartment, and he told me he thought he was falling in love with me."

"Just like that?"

"He had to work up to it a little, but yeah, it was pretty abrupt. So I confessed that I was probably falling in love with him, too. And before I knew it...."

"You were having sex."

"And it was wonderful. I wish it had been lousy, so we could just put the whole thing behind us and move on like nothing happened. But I've never felt anything like it before."

"Spare me," I said. "I have a hard enough time thinking of you in bed with Mark. The last thing I want is to picture you with another guy."

"Sorry," she said, and we were both silent for a minute or so.

"What are you going to do?" I finally asked.

"I have no idea. We weren't even going to tell Gavin, but--"

"He would have found out sooner or later."

"I was hoping for never, but...I came over this morning so we could shop for the party. Gavin was so happy. He thought he and Tres were getting along so well, and they were, really. Tres really cares for Gavin. But he's discovered he just isn't sexually attracted to him after all. But Gavin thought just the opposite. He was telling me that tonight was the night he'd finally ask Tres to stay over."

I shook my head, listening to the clock tick on the mantle until Iseult spoke again.
"What could I do?" She was getting ready to cry again, so she pulled another Kleenex from the box. "I just had to say something. So there we are, in the parking lot of Party Time, and I just blurted it out. I was sure he was gonna go ballistic. You know what a temper he has. So we went into the store, and I started picking out balloons. I thought he might lose it and throw one of the silver coffee sets through the front window, but he just stalked around with that look in his eyes."

"Just like Dad," I said.

"That's the one. Scared the hell out of me."

"I know the feeling. Remember when Morgan got a ding in the car door, and we all thought Dad was going to kill him? But he just got that murderous look on his face."

"Well, Gavin looked just like Dad. It was like seeing a ghost. I almost would have preferred a tantrum or something."

"If it makes you feel any better," I said, "I think Tres was going to tell him, too. He seemed pretty upset when he called."

"This is such a mess. I can't believe any of it's happening."

"And all on Lucie's birthday, no less."

"We'd better get back to decorating. She and Morgan will be here at five."

"I thought the party was at seven," I said, standing and grabbing the last of the balloons.

"It is. Gavin's taking them to dinner, then back here. That's when we all jump out and shout, 'Surprise!'"

"I don't know about you," I said. "But I've had enough surprises for one day."

It didn't take that long to put up the streamers and set the coffee table with party favors. It was supposed to be like a kid's party, with hats and noisemakers. Lucie was raised as a Jehovah's Witness, so she'd never had a birthday party before.

After we finished, Izzy stuck around for another hour, waiting for Gavin to get back. We caught up a bit. She told me about her job, and I told her about the gigs my band had played in the last month. We were trying to land a contract with a local record company, and I was still squeaking by working part-time at an adult book store. Both Mom and Dad had been professors at Iowa State, and I was
the only one of their kids who didn't have at least a bachelor's degree. I know they would have been disappointed, but I really hated school.

Finally Izzy couldn't wait any longer. At three-thirty, she went home to change for the party and pick up Mark. So I was alone again in the house. Somehow I didn't feel quite as at home as before. Then the phone rang. It was Gavin.

"Is she still there?" he asked.
"She just left. Where are you?"
"My office." His voice was still tense.
"Have you talked to Tres yet?"
"No. I suppose she told you."
"She did. Listen, big brother, I really think you two need to talk about this."

He was silent for a moment, then said, "Don't answer the phone again. Lucie's supposed to call from the car phone just before they get to the Des Moines turnoff. If she hears your voice, it'll spoil the surprise."

"Okay."
"I'll be home in twenty minutes." He hung up without saying good-bye. I hate when he does that.

Twenty minutes later, he walked into the living room and looked around at the decorations. "Good job," was all he said before climbing the stairs. I followed him to his bedroom. It was a year after our folks died that he finally moved into their bedroom.

"You wanna talk about it?" I asked, sitting on his bed as he opened the closet.

"No," he said simply, pushing through a rack of shirts.
"C'mon. I know Izzy's side of it. I wanna hear your side."
"I'm sure you know as much as I do," he said, flinging a pink oxford onto the bed taking a pair of gray chinos off a hanger.

"So tell me how you feel."
"How do you think I feel? It's Jack Lucan all over again."
"That's his name! The guy from the prom. I couldn't think of his name before. Whatever happened to him?"
"How the hell should I know?" He tossed the chinos on the bed and pulled off the sweatshirt he'd been wearing. "What difference does it make?"
"Sorry, you're right. But this really isn't like what happened then."
"The hell it isn't. He's been using me all this time to get to Izzy. Just like Jack did."

"Izzy doesn't see it that way. She says Tres really does care for you."

"Hmph," he snorted, sitting on the edge of his bed and untying his sneakers. "Are you planning on showering before the party?"

"I just took a shower this morning," I protested. My hair was still a little damp.

"Then for God's sake, brush that mop. It looks like you haven't brushed it in a year."

I ran a hand through my long, dark hair. I had to admit it was pretty tangled. I love having long hair, but I hate brushing it. But I didn't want to piss Gavin off any more than he was. "Okay," I said.

"Is that what you're wearing?"

I looked down at my clothes. A faded black t-shirt from a Pink Floyd concert, jeans torn at the knees, and a pair of combat boots that had seen better days. "I guess so," I said. "I didn't really bring anything else."

Gavin frowned. "Why don't you find something in my closet to wear. You don't have to wear a tie, but you should at least be presentable."

"Sure," I said, as Gavin searched through a dresser drawer for a pair of socks. Image is important to Gavin. He always dresses just right for every occasion, though he usually looks over-dressed to me. Image is important to me, too. It's just that my image is a lot more relaxed than his.

"I don't think any of my shoes will fit you," he said, "but you'll find black shoe polish in the kit in the bottom of the closet. See what you can do about those boots."

"God, who's coming to this party? The Queen of England?"

"Just Lucie and Morgan, Iseult and Mark. But this is Lucie's first birthday party. And it won't kill you to shine your boots, will it?"

"I guess not."

Gavin took a pair of boxer shorts and headed for his bathroom. "I'm taking a shower. Remember, don't answer the phone. See if you can't find a hair brush."

I sat at the vanity dresser, where there was a silver brush, comb, and mirror set. They'd been Mom's, I knew, and holding the brush made me think of her. I'd been fifteen when she and Dad had been killed, and I usually try hard not to think about how much I miss them.
They'd both been pretty liberal when they were younger, I guess. But time and three kids had mellowed them, so by the time I was born, they'd become more conservative. I still remember how they took the news when Gavin came out of the closet.

They weren't really surprised, I guess, but Mom seemed to take it better than Dad. He went into denial for almost a year, refusing to talk about it and ignoring anyone else who talked about it. Mom was supportive, but even I could tell it broke her heart.

I was fourteen when he broke the news to the family, but I'd known it all my life. I'd just accepted it, like I would have accepted it if he'd been left-handed. It didn't freak me out at all, even when we shared a room, before Morgan went off to college in Iowa City. It was just who Gavin was.

I wondered how they would have reacted to the Gavin-Izzy-Tres love triangle thing. Mom would try to stay neutral, but I know she'd secretly side with Izzy. Mom was never fond of Mark, and the thought of her son with Tres -- or any man -- would probably drive her a little nuts.

Dad would probably try to ignore it altogether, refusing to believe his baby girl would ever cheat on her husband. Of course, Dad was the family's expert on adultery. For almost a year before the accident, he'd been fooling around with another professor in his department. We kids knew about it, but none of us ever confronted him. And no one thought Mom knew.

There's something I've never told anyone. The day my parents died, I was home. I was skipping school, and Mom came home at noon. She didn't know I was there. So anyway she called Aunt Vivien. That was Dad's mistress. She isn't really our aunt, of course, but that's what we've called her since we were kids.

She and Mom had a fight on the phone. I was hiding in my bedroom, but I could hear Mom screaming in the kitchen. Anyway, after she hung up, she came upstairs and started packing her suitcase. I was too scared to come out of my room. God, I wish I had.

Then Dad came home. They had a big fight, and Mom stormed off to her car, and Dad went after her. I ran across the hall to Izzy's old room, which faced the street, and I saw them fighting in the driveway. I'd never seen Mom so mad.

Somehow, Dad calmed Mom down enough that she got into his car, and they drove off. And that was the last time I saw them alive. Some bastard who'd gotten drunk at lunch ran a red light and killed them both.
I was still staring at Mom's silver brush when Gavin came out of the bathroom in his boxer shorts, rubbing his hair with a towel. I suddenly felt very guilty and quickly placed the brush back on the dresser.

"Don't tell me you consider that to be brushed," Gavin said.

"No," I said. "I just can't use Mom's...that brush."

"Yeah, I know. I can't use it either."

"Do you ever miss them?" I asked.

"Every day," he said, sitting on the end of the bed. "Every morning, I expect to see Mom in the kitchen, flipping pancakes. Dad sitting at the table, reading his morning paper and complaining about the university administration."

"I know what you mean. Whenever I'm here and the front door opens, I expect to see them coming home from campus. I don't know how you can live here. It's like their ghosts are all over the place."

"That's why I can't leave. Believe me, I've wanted to. When you graduated and moved to Cedar Rapids, I almost put the house on the market. But then I'd find one of Dad's pipes, or a pair of Mom's reading glasses. She must have had a dozen of those things, and she was always losing them."

"She was too vain for bifocals," I said.

"That was part of it. But I think she just liked wearing those half-glasses. They made her look so professorial."

I grinned, and Gavin smiled, too. It was the first I'd seen him smile that day, and I put hand on his arm. "And now you're in Cedar Rapids," he said. "And Morgan's in Iowa City."

"It must be hard for you to live here all by yourself." At least Izzy's close by...." I stopped myself before finishing the thought, but it was too late.

Gavin's smile disappeared. "Yeah, well." He pulled away from me and walked to the tall dresser, finding a white t-shirt to put on.

"You two will work this out, you know," I said. "You have to. 'There's nothing a Remington can't handle,' Dad used to say. And there's nothing a Remington can't forgive."

"Dad never said that."

"No, I said it. And it's true."
"I don't know about that," Gavin said, buttoning up his pink shirt. "What I do know is that Lucie will be calling any minute, and I need to meet them at Lucullan's. So go find another brush, so I can get dressed."

I knew the subject was closed, at least for the time being, so I went to my own room and searched my duffel bag for a brush. Of course, I hadn't packed one, but I looked anyway. The phone rang, and soon Gavin walked in, fully dressed and holding one of his own brushes. "I'm going," he said. "We'll be back by seven. Iseult and Mark should be here by then."

"What about Tres?" I asked. "Have you talked to him yet?"

"No, and I don't plan to. Not tonight, at least." "But he said he was planning to be here tonight."

Gavin wrinkled his brow and pressed his lips into a tight line, then said, "Do me a favor and call him at the Shop. Un-invite him, and tell him I'll call him tomorrow. Or the next day."

"No way," I said. "You need to deal with this yourself, and I don't wanna get involved."

"Fine," he said in that angry tone Dad would always take when he was pissed off. "If you get hungry, call for a pizza. But keep away from the cake."

My tone became defensive. "Like I'd eat Lucie's birthday cake. I'm not six anymore, you know."

I could tell he was about to make some angry reply, but instead he just ground his teeth and stormed off. Izzy was right. He was just like Dad when he was mad. Why hadn't I seen it before?

I hoped Tres would show up before Izzy and Mark, so I could hear his side of the story, but it didn't work out that way. Instead I had to listen to Izzy and Mark have an argument over something petty. Something else I noticed for the first time was that they were always arguing when I saw them. In many ways, Iseult was like Dad when she fought, making quick verbal jabs and not giving Mark a chance to make a come-back. Mark would get flustered and jibber, trying to form a complete sentence.

"C'mon, guys," I finally said. "Chill out. This is supposed to be a party. Can't this wait till later?"

Izzy crossed her arms and pressed her mouth into a thin line, just as Gavin had done earlier. God, did everyone in the family take after Dad but me?
Well, before they could start the next round of fighting, the doorbell rang. "Is that them?" asked Mark.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Izzy, standing and walking toward the front door. "It's too early. And why would Gavin ring his own doorbell?"

"It was just a question," said Mark, looking to me for sympathy. Secretly I did sympathize, because my first thought had been the same as his.

Iseult opened the door, and there was Tres. "Hi, Izzy," he said. "Am I too late?"

"Not at all. Gavin still has them at the restaurant."

He came in and we all sat down again. Mark tried to make small talk. "So, Percy, how's your band?"

"Driving me crazy. Our singer is always late for practice, and our new bass player keeps trying to get us to play covers."

Mark nodded, like he knew what I meant, but I could tell he didn't have the first clue. Tres and Izzy kept shooting glances at each other when they thought no one was looking. I wondered if Mark noticed, but he seemed fairly clueless tonight.

"How about your girlfriend?" said Mark.

"Gwen?" I said. "We broke up."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Mark. He asked me if I'd made any coffee, but of course I hadn't. I stood to go to the kitchen, and Tres also stood.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Tres makes the best coffee in Ames," Izzy offered.

"Sure," I said, glad to have a few minutes alone with Tres. I just hoped Iseult and Mark wouldn't start fighting again.

Tres scooped beans into the grinder, while I put a filter in the coffee maker. "I suppose you know what's going on," he said.

"Izzy told me," I said.

"And I suppose he hates me."

"Who, Mark?"

"No, Gavin. I assume you talked to him."

"A little. He's mad, but I'm sure he doesn't hate you."

"He does," he said, pressing the grinder's switch. Neither of us tried to talk over the noise, but I filled the coffee maker with water.
As he dumped the grounds into the filter, he said, "And he has every right to hate me. I hate me right now. You probably do, too."

"I won't say I approve of what you did," I said, keeping my voice low. "But I could never hate you. Well, unless you sleep with my girlfriend."

I'd meant it as a joke, but the look of pain in his green eyes told me it missed the humor mark. "I didn't mean that," I said.

"No, you're right. I've really fucked up everything." "Yeah, well...." I didn't know what to say.

"I love your sister, you know."

"That's what she says."

"I do, really." He seemed sincere, but I'm really not the best judge of this sort of thing.

"What about Gavin?" I wanted to know.

"I love him, too. Just not the same way. I wish I did. God, I wish I did. It would make this all so much easier. But it's Izzy I'm in love with."

"Shhhh!" I said, my eyes darting to the door. "You want Mark to hear you?"

"What the hell am I thinking," he said, lowering his voice again, "sleeping with a married woman?"

"Hey, it runs in the family," I said, and Tres gave me a quizzical look.

Before I could say anything more, Iseult came into the kitchen. Tres said, "How are you holding up?"

"Well as can be expected," Izzy said. "Mark's hungry, so I'm making him a sandwich."

"One of us better go out there," I said, "before Mark starts suspecting something."

"I'll go," said Tres, flicking the switch on the coffee maker and leaving. Izzy opened the refrigerator

"You didn't tell Mark, did you?" I asked.

"I'm crazy, but I'm not a complete idiot." She took a head of lettuce and a mayonnaise jar and walked to the counter.

"Are you ever going to tell him?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I hope it doesn't come to that. We have to be married at least another year before he gets his permanent green card."

"And then?"
She went back to the 'fridge for cold cuts and mustard. "I'll burn that bridge when I come to it."

"Well, do you still love him?"

"Yes," she said. "But it's more complicated than that. I love him, but I don't think I'm in love with him."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know," she said, taking a loaf from the bread box on the counter. "I just know that I don't want to hurt him."

"Are you going to see Tres again?"

"I have no idea." She spread mayonnaise on two slices of bread.

"Do you want to?"

"More than anything," she said. "But it would kill Mark, if he ever found out."

"Not to mention Gavin."

"God, what am I going to do about Gavin? How did all this happen?"

"Sins of the father," I whispered. Neither of us spoke for a while. I stared out the window at the back yard, and Iseult finished making the sandwich. I noticed she was starting to cry again.

"We probably shouldn't be talking about this now," I said. "Mark's in the other room."

She took a deep breath and wiped the first tears from her eyes. "You're right," she said, putting the sandwich on a plate. "Let's see if we can't get through this evening with as little bloodshed as possible."

I could tell you about the rest of the evening, but really, nothing more happened. Lucie was surprised, and we all ate cake and drank wine until ten. Actually, everyone drank except Izzy and Tres. Gavin nursed the same glass of wine for hours, and I could tell he was trying hard not to glare at anyone.

Finally Tres left. Gavin refused to talk to him, despite the fact that Tres kept trying to corner him alone. He promised to call Gavin the next day. Then everyone else got ready to leave. While Morgan and Mark were setting up the next time they could get together for lunch, Lucie dragged me off to a corner.
"You're calling me tomorrow," she said, "and telling me what the hell's going on."

"Whaddya mean?"

She arched an eyebrow and gave me one of her pursed-lips grins. "Gavin looks like he's ready to bite someone. Izzy and Tres look like they got caught biting someone. If you know what I mean. And I think you do."

"Yeah, well," I stammered.

"You know the whole story," she whispered. "Tomorrow you're dishing it out to me. 'Kay?"

There was really no question of refusing. Lucie had a way of getting whatever she wanted, no matter how hard someone tries not to give it to her. If she'd gotten my affirmed-bachelor, playboy-club-owner older brother to not only propose but actually marry her, there was no way I could say no to her. No way. "I'll try," I said.

"I know." She leaned in close and kissed my cheek. Her perfume tickled my nose and made my head swim. Or maybe it was the wine. I knew I'd call her the next day. Hell, I would've run off with her to Las Vegas, if she asked. Does that make me a terrible person? Or just a drunk person with terrible tendencies?

Well, she never did ask me to run off to Las Vegas, so I guess it doesn't matter. Instead she left, along with everyone else. It was just me and Gavin. "You want help cleaning up?"

Gavin drank the last of his wine and looked around the living room. "Nah," he sighed. "It'll keep till morning."

"Or afternoon," I offered, knowing I planned to sleep until the crack of noon. And although I'd had too much to drink, and my body really wanted to sleep, something made me say, "You wanna talk yet?"

Gavin sank onto the sofa and set his wine glass on the coffee table. Without a coaster, I noticed. "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore."

I sat on the sofa next to him. "I talked with Tres a little tonight. He's really sorry he hurt you."

"Yeah, well. This whole situation's...."

"Shit," I said. "He did a shitty thing. They both did. I think you should kill them."

He looked blankly at me for a moment, then burst into laughter. I mean it, it was like he exploded, and he laughed so hard I thought he'd bust a blood vessel.
"In a perfect world," he said, calming, "I would kill 'em."
"In a perfect world, your boyfriend wouldn't sleep with your sister."
"And younger brothers would be in college, instead of working in porno shops."
"And older brothers wouldn't be chasing maybe-bi-boys." He smiled.
"In a perfect world," I said, quoting Dad, "fish would jump out of the river and right onto your plate."
"And plates would wash themselves," Gavin said, finishing Mom's part of the saying. He looked again at the cake plates and wine glasses scattered on tables around the room. "I could sure use some of those self-washing plates tonight, huh?"
"Tomorrow," I said. "And I'll even help."
He looked at me over the top of his eyeglasses. Another gesture he'd picked up from Dad. "You, wash dishes? Maybe this is a perfect world after all."
"Well, I'm not making a habit of it. Consider it your birthday present."
"My birthday's not for three months."
"And I'll be just as broke then, so take what you can get."
He put his arm around my shoulder, and we went upstairs. It was only about eleven, but it felt more like four in the morning.

I thought the worst of it was over. Though I didn't know what he planned to do about Tres, I was sure Gavin and Iseult would make up. He seemed calmed down when he went to sleep, maybe even on the verge of forgiving her. Man, was I ever wrong.

As I figured, I slept till noon, and I only woke up because Gavin was knocking on my door, saying my brunch was getting cold. Gavin always makes a late breakfast on Sundays, just like Mom always did.

So I dragged myself downstairs and sat at the kitchen table, trying to decide if I was hung over or just tired. I had just about decided it was a hang over, when Gavin put the plate of food in front of me. Then I realized I was hungry. Starving, really. I ate five eggs and four slices of toast, and who knows how much ham.
Gavin didn't eat, but kept making more food when I asked for it. Otherwise he drank coffee and read the paper. Another family tradition: no one talks while eating a meal. Instead, everyone reads. Even in a restaurant, if it's just family. We chat before and after, but while there's food on the table, it's just chew and read, read and chew. Been that way since before I was born, I'm told, something Mom and Dad started when they were dating as grad students. I wonder if Izzy and Morgan still do that at home, and how Mark and Lucie feel about it.

I'm the only one who doesn't read, unless you count comics. And even those I don't read at the table. They lose all collector's value if you spill food on them, you know. Sometimes I'll read a computer magazine or the paper's entertainment section, checking up on local bands. But that day all I felt like doing was eating.

Then Iseult came in the back door. Gavin folded the paper and crossed his arms. I said, "Hey, Sis," a little more weakly than I'd planned.

She tried to smile. "I thought I'd help you clean up from last night."

"Already done," Gavin said.

She was silent for a long time, standing in the open doorway. I was torn between the desire to finish eating and wanting to make myself scarce."

"Was there anything else?" Gavin said, his voice flat.

"I was hoping we could talk. Please?"

"What is there to say? What's done is done. 'You cannot un-work that which you have wrought."

"Well, thank you, Milton," she said, rolling her eyes.

"I believe it was Marlowe," he said with a self-satisfied smile.

"I think I know the difference between Marlowe and Milton."

"Your both wrong," I said. "It was Lucifer. In Sympathy for the Devil. The movie."

They looked at me, blinking. Then Izzy said, "Damn, he's right."

"Leave it to the one non-literary member of the family," Gavin said.

I grinned. "See? You both need to read less and lighten up more."

"Be that as it may," Gavin said, "I don't see what talking about this will accomplish. What is it you want me to say?"

Izzy sat at the table, across from Gavin. "I don't care what you say. Tell me I'm a rotten person and a lousy sister. Call me names. Rant, scream, break a few dishes."

"I'd rather just forget the whole thing and move on with my life. Can't we just do that?"

"No!" she said emphatically.

"Why the hell not?"

"Because it's always going to be bottled up inside you, until finally you explode, or implode, or whatever it is you do. And it will always be hanging there between us, driving a wedge and making a deeper and wider gap in our lives. Just like with Jack."

"Goddamn it," he growled. His face was tense, and his hands gripped the edge of the table tightly.

"That's it," she said. "Let it out. Confess, you never forgave me for Jack, did you?"

"You're damn right I didn't!" he shouted suddenly. "And do you know why? Because I trusted you! I told you everything. Everything we were doing, and everything I was feeling. And you just drank it all in, biding your time until you could make your move. You stole him from me. My first boyfriend. The guy I lost my virginity with. And you just swooped in and snatched him away."

He fumed for a few moments, and she stared at the table. I was trying to think of a graceful way to slip away from the kitchen. The last of my eggs became cold and rubbery.

Gavin finally spoke again, his voice lower. "And as if that hadn't been enough, you've gone and done it again with Tres. Tell me, did you fuck Jack, too? Or were you saving yourself for my next boyfriend?"

"Okay, that's enough," Iseult said, looking up with suddenly angry eyes.

"You're the one who wanted me to get it off my chest."

"I did, and you have, and now it's my turn. First of all, I never slept with Jack. We went to the prom, and then on a couple more dates before I dumped him. He was a jerk, a first-class asshole, which you would have known if you hadn't been so blinded with puppy love."

Gavin sneered and looked about to say something, but Izzy drove onward. "Secondly, I never planned to steal him away from you. He asked me out, remember?"

"You should have said no."

"We could spend the rest of our lives discussing shouldas. I shoulda said no to Jack. I shoulda said no to Tres. Hell, I shoulda said no when Mark proposed."
You shoulda finished school after Mom and Dad died, instead of dropping out. You shoulda moved to LA with Roger, or fought harder to keep him here."

"And I shoulda kept Tres as far from you as possible."

"Maybe you shoulda. But you didn't. Now you're stuck with a sister who's in love with a man she can't have and married to a man she no longer wants to have. So if you want to spend the rest of your life hating me and wallowing in self-pity, you go right ahead. I've got my own self-pity to wallow in at the moment."

Gavin opened his mouth, snapped it shut again, then lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Izzy's features also softened. "I'm sorry, too. For everything. For Jack, for Tres. Even for breaking your train set when I was eight."

Gavin tried to smile. "You don't know how hard this has been on me. You're the only person I've really talked to about Tres. And now this has happened, and the one person I want to talk to the most is the one person I can't talk to."

"You can talk to me," she said, placing a hand on his. "We have to talk to one another. We're Remingtons. There's nothing a Remington can't handle."

"Or forgive," Gavin said, placing his other hand on top of hers. "That's my line."

They looked up in surprise, like they'd forgotten I was there. "It is indeed," Gavin said. "I'm sorry for stealing your line."

I beamed triumphantly. "That's better."

"How about you, Percy?" said Izzy. "What are you sorry for?"

"I'm sorry I didn't get to finish my breakfast."

"Do you want me to make you more eggs?" asked Gavin.

"Nah, all this mushy stuff made me lose my appetite. I'm gonna go play on your computer."

"I thought you were going to help me wash the dishes."

"Well, I changed my mind. Now I have something else I'm sorry for. Hey, you guys know what you're going to do about Tres?"

Gavin looked to Iseult, who said, "I can't see him again, except to tell him why I can't see him again. What about you?"

"Well, I certainly can't date him after this. I don't even know if I can be friends with him. Serves me right for falling for yet another straight boy."
"I keep tellin' ya," I said, "to leave the breeders to other breeders. And ya know, none of this would happen if you'd just date girls."

"Right, and then I'd have to compete with you."

"But there'd be a big difference," I said. "I'd never be sorry for stealing one of your girlfriends. What would you do with one anyway?"

We laughed, and we went on with our lives. Doesn't everyone?
CHAPTER 3. WINTER MOON: AN EARLY START

Introduction

The reception I received with "Sins of the Fathers," both from the people the characters were based upon and the students in my fiction workshops, encouraged me to write a larger story. I envisioned a novel containing and expanding upon the events of the short story. But the main plot of the novel would be drawn from a vivid and persistent dream which had plagued me in late 1994.

Even today, it is hard for me to believe that the dream wasn’t reality. Logic dictates that it was, of course, only a dream. Yet is seemed so real at the time, and now my memory of what must be called reality has become very fuzzy. This may be attributed to the anti-depressant drugs I was taking at the time, treating the severe depression which had resulted from the revelation of “Izzy’s” affair with “Tres,” and other somewhat traumatic events.

In October of 1994, having been taking the prescription drugs for several months, I began to experience a rather skewed view of reality. I became convinced that my younger “brother,” who becomes Percy in the short story and the first draft of the novel, had died in a car accident while coming back to Ames after visiting his real family in Cedar Rapids. I had vivid dreams (which my mind later translated to actual memories) about helping his real brother clean out his dorm room, attending his funeral, and crying with my “siblings.”

Of course, none of these things happened, and I was shocked when, just after Thanksgiving break, I received a phone call from him. I was sure I was losing my mind, and it took some time to sort everything out and reconstruct reality. October had been a busy month for both of us, and we hadn’t seen each other in weeks. In fact, I’d had no contact with anyone in my “family” for some time. Depressed and lonely, I was feeling abandoned, and in my altered state, my mind began to believe that “Percy” was actually dead.

I convinced my doctor that I needed to switch drugs, and she in turn convinced me I should be getting some therapy. A couple months later, I was
much better, and the strange hallucination became nothing more than a blurred dream of false memories.

The strangest part of the whole affair was that the night before "Percy" called me, I had spent several hours alone in my darkened living room, thinking about him and listening to a bad demo tape he and his small rock band had made. I wanted so much for him to be alive again, and when I finally went to sleep, I dreamed that he was alive. So when I heard from him, my first thought was that I had somehow brought him back to life.

Long after I realized what had really happened, the idea of a brother bringing a sibling back from death through sheer willpower stayed with me. It would make a fascinating story, if I could pull it off. And since I had already created fictional characters based upon all the people involved, I took the opportunity to explore this other story.

The first draft is very chaotic, as I begin to explore the possibilities of the story. Each chapter is told from a different point of view. Chapter 1 is third-person objective, focusing on the remaining siblings, but never really getting into their minds. It is told in the past tense, as most fiction is told. The second chapter is also third-person, but limited to Gavin’s point of view. It is told in the present tense, basically because I wanted to play with that tense. I was trying for a surreal quality to what may (or may not) have been Gavin’s dream, and the immediacy of the present tense suggested itself to me.

The third chapter is in first-person, from Percy’s point of view. At this point, Percy is already dead, so this gave me a chance to explore what the afterlife might be like. I was considering writing the entire novel from Percy’s point of view, but I realized that would only be feasible if Percy’s ghost was lingering about, watching his siblings deal with his death, and especially observing how Gavin was trying to bring him back to life. However, since I wanted to have some ambiguity surrounding Percy’s death, this wouldn’t work. At this point in the writing, I wasn’t sure Percy was to die at all, or if it was all just a bizarre hallucination on Gavin’s part. This ambiguity remains an essential part of the novel.

The last chapter of the first draft is again third-person, this time limited to Izzy’s point of view. Since the affair between Izzy and Tres (who doesn’t appear in this draft) is an important sub-plot of the novel, I thought it best to show a
little of what was going on in Izzy's life. This would foreshadow her affair with Tres, and set up the reasons for the affair.

Only the first and third chapters of this draft were workshopped in a fiction class, in Spring of 1997. The reception was positive, despite the chaotic, embryonic nature of the draft. More changes were to come before I found a fuller vision of the novel.

Winter Moon: An Early Start

Chapter One

Percival Remington was dead. Undeniably, irrevocably dead, deceased, no longer among the living. Within two hours of the phone call announcing his death, Percy's sister and two brothers had gathered in the living room of the large house in which they had grown up together.

Percy's oldest brother, Morgan, paced before the fireplace, a glowing ember of anger and frustration. His sister, Iseult, younger than Morgan by four and a half years, nervously ran her fingers through her pale brown hair. The two had similar tempers, inherited from their father, and they exchanged heated words. They were not angry with each other, yet they took their anger out against one another.

Gavin, the second-oldest son, now middle child, sat on the sofa with his knees drawn up to his chin. He was the only remaining Remington to live in this house, where he and Percy had lived since the death of their parents two years ago. Unlike his siblings, Gavin did not feel anger or frustration. In fact, he felt nothing. He had felt nothing since returning from the hospital morgue, where his youngest brother rested in a cold metal drawer. This would have frighten him, yet he couldn't bring himself to feel even fear.

"We've got to do something to these guys," Morgan said, his face flushed red.

"The police will handle it," said Izzy, the fingers of her left hand again making their way through her straight hair.
"Fuck the police," Morgan spat. "They'll never catch the bastard. And even if they do, he'll be out in less than a year."

"For murder?" The word burned Izzy's tongue.

"He won't even get second-degree," argued Morgan. "It'll be treated as an accident."

"An accident? The guy stabbed him five times!"

"He shouldn't have gotten involved," Morgan said. "Never interfere with a knife fight. What I want to know is, what the hell was he doing there in the first place."

Morgan and Izzy fixed their gazes upon their brother. Gavin noticed that Izzy had stopped messing with her hair and was now fiddling with the small set of nail clippers she wore on a silver chain around her neck. The clippers were a new addition to her jewelry, and they disturbed Morgan, though Gavin found them amusing.

"Well?" said Morgan.

"His band had a show tonight." Gavin's voice sounded weak to his own ears. He had already explained all this to the police at the hospital. Percy's rock band had landed a gig opening for a more well-known local band in a Des Moines bar. Though Percy was barely seventeen, Gavin had reluctantly agreed to let him play. The band had meant so much to Percy after the death of their parents, and Gavin was the first to admit he made a poor fatherly substitute.

"And you just let him go." Morgan's words had the ring of an accusation.

"Yes," Gavin said.

"Why didn't you go with him?" Iseult wanted to know.

"I had homework," Gavin said, his voice strengthening. "Besides, I hear enough of that music here." For the past six months, Gavin had allowed Obscene Jester to practice in the basement. The harsh sounds they claimed as music had driven a steady wedge of pain into the space between his eyes.

"Why did you let him go in the first place?" Morgan demanded. "He's only seventeen."

"There was supposed to be a man from a record company there," Gavin said, "to hear the lead band. It could've been their big break."

"He's still in high school," said Morgan. "The only big break he should be worried about is getting a high score on his ACTs."
"Like you did?" Gavin found a sudden glee in lashing out at Morgan. Part of him disliked the feeling, but another, stronger part applauded the return of any feeling.

"Don't take that tone with me," Morgan said, obviously stung by the reminder that he'd disappointed his parents by entering the army, rather than pursuing the college education they'd groomed all their children for.

Izzy, who inherited not only her father's temper but also her mother's diplomatic skills, tried to press the creases between her brothers. "No one's accusing you of anything, Gavin."

"Aren't you?" Gavin said, his desire to feel strengthening into a desire to cause pain. "You think it's been easy for me? You're about to get the bachelor's degree I should have gotten years ago. You've been right here in town, but have you helped me one bit with Percy? Do you wake up every morning to make him breakfast and make sure he goes to school? Do you make sure he spends at least as much time studying French as he does with his band, or playing around on his computer?

"And what about you, Morgan? Where the hell have you been the last two years? Off killing babies in Bosnia? And now that you're back, do you move back into the house to help me out? Oh, no! You're in Des Moines, living it up on your inheritance, the money you got only because your parents died and left me to raise their youngest son.

"I've done the best I can with this, you know. And I've had to do it all by myself. So I don't want to hear a word out of either of you about my parenting skills."

Gavin saw that his words have had their desired effect. Morgan sat in a wing-back chair before the fireplace, and Izzy had stopped fingerling her nail clippers. Neither would meet Gavin's eyes. The sadistic wave washed out of him, and his hands shook only slightly as he lit a cigarette.

"You're right," Izzy said at last. "I haven't been here for you. Either of you. I'm sorry."

"So am I," said Morgan. "I just...couldn't be here, you know? They're still here. Everywhere."

Tears started to moisten Iseult's eyes for the first time since she was awakened in her dorm room by Gavin's frantic phone call. "What are we going to do?"
"We're going to kill the bastard," said Morgan simply. "Like we should have done with Pat."

Izzy winced at the mention of her ex-boyfriend's name. Gavin said, "That wouldn't bring Percy back." Even as he said the words, he realized he didn't believe them. In the front of his mind, he knew there was no way to redeem Percival from death. And yet a small voice from somewhere in his mind's basement told him that Percy could still be saved, and maybe the death of his murderer would be the tool which could wrench him from death's jaws.

Morgan turned his attention to Gavin. "We have to do something. I have to do something."

"Not that," Izzy said, pulling a tissue from a box on the coffee table and dabbing her eyes. "Not more death. I couldn't take it."

"We do nothing," Gavin said, tapping his cigarette into an ashtray on the coffee table. "We wait and see what happens. If the system doesn't give us justice--"

"It won't," Morgan interrupted.

"Well see," Gavin continued. "But our first obligation is to the living, to us, right now. We need to make funeral arrangements, call the family."

"I'll help," Izzy offered. "Do you want me to move home for the rest of the semester? I can withdraw and--"

"No," Gavin said emphatically. "You're graduating in December, if I have to tie you to a furniture dolly and push you across the stage myself."

"I don't know how I can, now," Izzy said, folding the tissue and rubbing her eyes again.

"You will," Gavin said. "But you can help me by calling Dad's side of the family. Grandma Jo is the only one who even talks to me anymore, though I suspect she doesn't really understand what it means that I'm gay."

"I'll call them," Izzy promised, reaching across the coffee table and taking his right hand in hers.

"I'll move back," said Morgan. "I've been thinking of going to college anyway. I can get a job here and help with the bills. That is, if you plan to keep the house."

Gavin crushed out his cigarette. "I'm not going to think about that now. But if you want to move in, you're more than welcome. I've kept your room for you." It was nearly a year after their parents died before Gavin could bring himself to
move into their bedroom, leaving the twin bed in the room that had once been Morgan's.

"I'll stay through the weekend," Iseult said. "When should we...you know, have the service?"

The clock on the mantle chimed four times, and Gavin let out a long, slow breath. "I don't want to think about that either right now. I think we should all just get some sleep."

"I doubt I'll sleep," Izzy said. "I don't know if I'll ever sleep again."

"I've got some valium we can take," Gavin said. Smiling at the look on his sister's face, he said, "They were Mom's, so they're a couple years old. I don't know if valium goes bad or not."

"I'll take my chances without it," said Iseult. "You should, too."

"Maybe you're right," Gavin said, rising from the sofa. "Although the thought of spending the next few days in a fog is very attractive."

"We'll be in a thick enough fog without drugs," Morgan asserted. "After the funeral, if you're still interested, I can get you something a lot stronger than valium."

Gavin tried to laugh off his brother's serious offer as a joke. "You just want to ensure I'm the last Remington to get a BA." He began walking toward the small study at the back of the house. "Go to bed, you two. We have a lot to do tomorrow."

"Where are you going?" Izzy asked, standing.

"I want to write for a while," Gavin replied, not turning back. "Try not to sleep too far past noon." He left his siblings and entered the tiny, book-swollen study his parents had shared as college professors. A large, two-sided desk filled the center of the room, with two computers sitting back-to-back. Gavin sat in the chair that had once been occupied by his father and flicked on the computer, listening to it hum and whirl to life.

Looking at the chair opposite him, he saw not the ghost of his mother, who had spent hours there writing scholarly papers on Medieval English literature. Instead he pictured Percy, chained to the desk at Gavin's insistence. Percy had a puzzled and annoyed look on his face as he struggles to understand not the American history text before him, but the necessity to read it in the first place.

The vision of Percy grew more solid as Gavin's eyes drifted closed. It was only hours later that he realized he had fallen asleep.
Chapter Two

Or has he?

Gavin is startled to see Percy solidify. He is wearing the same black t-shirt Gavin saw in the morgue, though there is no blood-stained knife wound. Percy’s light brown hair is long and tangled, but again there is no evidence of blood. He looks up from his history book, removing his un-broken glasses. “What are you staring at?”

“You. I thought you were dead. I saw you—”

“Of course I’m dead,” says Percy. “And still you make me study this crap.”

Gavin shakes his head. He notices that the temperature of the room has dropped slightly. “This isn’t happening.”

Percy slams his textbook closed. “Wake up, Big Brother. It’s all happening.”

“You’re dead, and yet you’re here. Am I dreaming?”

“Can’t tell you that. I can tell you that I’m trapped here.”

“Trapped?” Gavin shakes his head again. “Trapped how? Do you have unfinished business? Are you a ghost?”

“How the hell should I know? I’ve never been a ghost.”

Anger suddenly grips Gavin. “Goddammit, Percy! What the hell were you thinking, interfering in a knife fight?”


“You could’ve gotten yourself killed.”

“Yo, I did get myself killed, remember?”

“I’m asleep,” Gavin tells himself. “I’m asleep and dreaming. Maybe I’ve even dreamed his death.”

“Stop talking about me as if I’m not here!” shouts Percy. “I hate it when you do that.”
“I’m sorry,” says Gavin, his head starting to hurt. “I’ve never talked to a dead person before.”

“What about Mom? You talk to her all the time.”

“Yeah, but she never talks back to me. Hey, have you seen her or Dad yet?”

“Nope,” says Percy. “One minute I was in an alley, hurtin’ beyond belief. The next I was here, reading about President Andrew Johnson. Did you know he was impeached?”

Gavin ignores the history lesson. “How do you know you’re dead?”


Percy stands, and Gavin follows him to the study’s door. He glances back, half expecting to see his body asleep at the desk, but the chair is empty. He fights the urge to grab Percy in a hug -- Percy hates that. Gavin notices the air near his brother is colder than in the rest of the room. Percy leads his brother upstairs to his bedroom. A laundry basket with clean, folded clothes rests on Percy’s bed. Moonlight falls through the window and rests on the floor, illuminating the room with a silver light. Gavin notices his brother also glows somewhat, then sees the laundry basket.

“I thought I told you to put away your clothes,” Gavin says.

“Are you gonna nag me even after I’m dead? ‘Cuz I can always go haunt Morgan, ya know.”

“Sorry. Force of habit. What do you want to show me?”

“This.” Percy reaches between the mattress and box spring of his unmade bed, pulling out a pair of pink panties.

“Please tell me you weren’t a cross-dresser,” Gavin says. “One sexual deviant in the family is all Morgan can handle.”

“They aren’t mine, you dope,” Percy says, tossing the panties at Gavin. “They belong to a girl named Missy. She and I had sex here last week, when you were on campus.”

“You’ve been having sex here while I’m at class? Wait a minute, does that mean you’ve been skipping school?”

“At least twice a week,” Percy says.

“How could you? You know how important--”

“Does any of this matter right now? Man, you’re a pain.”
“Why are you telling me any of this? Are you trying to drive me crazy? Because it’s working.”

“I’m telling you this to prove that I was really here, that this isn’t just a dream.”

“Then I’m not dreaming?”

“I dunno. You might be, but it isn’t just a dream. I’m really here.” He takes the panties from Gavin and shoves them back under the mattress. “And this is the proof. Tomorrow, when you wake up, you’ll find these right here.”

“This is insane. None of it is happening. I’m going to wake up tomorrow, and everything will be back to normal. You won’t even be dead.”

“I wish,” says Percy. “Face facts: I’m dead, and there’s nothing you can do about it. Yet.”

“What does that mean? Yet?”

“I don’t know what it means. I just know that I’m dead, and you have to accept that for now. Later, I think, you can do something about it.”


“I dunno.”

Gavin wrinkles his brow.

“I hafta go,” says Percy.

“Go where?” asks Gavin, suddenly afraid to let Percy leave.

“I’m not sure. I just know that I’m very tired. Or hungry. Whatever it is, I have to leave here and go somewhere else, or I’ll pass out. Or something like that.”

“How do you know where to go? Will you be back?”

“Stop asking all these questions! Just because I’m dead doesn’t mean I have all the answers, you know. I just have to not be here for a while. I’ll come back if I can.”

Before Gavin can say anything else, Percy fades away, like a ghost in a movie. “Wait! Don’t go. Please, Percy.” But it is too late; Percy is gone.

Gavin goes back to the study, his head still reeling with the encounter. Opening his journal, he types a quick account of Percy’s visit, then shuts down the computer and goes upstairs to bed. As he drifts to sleep, he realizes he doesn’t remember falling asleep or awakening in the study. He decides to worry about it in the morning, and his sleep is undisturbed by dreams.
Chapter Three

My funeral turned out to be a real bummer. I always thought it would be cool to see my own funeral. Ya know, all those people sittin’ around, sayin’ nice things about me. Lots of girls cryin’. But it just sucked.

First of all, aside from my band, no one from school showed up. Not even that bitch Missy. It was just the guys from the band. Well, except for our singer, and he’s new. We always have a new singer. But no one else from school! I guess that’s what I get for dying in June.

Not a whole lot of family showed up either. ‘Course, most everyone lives back east. Aunt Kaye, who lives in Iowa City now, was there, and Gramma Jo made it from Maryland. And of course Morgan, Gavin, and Izzy.

I was wearing my only suit, the gray pinstripe that Gavin got me for Mom and Dad’s funeral. It was a little small on me, so I guess someone had to let it out a bit. God, I hated wearing that suit! It always felt like the tie was strangling me. I can’t believe that’s what they buried me in. I wanted to go in my good leather jacket. I’ll have to mention that to Gavin next time I talk to him. If there is a next time.

At the thing at the cemetery, he showed up. I don’t know who he is, but he seemed real familiar. He’s this real old guy who walks with a cane and has a long, white goatee. He looked a little like that guy from Needful Things, and he stood a little away from all the others. Izzy saw him, too, but when she went to talk to him, he was gone.

I only mention him because I saw him again later, at Joe’s Afterlife. That’s a bar where ghosts hang out. At least, I think we’re all ghosts. Nobody seems to know much of anything. Joe’s is where I wound up after I left the funeral.

It started out with a big, bright light, like you always hear about. I was walking toward it, ‘cuz I thought that’s what you’re supposed to do, but I never got
any closer. It was always way out there, like the sunset, and I just kept walking and walking. Finally I got bored and turned around, and that's when I saw Joe's Afterlife.

Actually I just saw a door that said "Joe's Afterlife Bar and Grill." There was nothing else around, just all this darkness. So I thought, what the hell, I could use a drink, and went in.

Inside it looked like a typical neighborhood bar, except everyone in it was a ghost out of a movie. Ya know, all transparent and glowing. A couple were playing pool, but most everyone was just sitting around at tables, drinking ghost-beer and smoking ghost-cigarettes. There was a juke box in the corner, and I knew it was playing something, but I couldn't quite make out what. So I went up to the bartender, who was this bald guy with pale blue eyes.

"How much for a beer?" I asked, and a couple of the ghosts nearby laughed.

"What, I have to be twenty-one to get a drink in the afterlife?"

The loud, drunk ghost at the stool next to me leaned over and said, "Beer's free in the afterlife, kid. That's the only advantage I've seen so far."

A glass appeared in front of me, and I took a sip. There was no flavor. I blinked a couple of times, then tried again, taking a longer gulp. Still nothing. It was like drinking water. The drunk next to me said, too loudly, "You get used to it. And you'll catch a buzz, if you're lucky."

Suddenly the too-quiet music stopped, and everyone was looking at the loud, drunk ghost. Nobody moved. Then, after a few seconds, the music started again, and people went back to what they were doing.

"That was close," said the bald bartender.

"You said it," loud, drunk ghost said.

"What?" I asked.

"That word," said the bartender. "The 'I' word. Don't say it, or he might show up."

"Who?"

Drunk ghost lowered his voice to a loud whisper, "The Devil."

I squinted at drunk ghost. "The Devil shows up if you say 'lucky'?"

The music stopped again, and the door swung open. These little wisps of fog drifted in with a voice: "I thought I heard my name."

"Oh, shit," muttered drunk ghost, moving to the far end of the bar.
And that's when the Devil walked in. He didn't really look anything like the Devil I had in my mind. Ya know, no red skin or horns. In fact, he looked a lot like Quinten Tarentino, with his black hair slicked back. I noticed a large pinkie ring on his right hand, which he extended to me as he approached.

"Hi there," he said, flashing a used car salesman's smile full of white teeth. "I'm Lucifer Q. Devil, but you can call me Lucky."

"What's the 'Q' for?" I wanted to know.

"In case I wanna play pool," he said, and I swear I heard a rim shot somewhere in the background. He was nothing like any Devil I'd ever heard about.

"I'm, ah..." I stammered.

"Don't bother," he said. "You don't remember who you are."

"No, I don't," I admitted. I didn't understand it, but I suddenly couldn't remember who I was or where I'd come from. All I remembered was that I was dead. How did I die anyway?

"You never remember," the Devil continued. "Not at first, anyway. Has something to do with the shock of being suddenly discorporated."

I stared at him blankly. "Dying," he said, patting me on the head like a puppy. I didn't like his attitude, but he flashed that tooth-filled grin again. "Now what is it I can do for you?"

"Me? I dunno."

"Well, didn't you call me?" He snapped his fingers to punctuate his question. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Listen, you're new, so I'm gonna cut ya some slack." He snapped his fingers again. "Here's how it works. You're dead. *snap* Your soul is in jeopardy. *snap-snap* That means the Big Guy upstairs hasn't decided whether you belong in Heaven or Hell. In the meantime, you wait here. *snap*"

I nodded as if I understood, though I was really only half listening to him. He had started snapping his fingers every once in a while, and my eyes were caught on that diamond pinkie ring.

"So that means *snap* that while you're waiting, you can make a deal with me *snap-snap*."

I blinked again. "Huh? What for?"

"Well, there's really only one thing you have that I want. And I think you know what that *snap* is. I, on the other hand, can offer you a variety of things. It's one of the perks to being a pan-dimensional super-being."
"Can you make me alive again?"

The Devil made a sound like a game show buzzer: "ERRR! No, I'm sorry, that's not open to negotiation. Pick something else."

"That's all I'm--" I was cut off by the sound of another voice.

"This one isn't for sale, Lucky," said the new man, and I turned to see the old guy with the cane, the one I'd seen at my funeral.

"He's one of yours?" said the Devil. He turned to me, his voice taking on a whiny tone. "Man, why didn't you tell me you were his?"

"I dunno who he is," I said.

"Look, son," said the Devil, "If you ever decide to switch agents *snap* you just gimme a call *snap-snap*." And three darts appeared in his hand when he snapped. Flashing that Osmond smile again, the Devil walked over to the dart board in the corner.

I turned back to the old guy with the cane. I could tell he wasn't a ghost, because he wasn't even slightly transparent. "Hi," I said weakly, still shaken by my encounter with the Devil.

"Hello, Percy," he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. The warmth of his hand spread down my arm, across my chest, and up my neck, into my scalp. Then my vision started to clear. I hadn't realized it before, but everything had been all blurry, like I'd forgotten to put on my glasses. Come to think of it, I probably wasn't wearing my glasses, which would explain a lot.

As my eyesight got stronger, the bar became more solid, and I saw just how shabby the place really was. I could also hear the jukebox more clearly. It was playing some sappy song from the seventies, but I didn't really recognize it. Also the other ghosts grew fainter, more like pale blobs of light than anything else. And suddenly I remembered who I was.

"Percy," I mumbled. "I'm Percival Stewart Remington."

"Indeed you are," said the man. When he smiled, his pale gray eyes lit up.

"Who are you? Are you God?"

He laughed. "Me? Good heavens no!"

"An angel then? I mean, you must be pretty powerful to scare off the Devil like that."

"I didn't scare him off," the man said. "I doubt much of anything frightens Lucky."

"Then who are you?"
“Let’s just say I’m an old friend of the family. A very old friend.”

“Are you a ghost, too?” That didn’t make sense. Aside from the Devil, who was consistently throwing bulls-eyes, this guy was the most real-looking person in the bar. He smiled and shook his head, so I asked, “Then why are you here?”

“I came for you,” he said. “You need to go back.”

“I want to go back. Can you make me alive again?”

“I’m afraid that really isn’t up to me. What I can do is guide you back to where you need to go.”

“Anything’s better than staying here.” I glanced at the run-down room again. I didn’t really feel like drinking water-flavored beer with this group of glowing blue globs for the rest of eternity. The man smiled, tapped his cane twice against the bar, and walked toward the door. I started to follow, when the Devil said a word I couldn’t begin to understand. The old guy must of known what it meant, because he stopped suddenly and looked at the Devil.

“Next time, old man,” said the Devil.

“Don’t threaten me, Lucky. Your reign shall not be eternal, and you know it.”

The Devil flashed those teeth again, but somehow I didn’t think he was smiling. “Not a threat, [that word again]. Just a friendly warning.” And he turned back to his dart game.

“What did he call you?” I whispered. I can’t even tell you what it sounded like.

“An old name. One you couldn’t possibly comprehend.”

“Well, what am I supposed to call you then?”

He folded his arms and looked past me for a long while before answering. “Why don’t you call me Shade?”

“Shade?”

“Yes, that should work. Now let’s go, before Lucky decides he wants to play with your soul after all.”

I followed him through the door of Joe’s Afterlife, and then everything went blurry again.
Chapter Four

Izzy sat in a corner of the M-Shop, a cup of bitter coffee in one hand, a cigarette in the other. The small table before her was crowded with the books and notes of her modern world history class, a class she feared she might not pass. The lunch rush, such as it was during the summer session of classes, had dwindled, and the only people left in the ‘Shop were the regulars who had late afternoon classes. Izzy barely knew of their presence.

It had been two weeks since Percy’s funeral, and Izzy was still having a hard time accepting his death.

And yet she had no time to dwell on her sorrow. It was only two weeks until final exams, and she needed to pass both classes if she was to graduate in December. *One more semester*, she told herself, tapping ashes off her cigarette and taking a long drag.

Focusing again on the last years of the Cold War, she failed to notice when Pat approached her table. “Hey, babe,” he said, shoving her backpack off the chair and sitting opposite her.

The sound of his voice caused a wave of nausea to wash over her. She fought it back and looked up at him with as little emotion as she could muster. “What do you want, Pat?”

“I heard about Percy,” he said. “I wanted to tell you how sorry I am. I kinda liked Percy.”

She felt he sounded sincere, but Izzy had learned not to trust her feelings where he was concerned. She kept her voice flat when she spoke to him. “Thank you for your sympathy. Now if you don’t mind—”

“It must be rough on you.” He reached a hand across the table, but she pulled her hand back before he could lay his upon it.
"Touch me and die, asshole," she thought, but said, "Yes, it's been rough. But I have a lot of work--"

He cut her off again: "I've been thinking about us a lot lately. I still can't figure out what went wrong between us."

Izzy almost began shouting at him, but she stopped herself. After a long silence, she said, "Until you figure it out, I have nothing to say to you."

"Aw, c'mon, Izzy, this isn't fair. I love you. And you used to love me."

"Yes, Pat, I did. It was a mistake."

"How can you say that?" He reached his hand for her again, but she pulled it away in time. "Can't we at least discuss this? You need me right now."

Before Izzy could respond, a darkly handsome man appeared at her table. "Hello, Izzy," he said, his voice carrying a mild Romanian accent.

"Hi, Mark," she said, her eyes brightening. "Have you met Pat, my ex-boyfriend?" She emphasized the ex as much for Pat's benefit as for Mark's. "Pat, this is Mark Resnikov, a friend of mine from the Senate."

"Uh, hi," Pat stammered, as Mark sat at the table.

"Hello, Pat. I've heard quite a bit about you."

"Yeah, well, Izzy and I were just--"

Mark turned to Izzy, as if Pat weren't speaking. "Izzy, I need to talk to you about--"

"Yes, we need to talk about that," Izzy quickly said. "You don't mind, do you, Pat? We have a lot to discuss before the first GSB session."

"Yeah, but we--"

"Thanks, Pat. I knew you'd understand." And she fixed him with a look he'd come to know only too well recently, the one which said that if he pushed any harder, she'd snap at him. Normally she wouldn't dare argue with him in public, for fear of his private reprisals, but Mark's presence and the fact that she no longer lived with Pat gave her courage. She could see that Pat knew this, too.

"Yeah, okay. I guess I'll talk to you later."

Pat stood, his shoulders slumped, and wandered away from the table. "Thank you," Izzy said, placing her hand on Mark's. "You're a life-saver. Now what did you want to discuss."

"Nothing. I just thought you might want help getting rid of that jerk."

"Well, thank you. I could've handled it, but thanks."

"So how are you doing?"
"Not good. I think I'm gonna have to resign."

"You can't resign. You just got elected, Madame President."

"Yeah, but with Percy dying and all...I just want to graduate in December and get out of here."

"I thought you'd decided to stay until May."

"I had, but Gavin--"

"Who runs your life? You, or Gavin?" When Izzy didn't answer right away, Mark continued. "Listen, we worked very hard to get you elected. You're going to do a lot of good. The Government of the Student Body needs you. We all need you."

"I know that, but--"

"Don't let your brother bully you. The way Pat did." his words stung her, but she kept silent. He continued, "You've got to take charge of your life. You've wanted to be president since I met you. I can't believe you'd throw that away so easily."

"But it's so complicated now."

"I also didn't think you were the type who ran away at the first sign of trouble."

"Look, my personal life is just too screwed up for me to be playing in politics right now."

"The personal is political," Mark said. "You know that. You draw your political strength from your personal life."

Izzy tried to speak, but Mark waved his hand and stood. "Just think about what I've said, that's all I ask. We would miss you...I would miss you."

"I'd miss everyone, too."

He arched an eyebrow. "Me more than others?"

"Maybe," she smiled. Her eyes were suddenly drawn to the bar, where an old man with a long, white goatee leaned on a gnarled cane and sipped beer. He seemed to be watching her, and she thought she recognized him from somewhere.

"Mark, do you know who that is?"

"Who?" Mark said, turning toward the bar.

"The guy with the white beard. I've seen him before, but I can't remember where."

Mark sat again, keeping his gaze on the stranger. "No, I've never seen him before. Do you think he's been following you?"

"No, it's just...he's watching me."
“Oh, come on, Izzy,” Mark said, turning back to her. “Don’t you think you’re being a little—”

“I’m not paranoid,” she said, a bit more emphatically than she’d intended. “He is looking at me, and I have seen him before.”

“So maybe he is looking at you. Your picture’s been in the paper. Maybe he recognizes the new GSB President.”

“I just wish I could remember...wait! Percy’s funeral. He was there.”

“Are you sure? Is he maybe one of Percy’s teachers? Or a bar owner?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.” She stood, but stopped suddenly. He man had vanished, leaving behind only a half-empty beer glass. “He’s gone again.”

“So he is,” Mark said, looking again at the bar.

“But where did he go? I didn’t see him leave.”

“Maybe he went out the back door.”

“No-no-no-no-no. Nobody goes out that door unless they work here.”

“So maybe he works here?”

“No, I’d never seen him before the funeral, and then again today.”

“Izzy, I hate to say this, but you are starting to sound a little...paranoid.”

“I guess I am, huh?” She sat again and began fingering her necklace.

Mark’s eyes were drawn to the tiny set of nail clippers on the silver chain.

“Are you going to tell me what those mean?”

Becoming self-conscious, Izzy dropped her hand away from the necklace.

“Someday...if you’re a good boy. I don’t really feel like studying anymore. You wanna go downstairs and play some pool?”

“Sure, if you let me win.”

“We’ll see,” Izzy smiled, beginning to gather her books. Her eyes continued to dart to the bar, to that half-empty glass, expecting to see the mysterious stranger return. But of course, he never did.
CHAPTER 4. WINTER MOON: THE TRANSITION

Introduction

Over the Summer of 1997, I began the novel over again from the beginning. The first thing I did was make everyone a few years younger, and keep the parents alive. Having the main characters as older and relatively self-sufficient was causing me headaches, as I tried to come up with logical reasons for their financial situation. College professors, even at private colleges, are not wealthy people, and the parents of the main characters could not really leave a fortune to them to live off indefinitely.

By making the main characters younger and keeping their parents alive, I was able to eliminate most of my money worries. Living parents would not only have their savings, but their salaries and income from their published works as well.

Another possibility that I was able to pursue with living parents was the affair the father has, which I could then compare with the affair between Jessie and Troy (Izzy's and Tres' new names). The stern father also introduced a new tension to be explored, for the relationship between the father and his children is a strained one.

Another major difference in this draft is the setting, which shifts from the real city of Ames, Iowa, to the fictional town of Weston, Iowa. Here again I was moving away from reality and toward fiction, which gave me more freedom. Having lived in Ames for nearly 12 years, I was quite familiar with its landmarks and would have little problem portraying the town in such a way that even someone who had never visited Ames would find it realistic. But that very realism would also bind me closely to reality. For while I could invent a great deal, I couldn't significantly change the landscape of Ames, because this would draw too much attention to the fact that I was creating a work of fiction. It was important that I maintain the illusion of reality, so the reader would willingly suspend his or her disbelief.
The town of Weston was originally created for a series of short stories in Spring of 1995. The short stories never really went anywhere, and I abandoned the series rather quickly. However, I had spent quite a bit of time creating the town, and I felt it would make the perfect setting for the novel. Some of the characters, especially Merle, originally appeared in these stories.

In this draft, a sort of inversion takes place between Gavin and Troy. In the previous draft, Gavin is very secure in his sexuality, and it is Tres (who becomes Troy) who is questioning his own identity. However, in this draft it is Troy who is firmly bisexual, and Gavin who is exploring. I felt this insecurity on Gavin’s part might make his character more sympathetic. After all, who isn’t a little insecure about some aspect of themselves?

Portions of this draft were also workshopped in a fiction class in Fall of 1997. At this point, I had decided that this was indeed to be my thesis project, and so I was very curious to know what other creative writing students thought of it. The story was very well received, though there were some concerns about the pace.

Winter Moon: The Transition

Chapter One

Nineteen-year-old Gavin Welsh checked his watch again: ten-thirteen. “Dammit,” he muttered though clenched teeth, his breath puffing out in a small white cloud. He was glad he’d decided to wear a sweatshirt under his wool jacket. As the Daily Herald had predicted, the temperature had fallen below freezing. By morning, he knew, the Quad would be white with a layer of frost.

More because he was impatient than to keep warm, he began pacing in front of the dormitory, his hands thrust into the pockets of his jacket. In the distance, he heard the union’s clock tower chime the quarter hour, and he glanced again at his watch to confirm the time. What could be keeping him? Gavin had a mid-term paper due Friday, only half of which had been written. As it was now Wednesday night, he knew he should be in his room, finishing the paper.
Just as he was about to start up the steps to the front doors, he saw a single headlight approaching from the east. As it drew closer, a low rumbling sound grew louder, and Gavin knew Troy was finally arriving.

“Your late!” Gavin shouted over the motorcycle’s roar.

“I’m sorry,” Troy Cornell said, flipping up the face plate of his helmet. He fumbled with gloved hands to untie a spare helmet from the back of the cycle and handed it to Gavin. “She wouldn’t start again.”

Gavin pulled the helmet on and began fastening the chin strap. “Mount from the left,” Troy said, “just like a horse.”

Grinning and shaking his head, Gavin did as he was instructed, swinging his right leg over the back of the cycle and settling behind Troy. “So what’s the big surprise waiting at Glass Lake?”

“Oh no, that would be telling. Just hang on.”

Gavin began feeling along the sides of the bike for hand holds, but Troy shouted, “It’d probably be best if you just held onto me. Either put your hands on my shoulders or around my waist, either way.”

Gavin placed his hands firmly on the shoulders of Troy’s leather jacket. “Ready?” Troy asked loudly, and Gavin nodded. Troy flipped his face plate back down. “Okay, then, hang on.”

Without another word, Troy gunned the powerfully loud engine. Then the motorcycle leaped forward like a horse from a starting gate, surprising Gavin with its initial speed. As they reached the end of the driveway, he had the presence of mind to lean in the opposite direction of the turn, thus balancing their weight somewhat.

To get a better view, Gavin turned his head slightly, but from behind the helmet’s plastic face plate, there was little to see but a blur of streetlights. After a few minutes, even those were gone as they left Weston and headed west into the countryside. All Gavin could see then was a small patch of ever-changing pavement lit by the motorcycle’s single headlight.

Soon Troy began to slow the cycle, and Gavin thought he could make out the shape of a sign on the side of the road. Because his helmet’s face plate was tinted, he couldn’t read the sign, but he knew what it said:

GLASS LAKE 2 MI —>
Again, Gavin leaned in the opposite direction as Troy turned the bike north onto another paved road. An icy chill began to settle in Gavin's fingers, and he wished he'd thought to wear gloves, as Troy had.

The last two miles of the trip were a blur of darkened images, until at last Troy slowed the cycle again and turned onto the small gravel parking lot beside Glass Lake. Coming to a stop, he killed the engine and knocked down the kick stand. "You'll have to get off first," he said. As Gavin began to slide to his right, Troy stopped him. "No, from the left. Like a horse, remember?"

"Right," Gavin said, planting his left foot on the ground and swinging his right leg over. Troy pulled off his helmet and shook out his shoulder-length dark hair, which Gavin had noticed he only tied back when he was at work in the coffee shop. When Troy had dismounted, Gavin removed his helmet and handed it to Troy, who placed it beside his own on the bike's seat.

"Well, here we are," Troy said, leaning against his bike and folding his arms.

"So we are," Gavin replied, rubbing his hands together to warm them. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are we here? I'm freezing."

"Ah, this isn't cold. Wait till January."

"I'm familiar with Iowa winters. Meanwhile, where's the surprise you promised me?"

"Don't be so impatient," Troy said, waving his hand slowly in the direction of the lake. "Take a minute to admire the view."

Gavin's eyes were slowly adjusting to the dim light of the waning moon, which cast a pale, shimmering reflection upon the lake. Troy said, "Isn't it beautiful? Just think, hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago, someone may have stood on this very spot, looking at this very lake."

"Romantic," Gavin said. "Except for one thing. This lake wasn't here a hundred years ago, let alone a thousand."

"How do you know that?"

"Because until 1912, this was a limestone quarry, run by the Glass family, which is where the lake gets its name. Before that, it was just an open field."

"You sure know how to ruin a moment," Troy said, his shoulders sagging.
“Sorry. It’s the curse of having a father who’s a history professor. But you know, the moment doesn’t have to be completely ruined. It’s still possible that someone stood here hundreds of years ago, looking at the stars. That view hasn’t changed much.”

“Right you are,” Troy said, stepping away from his bike. “And that’s the real reason I brought you out here. What time is it?”

“I can’t see my watch in the dark. But it’s probably about ten-thirty or so.”

“Good. Follow me.” And Troy began walking toward the lake.

“Now where are we going?”

“We need to be on the east side of the lake. There’s a trail that runs just along the shore.” Without stopping to see whether or not Gavin was following, Troy continued to the path. More bewildered than ever, Gavin followed him northward.

“When I first heard about it this afternoon,” Troy said when Gavin had caught up with him, “I came out here to scout the best spot. There’s a picnic area right over there, and I dragged a table over to the shore.”

“First heard about what?” Gavin wanted to know, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

“You’ll see. Man, patience isn’t your strong suit, is it?”

“No really.”

“You need to learn how to take it easy, slow down a little. Remember what John Lennon said.”

“No, what?”

“Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.’ Do you want to wake up one morning an old man? Careful: log.”

“I suppose not,” Gavin said, stepping over the small log. “But I can slow down after I get my degree.”

“There’s the table ahead,” Troy said. “Why not slow down now?”

“I’ve got a paper due Friday,” Gavin said.

“Yeah, me too. And a test. Hey, would you like to see a movie Friday night? There’s one showing in Ames that I think you’d like. Rock on the left here.”

“I see it,” Gavin said, avoiding the rock. “Ames? That’s an hour away.”

Troy smiled. “I’ll borrow a car, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Actually I’m more worried about dinner.”

“We can get something in Ames. My treat.”
“You don't understand,” Gavin said. “I have to go home for dinner every week night.”

“Why? Does dorm food suck that much?”

“Well, it's more like tradition. Ever since I can remember, no matter how busy my parents were, the whole family always had dinner together. Even if that meant eating at ten at night because one of them had a meeting. But I'll see if I can't get out of it Friday.”

“Good,” Troy said. “Here we are.” He stopped and sat on the edge of the picnic table. Gavin joined him, facing west across the lake.

“Okay, where's the surprise?” Gavin asked.

“What time is it?”

Gavin's eyes had adjusted some more, and he could barely make out the hands on his watch. “Quarter to eleven.”

“Any minute now,” Troy said, his eyes focused on the clear sky.

Gavin looked upward, seeing nothing but the stars and the thin crescent of the moon. “I don't know what I'm looking for.”

“You will. Just be patient.”

Sighing, Gavin turned in a full circle, trying to pick out constellations, but found the only one he recognized was the Big Dipper. Not seeing Orion, he wondered if it was too early in the night -- or even the year -- for Orion to be in the sky. There were no other patterns he was familiar with.

Troy turned to him. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Gavin said.

“Do you ever think about him? The guy in Paris?”

Gavin took a deep breath. He'd thought about Karl often in the past year, especially in the last two weeks.

A year ago, when Gavin graduated from high school, his parents had given him a choice: a new car or a month in France. Since he knew he'd be going to Mallory College in the fall, and that the small town of Weston had a shuttle bus service, he figured he'd have little use for a car. He also knew it would probably be four years or more before he had another opportunity to visit Europe without the supervision of his parents. So he decided to see France.

The trip was carefully planned. A whirlwind tour of museums, castles, historical landmarks, and youth hostels in Chartes, Versailles, Champagne, and Marseilles, culminating in a week's stay in Paris. And it was there that he met
Karl Wolfram, a charming German student who was also visiting Paris for the week. A year older than Gavin, Karl was fluent in English, French, and Italian. And like Gavin, as a boy he had been fascinated by the stories of King Arthur. The two became friends on the day they met outside the Louvre.

Karl was openly gay, and he was the first man to whom Gavin ever confessed that he was also attracted to men. He was also the first man Gavin had ever allowed to kiss him. Gavin hadn't felt ready for anything more than kissing, though Karl had passionately begged for more. But Gavin had been too afraid then.

And now Gavin was with Troy, a bisexual man he found more than a little attractive. And he realized that the same excitement he'd felt with Karl was with him again, but so was the same fear. "I do think of him sometimes," Gavin admitted. "I wonder what would have happened if...you know, if we'd done more than just kiss."

"What do you think would have happened?"

"I don't know. Except that my questions would be answered, one way or another."

"Gavin, I know it's hard when you first start to explore your sexuality. But you can't be afraid to take that first step." Troy leaned closer to him, but Gavin pulled away.

"I know. I just don't know if--"

"There!" Troy said suddenly, pointing to the sky over the lake.

Gavin looked in the direction Troy was pointing and saw a spray of shooting stars streak across the black sky. Just as the first few fizzled out, another wave of white meteors lit the night.

"Eight, twelve," Troy counted. "Sixteen, twenty...God, look at them."

"It's incredible. How did you know?"

"It was on the news today. Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"No," Gavin admitted, watching as another shower of lights flared and died. "Never."

"Better than a Floyd show. Don't forget to make a wish."

Gavin was too in awe of the spectacle to think of anything to wish for, except possibly for the moment to last forever. But of course it didn’t, and all too soon the sky was filled with relatively fixed stars. "It's over already?"

"Already?" said Troy. "How long do you think we've been standing here?"
“A couple minutes. Maybe five.” Gavin looked at his watch again and found that twenty minutes had passed.

“Wow,” was all Gavin could think to say, again staring at the sky. “I still can’t believe it. And you heard about it on the news?”

“Yeah, they said the best view would be in the west, between ten-forty-five and eleven. But we had to get away from Weston and all the city lights to really appreciate it.”

He turned to Gavin. “So, was it worth missing a little study time.”

“Definitely.” Gavin took one of Troy’s gloved hands. “Thank you.”

Troy looked at Gavin and squeezed his hand. He leaned closer again, and this time Gavin didn’t pull away. But at the last moment Troy turned his head aside and sneezed violently. “Sorry,” he said, sniffing.

“We should get back,” Gavin said, his nerve failing again. “Before you catch pneumonia.”

“You’re right.” Taking Gavin’s hand once more, Troy started walking back to his motorcycle.

Half an hour later, Gavin found his roommate in their dorm room, lit only by the pale glow of the computer screen. “Hey, Lance. What are you working on?”

“Work?” said Lance Renault, not looking up from his computer. “Bite your tongue. I’m talking to a girl in Minneapolis.”

“Don’t you have any tests to study for?”

“Just philosophy, on Friday. Piece of cake. You’re back late. Fight with the parents?”

“No,” Gavin said, reaching to the left of the door and switching on the overhead light. “How can you sit here in the dark like this?”

With a mock-menacing grin, Lance said, “I’m a Scorpio, remember? I like the dark.”

Smiling and shaking his head, Gavin hung his jacket in the closet and sat at his desk opposite Lance.

“I don’t envy you,” Lance said, leaning back in his chair. “Why are you going to the very college where both of your parents are professors?”
"Are you kidding? Free tuition at one of the best private schools in the Midwest."

"Yeah, but college is supposed to be all about freedom from your parents. How do you expect to find out who you are if your parents are right here, watching your every move?"

"That's why I'm living in the dorm, instead of at home. And besides --" Gavin was cut off by a beep from the computer. Lance leaned forward to read the screen, and a smile stretched over his face. "Oh, this one's hot tonight!"

"Who is this one?" Gavin wanted to know.

"A lesbian at U of M. She's describing one of her sexual fantasies for me."

"Why is a lesbian telling you her sexual fantasies?"

"She thinks I'm a lesbian, too," said Lance, and reading the expression on Gavin's face, he added, "Well, they don't usually let men into the lesbian chat forums."

"And how do you know she isn't also a man, pretending to be a lesbian?"

"Listen," said Lance, "if you're going to spoil my fun, I'll have to ask you not to play."

Rolling his eyes, Gavin opened his notebook and continued work on his literature paper. He preferred to write papers longhand and type them later. An hour passed, and Gavin was about to start his paper's bibliography, when Lance shut down his computer. "Done for the night?" Gavin asked.

"Got kicked out of the lesbian forum," Lance said. "Again. I thought about hitting the metaphysical forum, but it's getting close to shower time."

Lance was in the habit of showering at night, so he could sleep an extra hour in the morning. As he was pulling off his polo, he asked, "You going to be up for a while?"

"Probably not," Gavin said, noting it was nearly one in the morning.

Lance took a towel and bottle of shampoo from the closet. "Okay, I'll try to be quiet when I get back." And with that, he went to take his shower.

Gavin stood and walked to the room's small window. Clouds had begun to gather, blocking out most of the stars. He realized how lucky he and Troy had been to see the meteor shower. If it had been an hour later, they might have missed everything.
Gavin had a free hour between three and four the next afternoon, time he had intended to spend typing his midterm paper. But as he sat in his Medieval history class, listening to the book reports of other students (his own report wasn't due until the end of the semester), he found himself wanting to take a break from academia. After all, his paper wasn't due until the next day at noon, and he could type it that night.

So when Professor Lake dismissed the class at three, Gavin pulled on his wool jacket, slung his backpack over one shoulder, and set off across the Quad to the English building. Climbing two flights of stairs to the third floor, he headed down the hall to his mother's office. If I ask her now, he thought, without Dad around, maybe I can get out of dinner Friday without too much fuss.

His mother, Caitlin Welsh, was head of the English department, chair of the college's small graduate literature program, and always insisted upon teaching at least two, and usually four or five, classes per semester. Despite her busy schedule, she was known as the most calm and organized professor on campus.

But when Gavin arrived, he found her office in disarray. File cabinet drawers hung open, their contents sticking up at odd angles. Books, which normally neatly lined the shelves along one wall, lay in jumbled heaps on the floor and desk. Amid this chaos stood his mother, bent over her desk and rifling through a stack of magazines.

"Mom, what happened?"

"Oh, Gavin, good," Caitlin said, brushing a lock of reddish-brown hair from her eyes. "You're just in time to help me."

"Did someone break in?"

"Good heavens, no!" She took one of the magazines, scanned the table of contents, then dropped it again in the stack. "I'm looking for a reference."

Gavin blinked several times. "And you're tearing your office apart to find it?"

"This is an emergency." She removed the half-glasses she wore for reading, dropping them and letting them hang from the chain around her neck. "My editor called this morning. It seems I forgot to cite one of the sources in an article I wrote three months ago, and the magazine goes to print tomorrow."

"Don't you keep notes on your computer?"

"Yes, but the system's been down all morning. Can you believe it? Anyway, now I can't find my original source. It was in an Ashley article that was
published last year, but I don’t remember the magazine. I sent Luke to the library over an hour ago, but he hasn’t come back. Would you be a dear and run over for me?”

“I only have an hour before Latin, but sure.”

“Thank you, Gavin. It’s by Edmund Ashley, and--”

Before Caitlin could finish her thought, her research assistant, Luke Dagan, rushed into the office carrying a large book. “Here it is,” he said. “In the transcript of the Grail Seekers Society’s convention last year.”

“Oh, of course,” said Caitlin. “Now I remember. Whatever made you think to look there?”

“It wasn’t listed in any of the catalogs,” Luke said, “and I was about to give up, when I ran across an article that mentioned Ashley was accepted into the Society last year, so I thought I’d check the transcript. And here it was.”

He handed the book to Caitlin, who opened it to the marked page. Putting on her reading glasses again, she said, “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you! You’re an absolute life saver. I don’t know what I’d do without you. Oh, Luke, you remember my son, Gavin.”

“Of course,” Luke said, extending his hand to Gavin. “We met at the grad mixer.”

Gavin shook Luke’s hand. “Mom loves to host those things. I don’t know where she finds the time.”

“I have to call Phyl,” Caitlin said. “She’ll be so relieved. Luke, why don’t you take a break? Go get some coffee at the union or something.”

“I should help you clean this up,” Luke said.

“Nonsense. I’m the only person who knows where everything goes. Take an hour off. If fact, I have a meeting at three-thirty, so I won’t need you the rest of the day.”

“Well, if you’re sure....”

“Absolutely,” Caitlin said, picking up the phone. “Go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, then,” Luke said, collecting his backpack from a corner. Gavin noticed that Luke smiled as he brushed past him and left the office.

Caitlin began dialing the phone, when she noticed her son. “Oh, Gavin, you’re still here. Did you want to talk to me about something?”

“Well--”
"Yes, Phyllis Bedwin, please," Caitlin said into the phone, then looked again at Gavin. "Yes?"
"It can wait till tonight."
"Are you sure, dear? Oh, Phyl, it's Caitlin Welsh. Guess what." Gavin backed out of the office, and when his mother smiled and waved to him, he smiled back.

As he left the English building, he checked his watch. It was now three-twenty, which didn't leave enough time for him to walk to his dorm, type anything, and walk back to the Classical Studies building. There was, however, just enough time to get coffee in the Student Union and put in a little studying of irregular verbs before Latin class.

* * * * *

John Welsh glanced up from his manuscript as his oldest son took his place at the table. "You're late."
"I'm sorry," Gavin said breathlessly. "I missed the 5:30 bus. I had to run."
From her place at the other end of the table, Caitlin passed her son the salad bowl. "You're here now, that's what's important."
Across the table, Jessie raised an eyebrow at her brother. "You ran all the way from campus? In this weather?"
Gavin rubbed his hands to warm them. "I wouldn't suggest trying it. It's colder than --"
"This wouldn't happen," interrupted John, setting aside the manuscript he'd been editing, "if you lived at home."
Gavin passed the salad to his father. "Even if I did, I'd still have Latin at four. What I really need is a car."
"If Gavin gets a car," said Jessie, "I get a car."
John glared over his reading glasses as he passed the salad to his daughter. "When you're eighteen." Jessie huffed in frustration, but John ignored her, turning back to Gavin. "You had your chance to get a car last year. You chose Europe instead."
"That's before I realized how slow the campus shuttle is," Gavin protested. "Shall we discuss this after dinner?" Caitlin said, lifting her salad fork.
Gavin frowned, noticing the empty space next to his sister. “Where’s Perry?”

“His band is practicing late tonight,” said Caitlin. “He’s eating at the Morgans’.”

John shot his wife a sour look, but remained silent as he began eating his salad. Gavin said, “That’s the second night this week.” It seemed as though his younger brother’s participation in a mediocre garage band was sufficient enough to warrant missing dinner.

Caitlin forced a smile and changed the subject. “Gavin, how are your classes going? How many midterms have you taken?”

“I had a history exam Monday, and I know I missed five points.”

“Which history exam?” John asked. “American or Medieval?”

“Medieval,” said Gavin. “Professor Lake’s class.”

“How is Vivien?” asked Caitlin. “We haven’t had her for dinner in ages. Why is that, John?”

“I’ll ask her about it,” John said, turning back to his son. “How did you miss five points? It’s a simple survey class.”

“I mistook the date of the Battle of Hastings,” Gavin said. “Thirteenth instead of the fourteenth.”

“How could you make such an error? William landed his troops on Friday the thirteenth, marched them to Hast--”

“I made a mistake, okay?” Gavin rolled his eyes. Medieval history was his father’s subject. “It’s only five points.”

“That’s the wrong attitude, Gavin.”

“John, please,” said Caitlin. “Gavin, how are the rest of your classes? Burke Green tells me he’s looking forward to reading your paper on the Faerie Queene.”

“I’m almost finished writing it,” Gavin said. “Red Cross Knight as allegory for the Church of England.” He glanced at his father, hoping for approval of the subject. But John was now intent upon his salad.

“I’m getting an A in chemistry,” said Jessie. “If anyone’s interested.”

“Jessie, what a thing to say,” Caitlin said. “Of course we’re interested. And very proud of you. I was never very good at chemistry. Of course, when I went to school, girls weren’t encouraged in the sciences.”
The salads finished, Caitlin rose to collect the plates and serve the main course. Jessie rose to help, but Gavin waved her back to her seat, taking John’s and his own plates and following his mother to the kitchen. “Look at this lasagna,” she said, closing the oven and placing the glass pan upon the stove. “Your sister has become quite a cook. I don’t know what I’ll do when she goes to school next year. I suppose we’ll have to hire Ellie back.”

“Mom, I won’t be here for dinner Friday.”

“Tomorrow?” Caitlin handed her son a basket of bread. “Why’s that, dear?” “I sort of have a date,” Gavin said, holding the kitchen door for his mother as she carried in the lasagna.

“Really? That’s wonderful.”

“What’s wonderful?” asked John, again closing the manuscript of his latest book.

“Gavin has a date tomorrow night,” Caitlin said, lifting a piece of lasagna onto a plate Jessie held. Gooey strands of cheese dripped back into the pan. Jessie handed the plate to her father.

Gavin grinned meekly, holding his own plate for his mother.

“You have a date?” Jessie sounded surprised. “With who?”

“Whom,” corrected Caitlin, placing lasagna on Jessie’s plate.

“Nobody you know,” said Gavin. “Just someone I met in the coffee shop.” Caitlin scooped lasagna onto her own plate. “Why don’t you invite her to dinner?”

“I don’t think so,” said Gavin. “The movie starts at seven, so we have to leave town early.”

“Who did you say she was again, dear?” asked Caitlin.

“Just someone who works in the Dancing Cup. Dad, how’s your book coming?”

“I’m still struggling with the documentation,” said John. Gavin breathed a sigh of relief as his father launched into an explanation of the difficulties he was having with the life of Henry VII.
Chapter Two

Throughout the rest of dinner, however, Gavin noticed his sister watching him with suspicious eyes. Later, as their parents had coffee in the living room, he and Jessie washed the dishes.

“So you have a date tomorrow,” said Jessie, handing her brother a glass to dry.

“That’s right.” Gavin toweled the glass and hung it from a rack over the counter.

“What’s his name?”

“Wh-what do you mean?” Gavin stammered, taking the next glass and nearly dropping it.

“C’mon, Gavin. The only woman who works at the coffee shop is Irma, and she’s over fifty. Now who’s this guy you’re dating?”

“All right, but keep your voice down. I don’t want Mom and Dad to find out.”

“Gavin, I know you’re gay. You told me last year, when you came back from France.”

“I said I though I might be, okay? I wasn’t sure then.”

“But you’re sure now.” She rinsed a plate and handed it to her brother.

“Not completely --”

“Have you slept with him yet?”

“Jessie, for God’s sake!” Gavin hissed. “Keep your voice down, will you?”

Jessie spoke more quietly. “Well, have you or not?”

“No, I haven’t. I just met him two weeks ago, and he invited me to a movie.”

“Which one is he? The blond, or the one with long hair?”

“The latter. His name is Troy Cornell.”

“Good. I don’t like the blond. He’s real snotty.”
Gavin dried the next plate and put it in the cupboard. "What are you doing at the campus coffee shop, anyway?"

"What else is there to do after school? And that's where all the cute guys hang out. But I've never seen you there."

"I go there for lunch. I have classes from two to five."

Jessie handed her brother another plate. "Tell me all about him. What's his major? What year is he? How did you know he was gay? I mean, did you just ask him, or did he give you hints?"

"Whoa, slow down. One question at a time. His major is literature. In fact, he's in Mom's class this semester."

"See, that's why I'm applying to Iowa State next year. I don't want any professors who are on a first name basis with my parents. But anyway, how did you know he was gay? I never suspected."

"I didn't. We were talking one day, and it just sort of came out. And he isn't gay, he's bisexual."

"Well, that explains it," Jessie said, rinsing the last plate and dropping the glass pan into the dishwasher to soak.

"Explains what?"

"Why he's always flirting with girls. I've never seen him flirt with guys."

"He's a little more subtle when he flirts with guys," said Gavin, shutting the cupboard and handing the towel to his sister.

Their mother's voice called from the living room: "Jessie, dear, would you bring us some more coffee?"

"Don't go anywhere," Jessie said to her brother. "I want to hear more."

"I have to catch the last bus to campus," he said. "I need to start typing my paper."

"Okay, what time do you have lunch tomorrow?"

"One o'clock, why?"

"I'll meet you at the D Cup. I want to meet your new boyfriend."

"But what about school?"

"Jessie!" John's stern voice called.

"Coming!" Jessie sang. She grabbed the coffee pot and whispered to Gavin, "It's only gym, I can skip it. One o'clock. Don't be late."

Before Gavin could protest further, his sister was on her way to the living room. Great, he thought, wishing he'd never told her about Troy.
Back in his dorm, Gavin typed his paper, while Lance again chatted on the internet. At ten o'clock, Lance suddenly said, "Telephone," four seconds before it actually rang.

"How do you do that?" Gavin asked, but Lance only shrugged his shoulders and went on typing on his keyboard. Fortunately the phone line was separate from the modem line. Gavin picked up the receiver and was surprised to hear Troy's voice. "I didn't expect to hear from you."

"Thought I'd call and see how it went," said Troy. "Can you get away tomorrow?"

"It took some doing," said Gavin. "My mother all but insisted you come to dinner first."

"Uh-oh. You got me out of that, didn't you?"

"Yeah, not a problem. Listen, you never told me what movie we're going to see."

"Ah, that's because it's a surprise. So, what are you wearing?"

"What, tomorrow? I don't know --"

"No, I mean now," said Troy. "What are you wearing now?"

Gavin shot a look at Lance, who was still intent on his internet conversation. "I can't really talk about that right now."

"Why, is your roomie there?"

"You guessed it."

"Ah. So what's he wearing?"

Gavin smiled in spite of himself. He pictured the way Troy's green eyes lit up when the conversation began to turn to double entendre. "You're incorrigible, you know that?"

"No, I'm encourage-able. So why don't you try encouraging me?"

"Not now. Maybe later."

"Maybe Friday?" Troy's voice sounded hopeful.

"Maybe we'll see."

"Hey, guess what I'm wearing."

Gavin was about to do just that, when Lance broke the mood by asking, "Who's kd lang?"

"A lesbian singer," Gavin said, annoyed.

Troy said, "Good guess, but not even close."
“Damn,” said Lance. “I thought she was Ellen DeGeneres’ lover. Now they’ll know I’m not really a dyke.”

“What makes you think I’m wearing a lesbian?” asked Troy.

“Not you,” said Gavin. “I was talking to Lance. Listen, I have to go.”

“Okay,” said Troy. “See you tomorrow at lunch?”

“Yeah,” Gavin said, debating for a moment whether to tell Troy that Jessie would be joining them for lunch. Before he could decide, Troy had said good night and hung up. As Gavin set the receiver back in the cradle, Lance shut down his computer. “Done for the night?”

“Shower time. So who was on the phone?”

“Just a friend,” said Gavin, unwilling to reveal too much. “Hey, how do you know when the phone’s going to ring?”

“Beats me,” Lance said, tossing his shirt on the closet floor and grabbing a towel. “I always know when it’s gonna ring, and I usually know who it’s for. Sometimes I can even tell you who’s calling, but that’s hit or miss.”

“Amazing. What else can you do?”

“Hmmm. Well, I can’t read minds, or pick lottery numbers. And the only way I can bend spoons is with my hands. But sometimes I have dreams that come true. Like the time when I was five and my father was going to fly to Washington, and I dreamt his plane would crash. I cried so long and so hard that he wound up missing his plane. Which crashed during take-off, I might add.”

“That’s incredible.”

Lance shrugged his shoulders and took a clean pair of boxers from a dresser drawer. “Runs in my family. My grandmother was clairvoyant. She predicted the start of World War Two when she was sixteen.”

“You’re kidding,” said Gavin. “Besides, anyone with half a brain knew the war was coming.”

“Yeah, but she saw the bombing of Pearl Harbor two weeks before it happened. Now I can’t do anything quite that dramatic. My flashes of the future seem to be limited to a twenty-four hour period. And they don’t always come true.”

“It’s still quite a gift.”

“I guess,” said Lance, taking his shampoo from the dresser top. “It’s one of the reasons I decided to come to Mallory in the first place.” Seeing Gavin’s confused look, Lance continued, “Mallory is the only school in Iowa that offers a
course in parapsychology. The next closest college is in Kirksville, Missouri. Did you know that Weston has eleven listings in the National Registry of Haunted Places, including two on campus?"

“No,” said Gavin, wide-eyed. “Where?”

“Sullivan Hall, and this very dormitory, down in the kitchen. Did you also know there are more UFO sightings in Weston than any other county in Iowa? And don’t even get me started on the curse.”

“What curse?”

“In every war the US has fought in since the Civil War, there’s been a casualty from Weston. That includes Grenada and the Gulf War.”

“Oh, that,” said Gavin. “I thought you meant the curse on the high school.”

“I hadn’t heard about that one,” said Lance, sitting on the end of his bed. “What’s the high school curse?”

“Well, every class for the past fifty years has had at least one death. Some are accidents, some are suicides. We have the highest per-capita teen suicide rate in the state. In my class, a kid named Duke Penn drove is car off the old railroad trestle, killing himself and his girlfriend.”

“Jesus, I knew about the suicide rate, but every class?”

“Since 1959. According to the legend, some kids were expelled from school for practicing black magic. Supposedly they cursed the school before they all committed suicide in some Satanic ritual. Or so the story goes. Nobody really talks about it or takes it seriously.”

“Well, it only goes to prove my point: weird things happen in Weston. That’s why I came here to go to school, to study this sort of thing.”

“How did you hear about all of this? I’ve lived here all my life, and I didn’t know anything about the haunted houses or the UFOs.”

“The internet, my dear Gavin,” Lance said, standing and heading to the door. “You can find anything in the world on the information superhighway.” And with that, he went to take his shower, leaving Gavin to wonder just how seriously he should take his roommate.

After his noon class the next day, Gavin walked a block and a half south of the Mallory campus and arrived at the Dancing Cup, a coffee shop popular with many college students. The fact that it was the only cafe within walking distance
of the campus had more to do with its popularity than the ambiance or the quality of the food served. As the only alternative to the dorm cafeteria, the DCup, as it was more commonly called, was blessed with a large lunch crowd.

By the time Gavin arrived shortly after one, the lunch crowd had thinned somewhat, and he usually had no problem finding a place to sit. He preferred to sit at the counter, where he could eat and read in peace. Lately he'd done more talking than reading -- talking to Troy, who worked every weekday afternoon. This day, however, instead of his accustomed place at the counter, Gavin moved to a table at the back of the room, where he found Jessie and their brother, Perry.

"What's he doing here?" Gavin demanded, taking the only empty chair at the small table.

"It isn't my fault," Jessie said. "He followed me."
"I saw her sneaking down the hill to the bus stop," Perry said.
"He was smoking in the parking lot," Jessie added. "He threatened to turn me in if I didn't tell him where I was going."

"And I figured, if she gets to meet your new boyfriend, I should be able to, too."
"You were smoking?" Gavin said. "If Mom finds out, she'll kill you."
"But she isn't gonna find out," Perry said. "Is she, loverboy?"
"That's blackmail," Gavin said.
"That's what I thought," said Jessie. "But what can we do? He's got us both over a barrel."

"You should both be in school," Gavin said sternly. "What class are you skipping, Perry?"
"Geometry. No big deal."
"Aren't you failing geometry?" Jessie wanted to know.
"That's why it's no big deal. Now, where's this hot stud of yours, Gavin?"

Gavin looked to the counter, where he saw the owner, Irma, refilling the coffee mug of a young woman. The two student employees who worked the lunch rush had already left for their one o'clock classes. There was no sign of Troy. "I don't see him. He's usually here when I get here. How long have you two been here?"

"About ten minutes," said Jessie.
“Well, I only have about fifty minutes before my next class,” Gavin said, standing and taking off his heavy jacket, “so I’m going to order some lunch. I’ll ask Irma if she knows where he is.”

“Get me some coffee,” Jessie pleaded. “I can pay you back next weekend.

“Yeah, I’ll take a beer,” said Perry.

“Your choices are coffee and Coke,” Gavin said. “Even if they did serve beer.”

“Coke, then.”

Gavin turned and walked to the counter, just as Troy burst into the cafe, a motorcycle helmet in one hand. “Sorry I’m late, Irma,” he said, slinging his backpack off his shoulder. “Couldn’t get my bike started again.”

Irma raised one eyebrow as Troy began tying back his long, dark hair. “Maybe you should get a new bike.”

“Maybe you should gimme a raise,” said Troy, taking an apron from a hook behind the counter. “Then maybe I could afford a new bike.”

“Hmph,” sniffed Irma, walking to the other end of the counter and picking up a newspaper. “Start coming in on time, and maybe we’ll talk.”

Troy smiled and saw Gavin. “Hey, Gavin, your mom’s a tough professor. Her midterm today was killer.”

“She’s a pretty tough mom, for that matter.”

“I can only imagine. So, what can I get you today?”

“The usual, number six, hold the tomato.”

“Oh, c’mon, be adventurous,” Troy said, looking at the chalkboard hung next to the clock. “Today’s soups are cream of mushroom and chicken noodle. And look, eggplant parmesan, doesn’t that sound good?”

“Just the sandwich,” Gavin said.

“Okay, but don’t blame me if your stomach dies of boredom. I suppose you don’t want a latte or espresso, either. Just a plain, ordinary, boring cup of coffee.”

“Two boring cups of coffee, actually. And a Coke.”

“Two coffees and a Coke?” Troy said, as Irma passed behind him on her way to the cash register, where she found her reading glasses. “You must be pretty thirsty.”

“Well, they aren’t all for me,” Gavin said, but before he could explain, Irma whispered to Troy:
“Don’t look now, Romeo, but you’re being watched.”

Troy and Gavin both turned to the back of the room, where Jessie and Perry sat, staring at Troy and whispering. “Subtle,” muttered Gavin, as Irma went back to her place at the end of the counter.

Troy leaned over the counter. “Hey, you know, the girl’s pretty cute, and I think that guy is checking you out.”

“First of all, I’m sure they’re both checking you out,” said Gavin. “And second, they’re my brother and sister.”

“No kidding!” Troy said, pouring two cups of coffee. “Now that you mention it, there is a bit of a resemblance. Grow your hair a little longer, you and your sister could pass for twins.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Listen, I didn’t want to do this, but...well, they’re here to sort of....”

“Check me out? Make sure my intentions are honorable, and all that?”

“Something like that. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Mind? I’m deee-lighted. I’d want to do the same thing, if I had a brother.”

“They’re probably going to give you the third degree.”

“No sweat,” said Troy, pulling a Coke bottle from the cooler. “Say, whatever happened to the first and second degrees? You never hear about those.”

“I think they were outlawed by the Geneva Convention. Too silly.”

“Okay, you take the drinks, and I’ll be over with your sandwich when it’s ready. Oh, I almost forgot. Five even.”

“What?”

“A number six, two coffees, and a Coke,” Troy said, walking to the cash register. “Five even. Excluding tip.”

“I’ll give you a tip,” Gavin said, handing him a five dollar bill. “Don’t flirt with your customers so much.”

“That’s usually what gets me tips in the first place,” Troy said, smiling and shouting over his shoulder, “Hey, Irma! Number six, hold the tomato.”

“Your hands don’t look broken,” Irma said. “Hey, can one of you college geniuses tell me a six-letter word for an unhorsed knight?”

“Tilted!” called Perry from the table, as Gavin arrived with their drinks.

“Thanks,” waved Irma, returning to her crossword puzzle.

“I guess you do listen when Mom and Dad talk,” Gavin said, handing Perry his Coke.
“Some of it sinks in,” said Perry. “But just the useless stuff. Like knocking a knight off his horse is called tilting.”

“Actually,” said Gavin, “tilting is riding at your opponent with your lance or jousting pole in an attempt to knock him off his horse. There really isn’t a term for actually knocking him down.”

“Like I said, useless stuff.”

“So,” said Jessie. “Is he coming over to talk to us?”

“He’s making my sandwich, which he’ll bring over. Then he has to go back and work.”

“Oh, yeah,” nodded Jessie. “It’s so busy in here now.”

Gavin looked around to see there were only eight other people in the cafe, all intent upon their textbooks and mostly ignoring their coffee cups. “Well, he needs to be at the counter, in case a customer wants something.”

“Irma could take care of that.”

“But it’s his job,” Gavin said.

Perry said, “We could always move up there.” He pointed to the empty stools in front of the counter.

“That’s even better,” said Jessie, standing and taking her jacket from the back of her chair. Perry also stood and followed her to the counter. Sighing and pausing only long enough to gather his jacket, backpack, and coffee, Gavin soon joined them.

“Just in time,” said Troy, setting Gavin’s sandwich before him. “So, are you going to introduce me, or should I just guess who your friends are.”

“Troy, this is my sister, Jessie, and my brother, Perry,” Gavin said. “Guys, this is my friend, Troy.”

“A pleasure,” Troy said, taking Jessie’s hand and lightly kissing it.

“My, chivalry isn’t dead after all,” said Jessie.

“Yeah, yeah,” Perry said. “So Troy-boy, are you really bisexual?”

Gavin resisted the urge to slap the back of his brother’s head, but Troy just smiled and said, “As a matter of fact, I am. How about you?”

“Me? No way, man! Strictly AC.”

“Better be careful then,” Troy winked. “I’m a universal converter.”

Perry looked startled for a moment, then laughed, as did Jessie and Troy. Gavin meanwhile glanced at the clock over the counter, hoping it was time to leave for class. It was barely one thirty.
"Forgive me if this is too personal," said Jessie, "but do you really...you know, do it with both men and women?"
"Not usually at the same time," Troy said.
"Okay, you two," Gavin said. "That's enough. Can we talk about something else now?"
"Why?" said Troy. "This is fun."
"Yeah, Gavin, lighten up," said Perry. "How are we supposed to learn if we don't ask questions?"
"Precisely," said Jessie, turning back to Troy. "When did you first become bi?"
"I honestly can't remember a time when I wasn't. I've just always been attracted to both men women."
"Okay, next question," said Perry. "Why are you so hot after Gavin?"
Gavin squeezed his eyes shut and tried to block out the whole conversation. Troy said, "Are you serious? Look at him! Classic boy-next-door looks. And I must confess, the fact that he's a virgin makes him very, very attractive."
"A virgin?" said Perry. "You told me you got laid in Paris."
Gavin groaned, and Troy said, "Oh really? You didn't tell me about that."
"Yes, I did," said Gavin. "A guy from my tour group and I fooled around a little. I never said we had sex."
"You implied it," Perry said.
"Can we please talk about something else?"
"Fine, Mister Bashful," said Troy. "My name is Troy Cornell, and I'm from Chicago. My parents sent me to school here because my father is an alumnus. Class of '69. I like hiking, reading, and going to movies. I lost my virginity at age fifteen to a woman whose lawn I used to mow. She had a son who was my age, and coincidentally he was the first boy I slept with. I took two dates to my senior prom, a guy and a girl. My turn-ons are rainstorms and Chaucer; my turn-offs are TV sit-coms and the Romantic poets. Does that about cover it?"
"You took two dates to the prom?" said Jessie. "That was pretty brave."
"Not really. If I'd really been brave, I would have taken just the guy."
"Do you prefer men or women?" asked Perry.
"Both equally," Troy said. "Though sometimes I go through phases."
"What's your longest relationship with a guy?" Jessie wanted to know.
"Two months, last summer. And what about you, Jessie? Are you seeing anyone?"

"Sort of," Jessie hemmed.

"Sort of?" said Perry. "She's been dating Mark for over a year."

"It's not like we're married," Jessie said. "Speaking of which, do you ever plan to get married, Troy? I mean, would it be fair to marry a woman if you're attracted to men?"

"What about men who are attracted to women?" Troy asked. "They get married all the time."

"Yeah, but this is different," Perry said. "You'd be going after women and men."

"It isn't really that much different," said Troy. "If I ever find a woman that I love enough to stay monogamous with, I'll get married. But that day's a long way off. Right now I'm just having fun. You know, you ought to consider bisexuality, Perry. Doubles your possibilities."

"Nah," said Jessie. "He gets enough rejection from girls as it is."

"Very funny," Perry said. "I just don't think of guys...that way."

"To each his own, I guess," Troy said. "Gavin, you're awfully quiet over there. And you haven't even touched your sandwich."

"I've lost my appetite."

"I haven't," said Perry, grabbing half the sandwich from Gavin's plate. "I skipped lunch to come here."

"Me, too," Jessie said, taking the other half. "You don't mind, do you?"

"I should be going to class," Gavin said, looking again at the clock. "And you two should be back in school. Don't come crying to me if you get detention."

"So I'll see you tonight?" Troy asked.

"Yes," said Gavin.

"You're sure now? Your parents don't mind?"

"It'll be fine. What movie are we going to see?"

"I told you, it's a surprise."

"Another surprise?"

"Oh, go on, Gavin," Jessie said.

"Yeah, have some fun," Perry agreed.

"It's like a conspiracy," Gavin said.

"I'll pick you up outside your dorm at five thirty," said Troy. "Dress warm"
"You didn’t get a car, did you?"

"Nope," Troy said, taking the coffee pot and walking to the other end of the counter, where a customer waited for a refill. "So we’ll be taking my bike. Just be on the front steps at five thirty."

"And you be on time." Gavin turned to his siblings. "I’m going back to campus."

"Let me check for the next bus," Jessie said, pulling a folded schedule from her jacket pocket. "We have a fifteen minute wait."

"I’d just as soon wait in here," said Perry, taking a pack of cigarettes from his own jacket. "It’s cold out there."

"Those’ll kill you, you know," Gavin observed as his brother lit a cigarette with a brass Zippo.

"Probably," Perry said, snapping the lighter shut. "You’d better go, or you’ll be late."

Gavin glanced at the clock again. It was only a ten minute walk to his next class, but he liked to arrive a few minutes early. "Yes, I should. Okay, I’ll see you at dinner tonight. And remember, not a word about Troy to Mom and Dad, or I turn you both in."

"That’s blackmail," said Perry.

"But what can you do?" Gavin smiled. "I’ve got you over a barrel." Saying good-bye to Troy, Gavin left for class.

"So," Troy said after Gavin had gone. "Have I passed the audition?"

"Well, we do have a few more concerns," Jessie said.

"Yeah," Perry agreed. "Like how you plan to treat Gavin."

"What do you mean?"

"We mean," said Perry, "is this just a casual fling for you? Are you just gonna use him and throw him away?"

"Now wait a minute," Troy protested. "I like Gavin."

"And he likes you," said Jessie. "But he’s new to all this...being gay business."

"Yeah, and you’re the great universal converter, remember?" added Perry.

"Hey, that was a joke," Troy protested. "I’m not pushing Gavin into anything. He’s got some exploring he wants to do, and I’m happy to help him out."

"I’ll just bet you are," Perry snapped.
“Perry, please,” said Jessie. “Look, Troy, you seem like a nice guy, and I can tell that you like him. But he’s really vulnerable right now.”

“Yeah,” Perry said. “Don’t forget Lynn.”


“He didn’t tell you about her?” asked Jessie. “She was his girlfriend, his senior year. But the night after the prom, she died in a car accident.”

“That’s terrible,” said Troy.

“Yeah, said Perry. “What happened was--”

“Perry!” Jessie said sharply. She and her brother exchanged a glance, and Perry kept silent. “Anyway,” Jessie continued. “Gavin was devastated. And when it came time to leave for France, he didn’t want to go.”

“Yeah, but we talked him into it,” Perry said.

“We thought it would be good for him to get away from Weston for a while. Take his mind off all that pain.”

“When he came back,” said Perry, “he told us he was gay.”

“But I don’t think he ever really got over Lynn. So all I’m asking is that you be careful with him.”

“And if you break his heart,” added Perry, “I’ll break your neck.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did,” said Troy, staring out the cafe’s front window.
Chapter Three

"Well?" said Jessie, as she and Perry rode the bus back to the high school.
"I don’t like him," Perry admitted.
"Why not?"
"He’s fake. Everything about him is just...fake."
Jessie’s brow wrinkled. "You think he was lying to us?"
"Not necessarily lying. Just not completely honest."
"I don’t know what you mean."
"I can’t explain it. He just didn’t seem...real to me. It’s like he was putting on a show to impress us."
"I’m sure he was, a little," Jessie said. "We did subject him to the Inquisition."

The bus was passing through downtown, and Perry said, "Let’s get off at the next stop and walk the rest of the way."
"It’s five blocks."
"But it’s the middle of sixth period," he said, pulling the signal cord. "If we walk from here, it’ll be closer to the end of the hour when we get there. Besides, I want another smoke."

The bus came to a stop in front of the public library. Perry and Jessie stood and waited for two elderly women to board before they exited. Perry paused outside the limestone building to light a cigarette.
"I still don’t trust him."
Jessie frowned and pulled her jacket closed against the cold. "Well, I like him."

Perry began walking toward the high school. "But do you trust him?"
"I don’t know," Jessie said, stopping in front of a card shop to look at the Halloween decorations. "I guess I’d have to get to know him better. Have you thought about your costume yet?"

"No."

"The party’s next weekend."

"I don’t even know the theme."

"Great loves of history. I want to go as Romeo and Juliet, but I can’t get Mark to wear tights."

"Loves of history? I don’t have anyone to bring."

"So go as Don Juan or Casanova."

"I dunno," said Perry, continuing to walk again. "Do we really have to go to the party? We aren’t even in college."

"What else is there to do?"

"That," Perry said, pointing across the street to the Avalon, Weston’s small movie theater. A poster advertised the annual showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The Avalon was the only theater within an hour’s drive to present the film, and it drew people, mainly teenagers, from surrounding communities every Halloween.

"Kids come from all over, and there’s always an after-party. People closer to our own age."

"I can ask Mark, but if he won’t wear tights, I know he won’t wear fishnets and a bustier."

At that, Perry burst into laughter. Jessie asked, "What’s so funny?"

"I was just picturing you in a bustier!"

At five-thirty the next evening, as Gavin was leaving his dormitory, he found his brother about to enter the building. "Perry, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be at dinner?"

"Dad and I got in this big fight about the band," Perry said. "I just hate him."

"Look, I know he can be a pain in the ass, but you don’t hate him. What did he say this time?"

"I don’t want to talk about it. I just...Can I hang out with you tonight?"

"Well, no," Gavin started, but before he could say more, he was distracted by a whiny car horn. Looking down to the driveway, they saw Troy leaning out the
window of a dirty white Volkswagen Beetle. "Surprise!" Troy shouted. "I got a car after all."

"Oh, God, your date," Perry said. "I didn't even think of it."

"Hey, Perry!" Troy said, opening the car door and stepping out. "Are you tagging along with us? I've never had a date bring his kid brother before."

"He's not coming," Gavin said. "Perry, you know you can't come. I haven't had a date in I don't know how long."

"I know, I know," Perry said. "I just needed...Troy, do you think you could drop me somewhere on your way?"

"Sure, where?"

"Merle's. It's out on--"

"Old Orchard," Troy finished. "No sweat."

"You go to Merle's?" Gavin asked.

"Hey, I own a motorcycle, don't I?" Troy said.

"No, I mean Perry. Since when did you start running with the gang at Merle's?"

"They're not a gang," Perry protested. "And don't start lecturing me like Dad. It's just, you know, Joe and some of the guys hang out there sometimes."

"Which one is Joe again?"

"My drummer. God, do you ever listen to me?"

"Perry, calm down. I'm sorry, okay? Let's just...I mean, of course we'll give you a ride. Won't we, Troy?"

"I said yes in the first place, remember? And you haven't even commented on the fact that I have a car."

"So you do," Gavin said, noting the numerous rusted areas and patches of gray primer. "Where did you get the money to buy it?"

"Not bought," Troy corrected. "Borrowed, from my housemate. And if I don't have it home by midnight, it turns back into a pumpkin."

"I believe it," Gavin said. "I guess I didn't need to wear my gloves after all."

"Don't count on it," Troy said, holding the passenger door open for Gavin. "The Bug's got no heater or defroster."

"Ah," Gavin said. "Perry, why don't you sit in back?"
Pulling the seat forward, Perry climbed into the cramped back seat as Gavin and Troy got into the front. "It's a lot smaller on the inside than you'd think," Gavin commented.

"I like it," Perry said, moving so that his body was behind the driver's seat, while his legs remained behind Gavin. Troy turned the ignition, which groaned and sputtered a few times before the engine caught and rattled to life. Troy revved it until the sound became loud and steady.

Troy smiled at Gavin. "Isn't this great?"

"Yeah, almost as loud as your cycle."

"Louder," Troy said, putting the Beetle in gear. It lurched forward, paused, threatened to die, then lurched forward again. "Wait till we get on the highway Then she's really loud."

Gavin began searching for his seat belt, but Perry shouted from the back seat, "No shoulder strap. There's only a lap belt."

Troy navigated through town. At each stop sign, he managed to keep the car from dying...barely. When they reached Orchard Road, he turned south. Perry shouted, "So you've been to Merle's?"

"Once or twice," Troy shouted back. "My bike's a real handful. I should have bought one of Merle's."

"They're so expensive," Gavin noted.

"In the long run, I'd've saved money. I'll be lucky to keep mine running through the winter."

Soon they were out of town, and the car accelerated, the engine became so loud that even shouted conversation was impossible. Merle's Sales and Service was a motorcycle shop a mile and a half south of Weston, and as Troy pulled into the long gravel driveway, the car bounced jolted at every slight dip. The small, paved area in front of the large converted barn had three old cars parked in it, and Troy stopped the Beetle beside the blue '72 Buick Skylark, which Perry recognized as belonging to one of his band members.

Gavin looked at the barn, the front of which had a large, glass display window. A Harley-Davidson sat behind the window, it's chrome gleaming in the dim light of the closed showroom. Perry asked, "You gonna let me out?"

But Gavin didn't move, staring at the barn-turned-cycle-shop. Troy leaned over and said, "She's a beauty, isn't she? Merle found her in a junk yard last year and restored her himself. I'd love to have her, but he's asking four thousand."
“What?” Gavin said, shaking his head slightly.

“The Harley. Isn’t that what you’re looking at?”

“Oh...yeah,” Gavin muttered, sounding like a man awakened suddenly from a sound sleep. “I just haven’t been here in a long time.”

“You used to come here?” Perry asked.

“In high school,” he said softly, his eyes still locked onto the barn. “With Lynn and...”

Perry placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Are you okay, Gavin?”

“I’m fine,” Gavin said, shaking his head again.

“Then do you think you could let me out?”

“Oh, right.” Gavin unbuckled the lap belt and opened his door. When he and Perry had struggled out of the small car, he asked, “You’ll be able to get a ride home?”

“Not a problem. That’s Joe’s car.”

“All right, then.” Gavin stared again at the barn.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Gavin looked at his brother and forced a smile. “Call me tomorrow, okay? We can talk about Dad.”

“Sure,” Perry said as Gavin got back into the car. Troy smiled and waved, shifting the car to reverse and pulling back onto the gravel driveway. Perry waved back, but Gavin continued to stare at the cycle shop. Frowning to himself, Perry turned and walked to the back of the barn, which held Merle’s repair garage.

Merle’s was something of a local landmark, though not one the good citizens of Weston were particularly proud of. Few seemed to remember when Merle had first bought the old apple orchard and converted it to a used motorcycle sales and repair shop, but despite the fact that only a handful of locals even owned cycles, Merle seemed to do a good business. He was known as a mechanical wizard, able to fix and restore any bike, no matter it’s condition.

But it was not his reputation as a mechanic that so annoyed Weston’s cultural elite. It was the fact that he allowed high school kids to hang out in his back room, playing cards and smoking cigarettes late into the night. It was also known that he brewed his own beer, which the kids freely drank. But somehow, every time the police sprang a raid on the place, no one was found drinking beer.
And in more than thirty years, not one under age boy or girl was found to be under the influence of alcohol, despite numerous traps that had been set late at night on Old Orchard Road. Most of Weston’s current police force had been frequent patrons of Merle’s in their youth, and none of them could explain why his beer never gave one more than a slight buzz, no matter how much was consumed. Since beer and cigarettes were the only drugs he allowed (and even the beer couldn’t be proven), Merle was allowed to stay in business.

Perry opened the small side door and stepped into the heated garage. Five boys, all older than Perry by a year or more, sat at the large circular table at the back of the room, playing poker. Two other boys were throwing darts in the corner. A cloud of cigarette smoke swirled around the ceiling fan.

In the front of the garage, the area closest to the show room, several motorcycles lay in various states of repair. Merle himself sat at one of the more complete bikes, tightening the screws on a side mirror. It was impossible to determine his age. Though completely bald, there wasn’t a line or wrinkle on his face. The only indication of his age was his trim, white goatee. Like always, he wore only faded jeans, scuffed engineer boots, and an oily leather vest.

“Hi, Merle,” Perry said.

He looked up and fixed his pale gray eyes on the boy. “Well, hello Perry. How are your parents?”

“They’re okay. My dad’s still riding me about the band.”

“Hmm.” Merle snorted, nodding.

“How come you never told me that my brother used to come here?”

Merle seemed thoughtful for several moments. Finally, he said simply, “You never asked me.” And without another word, he went back to his work.

Perry walked past the card table. He knew two of the guys only vaguely. His only friend here tonight was his band’s drummer, Joe Morgan, who was playing darts with a boy Perry knew only as Hal.

“Hey, man,” Joe said, tossing a dart at the board. “How’d you get here?”

“I caught a ride from my brother.”

“Gavin?” Joe said, looking around the rest of the room. “Is he here?”

“No, he was on his way to a movie. Did you know he used to come here when he was in high school?”

“Nope,” Joe said, tossing his second dart. “Before my time.”

“Merle never said anything. Do you think there’s any truth to the rumor?”
“Which rumor?” Joe asked, hitting the bull’s eye with his last dart. “Hot damn!” Hal groaned.

“You know, that he was once a professor. He’s always asking about my parents.”

“Who, Merle?” Joe laughed, pulling his darts and marking his score on the small chalk board. “He probably knows your parents from when they were kids. They probably used to hang out here.”

“No, neither of them are from Weston. They didn’t even meet till my mom got a job at Mallory.”

“Beats me,” Joe said, handing the darts to Hal. “He never asks about my parents.”

“Mine neither,” Hal said, throwing and missing the dart board. “Shit!”

“One more bull’s eye is all I need,” Joe said.

“Just shut up,” Hal said, tossing his next dart and hitting the 20. Perry noticed from the scoreboard that Hal needed a 19, three 15s, two bull’s eyes, and over 50 points to catch up with Joe.

“Joe, can I talk to you?” Perry asked, as Hal’s last dart failed to score.

“We are talking,” Joe said, stepping up to the line as Hal pulled his darts from the board.

“No, I mean outside. Privately.”

“I guess. As soon as I finish wiping the floor with this loser.” He took the darts from Hal and threw all three at once, seemingly without aim. Two didn’t score, but one landed dead center.

“You are such an asshole,” Hal said, taking his empty glass to the beer barrel beside the poker table.

From a pile of jackets on a tattered easy chair near the door, Joe grabbed his own. “C’mon.” Perry followed him out, removing a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and shaking one out, offering one to Joe as well.

“So,” Joe said, after he’d handed Perry back his lighter. “What’d you wanna talk about?”

“This isn’t easy,” Perry said, walking toward the overgrown orchard. Joe followed. “It’s just, I have to tell someone. But you have to swear you won’t tell anyone.”

“Okay.”
“No, I mean it. You have to swear on your life that you’ll never tell a living soul. Swear it!”
“Okay, I swear it on my life. Now what is it?”
“You know my brother, Gavin?”
“Yeah, the geeky one. What about him?”
“He’s gay,” Perry blurted.
“No shit? Are you sure? I mean, did he tell you?”
“Yeah. In fact, it was really his new boyfriend that dropped me off here tonight. They’re on their first date.”
“Whoa.” Joe took a long drag off his cigarette. “So how do you feel about it?”
“I don’t like him,” Perry said simply.
“Just like that? Your brother’s gay, so you don’t like him anymore?”
“No, I mean the boyfriend. But I’m not sure if that’s because he’s a jerk, or because he’s trying to fuck my brother.”
“It could be both. But what I meant is, how do you feel about Gavin being gay?”
“I don’t know. I thought I was okay with it until this guy came along.”
“Wait, how long have you known about this?”
“Since he came back from Europe last year. But he just told me about it that once. It never came up again, so I never really thought about it. Now....”
Joe dropped the cigarette and crushed it under his boot. “Now you have to deal with it. So how are you dealing with it?”
“Not too well, I guess. Dammit, why does he have to be gay? Why can’t he just be normal, like everyone else?”
“You’re asking the wrong guy. I’ve never understood it. Why would a guy wanna fuck another guy?”
Perry tossed away his own cigarette. “Beats me.”
They walked in silence for a few moments, curving back toward the barn. Joe finally said, “I do know one thing, though. If he were my brother, it wouldn’t matter. I wouldn’t be happy about it, but I’d be there for him. Blood’s thicker than beer.”
Perry nodded, but said nothing. As they were about to reach the side door, Joe again broke the silence. “Hey, did I tell you? Merle said we could play next Saturday.”
“That’s great. How much do we get?”

“Nothing.”

Perry’s shoulders slumped as Joe opened the door to Merle’s back room.

“It’s a gig,” Joe continued. “And look at the exposure we’ll get.”


“So we’re gonna hafta start practicing every night, starting tomorrow.”

Perry nodded, following Joe into the room.

After the movie, Gavin and Troy had walked silently to the car, both digesting the movie’s long, twisting plot. As it was only nine-thirty, Troy suggested they try to find someplace to have coffee. “Where?” Gavin asked.

“I was hoping you’d have a suggestion. I’m not familiar with Ames.”

“I’ve only been here a dozen or so times myself, and always with my parents.”

“We could drive around and explore,” Troy said, unlocking Gavin’s side of the car.

Gavin got into the car, reached over, and unlocked Troy’s door. “Why don’t we just go back to Weston?” he asked, not wanting to risk getting lost in Ames in a rusting VW Bug. “The D Cup will still be open by the time we get back.”

“True,” Troy said, turning the ignition and waiting for the engine to sputter to life. “So what did you think of the movie?”

“It was...different,” Gavin said.

“Different good?”

“I think so.” Gavin buckling his lap belt.

Troy held the door for him. “You didn’t like it.”

“No, I did like it” Gavin admitted, speaking more loudly as the car pulled into traffic. “I just don’t understand why he leaves her in the end. I mean, General DeWinter is dead, the project is canceled. Why does he leave her?”

“Don’t you see? Without the project, they have nothing in common.”

“But they’re in love!” Gavin protested.

“He’s in love with her. She was only using him to further the project.”

“That may have been true at first, but later she fell in love with him.”

“Did she really?”

“Yes!” Gavin said. “She risked her life to save him from the flood.”
"Because he had the last of the formula in his blood."

"I don't think so," Gavin said. "I think she really loved him."

"Maybe she did." Troy navigated the car toward the freeway. "But once he's seen through all her lies, he couldn't stay with her."

"I guess. Honesty is very important in a relationship."

"I agree," said Troy, shooting Gavin a look he couldn't quite read. "There should be complete honesty, right from the beginning."

"Yes," was all Gavin could think to say, unsure where Troy was taking this conversation. Was he about to tell Gavin something, something he was reluctant to reveal? But Troy only nodded and gunned the engine as they merged with traffic in the northbound lanes of Interstate 35.

As with the trip down from Weston, the sounds of the car driving 65 miles per hour was too loud to permit any meaningful talk. So Gavin settled back, listening to the wind and the whining roar of the engine.

Ten minutes later, Troy shouted, "I normally drive a lot faster, but I can't seem to push this thing past sixty-seven."

Gavin nodded, also wishing the car would drive faster. The sooner they were in Weston, the sooner they could continue their conversation. He was curious to know what Troy had been about to say about honesty in a relationship.

An hour and an eternity later, they left I-35 for the last, short leg of their journey back to Weston. As the car slowed, the engine sounds lessened, and Troy asked, "You still want to hit the D Cup?"

"Sure," Gavin said, his ears ringing. "Unless you have something else in mind."

"I was just thinking the D Cup might be crowded. But I've got coffee at my place." And he shot Gavin another look.

This time Gavin was sure he understood what Troy meant. "I like that idea even better."

Smiling, Troy turned the car away from campus and toward his small apartment.

"Well, this is it," Troy said, flipping on the light. Gavin followed him into the apartment for the first time. With a quick, "Sorry about the mess," Troy busied himself gathering newspapers and T-shirts from the sofa.
“It’s okay,” Gavin said. “Refreshing actually. My parents are so anal retentive, the house is like a museum. It’s nice to see a place that looks lived in.”

“Too lived in.” Troy began collecting empty Coke cans and coffee mugs from the small table at either end of the sofa.

“Will you stop?” Gavin insisted, taking off his jacket. “Why don’t we just make some coffee and relax?”

“Right, the coffee.” Grinning and carrying an armload of cups, Troy led Gavin to the tiny kitchen. Placing the cups from the living room into the sink, Troy said, “Typical.”

“What is?”

“It was Allan’s turn to wash the dishes,” said Troy, pointing to the clean silverware in the sink rack. “So he just washed what was in the kitchen, and left all the cups in the living room.”

“Allan, that’s your roommate. Where’s he tonight?”

“He and his girlfriend were going to a party. I doubt he’ll be back tonight.” Troy opened a cupboard, finding three clean mugs. “Good, we’re in business. It’s a little crowded in here, and this is a one-person job, so why don’t you go put on a CD and make yourself comfortable?”

“Okay,” said Gavin. “What CD would you like?”

“Anything you want to listen to,” Troy said, taking a bag of coffee beans from the freezer.

In the living room, Gavin found a shelf over the stereo lined with compact discs, ranging from Classical and Jazz to Rock and Alternative. “You and Allan have quite a selection,” he said.

“Most of those are mine,” Troy called, starting the coffee grinder. “Allan keeps his CDs in his room, thank God. He only listens to Country.”

Almost at random, Gavin took a Wagner CD and placed it in the player. “Ride of the Valkyries” thundered from the speakers, and Gavin quickly turned the volume down to a less obtrusive level.

“Wagner, my favorite,” Troy said, returning from the kitchen. “You know, he may have been an anti-Semitic prick and Hitler’s favorite composer, but my God, the man could write powerful music.”

“He’s one of my favorites, too,” Gavin said, sitting on the sofa. “He was the first German to use native mythology for his operas. But I didn’t know he was Hitler’s favorite.”
Troy sat beside Gavin. "The coffee's brewing. So...You liked the movie?"
"Very much. Thanks for taking me."
"My pleasure. I thought you'd enjoy it."
"But I still say she was in love with him."
"Maybe, but she'd been completely dishonest with him. How could he ever trust her? Their whole relationship was built on lies."

And again Gavin saw a nervous look in Troy's eyes. "You need to tell me something," Gavin said. "Or ask me something."
"There is something I'd like to ask you about. Lynn."
Gavin quickly looked away. "What about her?"
"How come you never told me about her? That she was your girlfriend?"
"Didn't I?" Gavin studied the knuckles of his left hand. "I was sure I mentioned her."

"I don't think so. And I know you never told me about her...about what happened to her."

Gavin was silent. After a moment, Troy placed a hand upon Gavin's. "Jessie and Perry told me that she died."
"It's been over a year," Gavin said softly. "I've tried very hard not to think about her. It's still...painful."
"I'm sorry. I wouldn't have brought it up, but it's been troubling me. It's like a whole part of yourself I don't know about."
"There's a lot you don't know about me," Gavin said, looking again at Troy.

"And a lot I don't know about you."
Troy held Gavin's hand. "I'd like to find out."
Gavin smiled and took Troy's other hand. "Me too."
"I'm sorry I made you feel uncomfortable."
"I should have told you about Lynn. And I feel perfectly comfortable with you."

"You know, Gavin, I really like you."
"I like you, too. A lot."
"And like I was telling Jessie, I want to get to know you a lot better, before we--"

"Has anyone ever told you," said Gavin, drawing closer, "that you talk too much?"
Troy leaned forward to kiss him, and Gavin did not pull away. In the kitchen, the coffee pot gave a last gurgling hiss of steam and fell silent, its contents forgotten until morning.
CHAPTER 5. WINTER MOON: THE FINAL VERSION

Introduction

This final draft of the novel was written between late 1997 and early 1998. The characters are a few years older, mainly so that I could make Gavin a bit more mature. He is still rather insecure about himself, but he no longer questions his sexuality.

In previous drafts, I had been exploring various possibilities, feeling out the characters and plot. This resulted in a rather shallow story, occupied with exposition and foreshadowing, but with very little actual action. In this draft, I had become more comfortable with the characters and had a better idea of the “big picture” of the novel itself. I am also more comfortable with weaving in more elements of the “weirdness of Weston.”

“Weird things” were happening in Weston when I wrote the original short stories in 1995. Some of this can be found, although in altered form, within this last draft of the novel. Merle’s role becomes more active, and parts of the plot of the short stories become components of Gavin’s past, as we see glimpses of in later chapters of this draft.

The first chapter of this draft actually began as a later, unnumbered chapter of the last draft. It was workshopped once in late 1997, and it was very well received. Many students expressed that this chapter was not only more dramatic than previous chapters, but that the fantastic events portrayed would do a good job of foreshadowing the future weirdness of the novel. Therefore, in this last draft, I began with this chapter and continued onward. This immediately submerges the reader into the world of the novel, and effectively foreshadows the strange elements to come later.

The rest of this draft continues to build the story and its world. The characters become more developed, and the plot progresses much more quickly (though it is still not as fast-paced as I would like it to be). It is by no means a finished story. In fact, it is barely a third of the length I envision the novel being. However, along with the short story and the two other drafts, it shows the progression of the novel.
Winter Moon: The Thesis Version

Chapter One

They had driven twenty minutes on the country road without finding the highway. Gavin asked, "Are you sure this is the right way?" Troy said something, but his voice was lost beneath the sound of the defroster and the howling wind. Gavin repeated his question.

"We must have missed our turn," Troy said more loudly.

Gavin squinted against the glare of the headlights reflecting off the blowing snow. "Can you read that sign?"

Troy said. "It's not a route sign. I think it's a park. Are there any parks around here?"

"None that I know of," Gavin said, struggling to keep the car in the right lane. He pointed. "There's another sign--"

"Look out!"

Gavin saw the deer a moment later, and he slammed on the brakes. Though they had been driving slowly, the car's rear end swerved left on the slick pavement, and it slid to a halt not more than a yard from the animal. His heart still racing, Gavin looked through the windshield at the largest stag he'd ever seen.

"Look at the rack on that thing," Troy said, his voice barely audible over the defroster. "What is that, six, eight points?"

Gavin was silent, his gaze locked with the deep, brown eyes of the stag. He thought he saw something there, an intelligence beyond that of a simple beast. He opened his mouth to comment, when suddenly the stag jumped forward and was lost in the swirling snow.

"Incredible," Troy said. "Just beautiful."

Gavin nodded, but said nothing. After another moment, he shifted to reverse. There was a loud grinding sound, but the car remained motionless. He shifted again, and this time the car lurched violently, slipping backward off the road and down the steep ditch. The engine coughed twice, then died.
"Damn," Gavin whispered through his teeth, turning the key and pumping the gas pedal. "Do you know anything about engines?"

"Just motorcycles," said Troy. "And not much about those."

Gavin turned the key again. There was a whining sound, but the engine didn't even try to turn over. He turned off the defroster and lights. "What are we gonna to do now?"

"This is all my fault," said Troy. "We should have stuck to the freeway."

Gavin was tempted to agree. Although the date had started off as a fun evening of dinner and dancing in Des Moines, the hour long drive home had become complicated when it began to snow. And it had been Troy's idea to leave the interstate and take back roads to Weston. Now heavy snow and strong winds made it all but impossible to see where they were driving, and the two seemed hopelessly lost.

"It isn’t your fault," Gavin said at last. "Let’s just see if we can’t flag someone down."

"I haven’t seen another car in half an hour. We’re in the middle of nowhere."

"Well, there’s a farmhouse just down the road."

"How do you know that?"

"Because this is Iowa," Gavin said, rubbing his hands together. An icy chill had begun creeping into the car. "Besides we’ll freeze to death here."

Troy zipped his leather jacket closed and wrapped his scarf around his neck. "Then let’s get going."

Opening his door, Gavin was hit with a blast of wind and snow. Moving quickly, he and Troy made their way out of the ditch. Looking up the road in the direction they’d been driving, Troy shouted over the wind, "Pick a direction!"

Gavin spotted a light through a thick stand of trees to the left. "There," Gavin said. "That’s got to be a farm."

"Do we walk through the trees?" Troy wrapped his arms over his chest.

Gavin pointed to a driveway about twenty feet up the road. "That way!" Troy nodded, and they hurried up the narrow lane, which twisted through the wooded area and over a small stone and concrete bridge.

"Creepy," Gavin said, noticing that Troy’s shoulder length hair had become white with snow.

"A perfect place to be on Halloween," Troy agreed.
"If this were a horror movie, there'd be a haunted house at the end of this drive."

"Nah," Troy said, his teeth beginning to chatter. "A house full of drunken teenagers, and one axe-wielding maniac."

Gavin groaned. "You're not making this any easier."

"Relax. This isn't a horror flick, ya know."

Before Gavin could answer, they came around the last bend in the lane and into a large clearing. Before them stood a rambling farmhouse, with several lights burning in the first-floor windows. "There," said Troy. "That isn't scary, is it?"

Gavin climbed the steps to the wide, covered porch, relieved to be out of the snow. By the light over the front door, he read aloud a small sign: "Corbie Inn? I've never heard of it."

"Maybe it's new," said Troy, pressing the doorbell.

A few moments later, a young woman in a gray dress opened the door. "Heavens, come in!" she said, pulling the door open widely. "You'll freeze out there."

"Thank you," Troy said, pressing Gavin in before him.

The warmth of the room wrapped itself around Gavin. It was a larger entryway than he'd expected, paneled in dark maple. Beside the wide staircase was a small front desk, with cubby-hole mailboxes behind it. This was no simple bed-and-breakfast, he thought, but a proper inn. He noticed the woman's eyes grow wide when Troy ran his fingers through his long hair.

"You aren't the Speermans, are you?" she asked, fiddling with her blonde braids.

Before Gavin could answer, a man's voice called from the next room: "Mandy, is that them?"

"I don't think so, Papa." Smiling brightly, she turned back to Gavin. "Would you like a room or...two?"

"No no," said Troy. "Our car broke down near your driveway. We just need to call for a tow."

"That's impossible," said the man's voice, closer this time. Gavin looked to his right to see a white-haired man in a wheelchair sitting in the doorway to the next room. "Storm knocked out the phone lines about an hour ago."
“You didn’t pass any other cars, did you?” asked the young woman. “On your way from town?”

“No, we came from the south,” Gavin said. “And we’re a little lost.”

“We were trying to find our way back to highway three,” Troy explained.

“Ah, but where are my manners?” said the man, extending his hand to Troy. “I’m Roy Fischer, and this is my daughter Amanda.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, taking Gavin’s hand. “Oh, but you’re freezing. We should get you to the fire.”

“We really can’t stay,” Gavin said, as Amanda tried to pull him into the next room. “We have to get back to town.”

“I don’t see how,” Fischer said, maneuvering his wheelchair back through the doorway. “We’re twelve miles from town, and the phone’s out. No, I’m afraid you’ll have to stay here for the night.”

“Don’t go to any trouble,” Troy said, as he and Gavin followed the old man into the parlor. It was also warm and wooden, dominated by a huge fieldstone fireplace on the far wall. The rest of the room was crowded with antique furniture.

“No trouble,” Fischer said, wheeling his chair with ease through the maze of furniture. “We can let you have the Speermans’ room. I doubt they’ll make it here tonight anyway.”

“We were really looking forward to having them, too,” Amanda said, helping Troy out of his jacket. “It’s their second honeymoon.”

“They stayed here for their first honeymoon, ten years ago,” Fischer said, moving his chair to a small table with a chessboard. “Nice folks.”

Troy stood next to the blaze in the fireplace, rubbing his hands together. “Listen, we appreciate you letting us warm up a bit, but we really need to get going.”

“I wish there was something we could do to help,” Amanda said, taking Gavin’s wool coat. “But we’re stranded here.”

“Your safest bet is to stay here the night,” Fischer said. “Mandy, go see if you can find them something dry to wear.”

“Really, we don’t want to be a bother,” Gavin protested again.

“No bother,” Amanda said. “I’ll get you a couple of our robes.”

Troy sighed and glanced at Gavin, who nodded. “Robes would be nice.”
She smiled and left the room. Gavin sat at the table near Fischer. “This is a great looking place you’ve got here. Is it new?”

“New? Why, the Corbie Inn’s been here since the First War. I inherited it from my wife’s family.”

“That long?” Gavin glanced at Troy, who was still warming himself at the fire. “I thought I knew all the landmarks around here.”

“We’re not exactly a secret. There’s a big sign just as you enter town.”

“I’ve never seen—”

Gavin was cut off when Amanda returned with two large, green bathrobes with the name of the inn embroidered in gold thread. “Thank you,” Gavin said, slipping into one of the robes.

“You two are lucky you broke down so close to the inn,” she said, handing the other robe to Troy. She also handed him a towel for his hair.

“You can say that again,” Troy said, drying his hair. “We probably would have frozen to death if we’d stayed in the car.”

“You’re still shivering. Can I get you some coffee? Hot cocoa maybe?”

“Coffee sounds good,” Gavin said.

“The stronger the better,” said Troy, taking the chair at the chess table across from Fischer. Amanda smiled and left the room again. “Listen, I don’t have a lot of cash, but if you take credit cards—”


Amanda returned with two cups of coffee. Troy blew over his before sipping. “Hey, this is really good.”

Gavin sipped from his own cup and was amazed to find it was the best he’d ever tasted. “Better than the D Cup.”

“The what?” Amanda asked, pulling another chair up to the table.

“The coffee shop I work at,” Troy said. “It’s really the Dancing Cup, but everyone just calls it the D Cup.”

Amanda turned to Gavin. “So you work for this coffee shop, too?”

“No, I’m an English major at Mallory College.”

“English?” said Fischer, casually moving one of the black chess pieces. “What does a fellow do with a degree in English?”

“Teach someday, after I have my doctorate.”
“College professors run in Gavin’s family,” Troy offered. “Both his parents teach at Mallory.”

“That must be great for you,” Amanda said, moving one of the white rooks. “Being able to work with your parents like that.”

“Great isn’t the word I’d use,” Gavin said. “Besides, I don’t take any classes from them. School policy.”

“That’s too bad,” said Fischer, studying the chessboard. The clock on the mantle chimed the quarter hour, and Gavin noticed that Fischer nodded to his daughter. Without a word she rose and left the room, headed for the kitchen. Fischer then turned to Troy. “You a college student, too?”

“Yep,” said Troy. “Journalism major.”

Fischer said, “Journalism sounds exciting. All that investigative reporting.” He moved another black pawn.

“Well, so far it’s just boring classes.” Troy moved a white piece.

Gavin expected Fischer to protest Troy’s intrusion into the chess game, but he merely moved one of his own pieces. Suddenly, the parlor lights went out, leaving the room bathed in the orange glow of the fireplace. “Storm must have knocked out the lines,” Fischer said, unconcerned. “Give the generator a moment to kick in.”

Troy slid a white piece across the board. “You have a generator?”

“Well, out in the middle of nowhere like this.” Fischer took one of Troy’s white pieces. “Can’t always count on Iowa Power, can we?”

Troy moved another piece. “And it starts automatically?”

“Something like that.” Fischer took another of Troy’s pieces. The clock on the mantle struck twelve, and Gavin glanced at his watch to confirm that it was indeed midnight. A moment later, Amanda returned from the kitchen with a white candle in one hand and what appeared to be a silver serving tray in the other. Gavin’s eyes followed her as she passed through the room without a word, went to the foyer, and began climbing the stairs.

“Are there any other guests?” Gavin asked.

“No, it’s a pretty slow time now,” Fischer said, sitting back in his wheelchair and folding his hands. “Past summer, but before the holidays. Thanksgiving things will pick up again.”

“Then who—” Gavin began, but was cut off by Troy’s triumphant shout:

“Check!” He moved his knight and smiled.
"Why so it is," said Fischer, forced to move his queen to protect his king. "Very clever."

"I'm really not very good at this," Troy said, studying the board for his next move.

"You're doing fine."

The lights came on again suddenly, and Gavin was startled to find Amanda standing beside him. "How's your coffee, Gavin? Do you need a warm up? How about you, Troy?"

"I could go for another cup," Troy said, not taking his eyes off the chessboard.

She took his cup. "Gavin?"

"No, I'm fine...." his voice drifted off for a moment. "Wait, how did you know my name?"

"You told me, of course. At the door, remember?"

"No, I don't remember. In fact, I'm sure I didn't."

"Then Troy said it. How else would I know your names?" She smiled again, taking Troy's cup to the kitchen.

"Troy, do you remember--?"

"Not now," Troy said, his face scrunched in concentration.

"There's something very strange going on here," Gavin whispered.

"Ah ha!" Troy again shouted in triumph, taking Fischer's queen his a knight. "Check mate."

"Well, you got me," Fischer said. "Good game."

Troy was grinning like a schoolboy with his first gold star. "I've never actually won before."

"Congratulations," Amanda said, and Gavin realized she had again appeared without his noticing. She handed Troy the fresh coffee.

"Yes, a very good game," Fischer said, unlocking the wheels of his chair. "Now I'm afraid I must be off to bed. It's been a long day."

Gavin saw Troy glance at the clock. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to keep you up so late."

"It's okay," Fischer said. "Amanda will show you to your room. Have a good night, and in the morning, we'll see about your car."

"Thank you," Troy said, as Fischer wheeled himself from the room through the door to the kitchen. "And thanks for the game."
"If you’ll follow me," Amanda said, smiling as always. Troy stood and carried his coffee after her.

Gavin said, "Wait, I still have some questions."

"Can’t they wait until morning?" Troy yawned, as they followed her up the stairs. "I’m exhausted. Feels like I’ve been awake for days."

"Here we are," Amanda said, opening the first door at the top of the stairs. "Everything you need—"

"There’s only one bed," Gavin said, brushing past Troy and into the room.

"Oh, of course," Amanda said. "I keep forgetting, this was for the Speermans. Bridal suite. It will only take a few minutes to make up another room."

"Don’t be silly," Troy said, placing his coffee on the large bedside table. "We’re both big boys, and this is a huge bed. We’ll be fine."

"You’re sure?"

Troy yawned again, and Gavin said, "I guess it will be okay. And I don’t want to put you to any more trouble than we already have."

"You’re probably tired yourself," Troy agreed, taking Amanda by the arm and leading her to the door. "Thank you for everything, and good night." She smiled as he closed the door. When he turned back, Gavin frowned and raised one eyebrow. "Would you rather have another room? It’s not like we’ve never slept together before."

"What I want is to know what’s going on here," Gavin whispered.

Troy let the robe drop from his shoulders. "What do you mean?"

"Don’t you think it’s a little too convenient that we broke down right outside this place?"

"It’s just a coincidence," Troy said, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling off one of his boots. "I mean, do you think they somehow arranged for that deer to jump in front of us?"

"Of course not." Gavin removed his own robe and draped it on the end of the bed. "Okay, how did she know our names? Do you remember introducing us?"

"No, but I don’t remember not introducing us, either. You’re just being paranoid."

"Maybe I am," Gavin said, unbuttoning his shirt. "But it’s the paranoid ones who survive horror movies."

"No, it’s the virgins who survive."
Gavin grinned. “In that case, we’re both doomed.”
Troy stood and walked to where Gavin stood on the other side of the bed.
“You know, there’s a rational explanation for everything.”
“Is that the journalist talking?”
“No, that’s the romantic talking,” Troy said, placing his hands on Gavin’s shoulders. “Here we are, alone in a bridal suite with a king-sized bed. And for once, we don’t have to worry about my roommate coming home early, or you having to rush back to your dorm.”
Gavin stared into Troy’s clear blue eyes. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you arranged all of this, including the blizzard.”
“I’m beginning to wish I had,” Troy said, leaning closer to Gavin.
“Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?” Smiling, he met Troy’s lips in a kiss.
Unfiltered sunlight fell through a gap in the drawn curtains and settled across Gavin’s face, rousing him from sleep and chasing away vague dream images. He blinked against the onslaught of brilliance in confusion. The single window in his dorm room faced west, which normally spared him from such early morning invasions of light.

It took him only a moment to realize he was not in his dorm bed, but a king-sized four-poster. Beside him, Troy stirred but remained asleep. At once, the events of the previous night came flooding back to him, and he bolted upright.

“The clock struck twelve,” he muttered. “Troy, wake up.”

Troy murmured something and rolled over on his right side. Gavin began shaking him by the shoulders, until at last he rolled onto his back and opened his eyes. “Good morning,” he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep.

“The clock struck twelve,” Gavin repeated urgently.

“It’s noon already?” Troy began to sit up.

“No, last night. Just before the lights went out, the mantle clock struck twelve.”

“Yeah? What time is it now?”

Gavin glanced at his watch. “Eight-thirty.”

Troy fell back onto the pillows. “Thank God. You had me worried.”

“Well, I am worried. The clock struck midnight last night.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that it was one-thirty when we left the club. We drove for at least an hour and a half. That would make it, what, three when we got here?”
“So the mantle clock was wrong.”

“But I checked my watch. I always do that when I hear a clock strike the hour. I check to make sure my watch is correct.”

Troy sat up. “You’re sure?”

“Positive. I didn’t think of it last night, because I was preoccupied with all the other weirdness.”

“What weirdness?”

“Well, like the fact that Amanda knew our names.”

Troy rolled his eyes. “Not that again. Gavin, one of us must have mentioned our names.”

“I don’t remember doing so.”

“What are you suggesting? That I planned this whole thing? That I’m somehow responsible for your car going in the ditch?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Troy threw back the blankets and swung his legs over the side of the bed. “No, but that’s what you’re thinking. This is all some elaborate plot to spend the whole night with you.”

“I don’t think that at all,” Gavin protested. “I just think it’s odd that you didn’t notice any of the strange things last night. What kind of a journalist are you?”

Troy winced as if struck. He rose from the bed and began silently dressing. After a few moments, Gavin also stood. “I’m sorry, that was low—”

Troy turned and glared at him. “Yes, it was. My observations skills were good enough to pick you out, weren’t they?”

It was Gavin’s turn to wince. Troy took pride in the fact that he had known Gavin was gay before they’d even spoken, despite Gavin’s firm public heterosexual facade. “I said I was sorry.”

“We wouldn’t even be here,” Troy continued, “if you’d gotten that transmission looked at last week.”

Gavin was about to point out that, regardless of the problem with his car’s transmission, they would certainly not be anywhere near this inn, were it not for Troy’s suggestion that they leave the interstate. But the spiteful look in Troy’s eyes made him think twice and change the subject. “Why were you worried that it was noon?”
Troy turned away, mumbling under his breath. Gavin said, “What was that?”
“I have to work at one.”
“What? I thought we were going to spend the whole day together?”
“I couldn’t help it.”
“When were you planning to tell me about this?”
“Last night. I was going to tell you when we got back to Weston.”
Gavin tugged on his chinos. “You promised me the whole day.”
“What am I supposed to do about it? Ida needs me, and I need the money. We don’t all have trust funds, you know.”
Another sore nerve Gavin quickly steered away from. “Are you still free tonight?”
Troy pulled on his boots. “After five.”
“Okay, we still have this evening. Let’s go call someone about my car.”

A few minutes later, they were standing at the main desk in the empty foyer. “Maybe they aren’t awake yet,” Gavin observed.
“I thought all you Iowans rose with the sun.”
Gavin ignored the jibe and picked up the telephone, but heard no dial tone.
“The line’s still dead.”
“Now what?” Troy found their coats hanging on a hatrack behind the desk.
“Should we try and find our hosts?”
“Let’s just go take a look at the car.”
Troy nodded and pulled on his leather jacket. Soon Gavin was walking beside him down the winding driveway, listening to the snow crunch under his shoes. Though the sky was partly cloudy, the glare off the snow made Gavin squint. “Hard to believe the storm only dropped three inches on us.”
“Seemed like a lot more last night,” Troy commented. They walked over the small stone bridge. Beneath it, the stream was unfrozen, and a low mist clung to it. Small patches of fog also surrounded the trees along the lane. “Maybe we can somehow get the car out of the ditch. If not, we can always walk to the next farmhouse.”
“I wonder if they’ve plowed yet. The car could be buried.”
The car was indeed buried, but only by the inch or so which had fallen since they’d left it. They found the road was unplowed, and the car was not in the
ditch. “What the hell?” Gavin walked across the road and started brushing snow off the windshield. The car sat on the shoulder, as though it had been parked there deliberately.

“Maybe someone came by this morning and was friendly enough to pull the car out,” Troy offered.

“No tire tracks,” Gavin muttered, looking at the ditch. Though some fog lingered in the lowest parts, Gavin could see no tire tracks there, no ruts in the ground, nothing to indicate the car had ever been there. Glancing up the road, he saw that the tracks from his car were faint, but still visible. There was no indication the car had skidded sideways and slid off the road. Instead it appeared to have been pulled off to the side and parked. There were no other tracks in the road, new or old. He pointed it out to Troy.

“Okay,” Troy said. “I’m officially creeped out now.”

“Help me,” Gavin said, brushing more snow away from the windshield with his bare hands. Troy worked on the rear window, using the sleeve of his jacket. Once they’d cleared all the windows, Gavin fumbled in his pockets for the keys and opened the driver’s door. He unlocked Troy’s door and slipped the key into the ignition.

“Here goes nothing,” Gavin said, turning the key. The engine coughed and stuttered a few times, then roared to life.

“Thank God,” Troy said.

“Thank Detroit,” Gavin said, shifting to drive. “And thank General Motors.” He began slowly up the unplowed road, toward the inn’s driveway. Now that the weather was clear, he was able to see clearly the sign which had caught his attention last night. It was actually a large brass plaque, green with age, which read:

**CORBIE INN**

Noting that the sun was on his right, he knew now that they were heading north. Surely Weston wasn’t far...or at least some landmark he was familiar with.

Ten minutes later, the last vestiges of winter fog had cleared from the edges of the road. Soon they passed an old apple orchard and a large barn. “That’s
Merle's," Troy said, pointing out the barn which had been converted years ago to
a motorcycle repair shop run by an enigmatic man named Merle.

"I know," Gavin said. "That means we're on Old Orchard road. We're only
five minutes from town."

"Thank God," Troy said again. "No offense, but I never, ever want to see
that inn again."

"I'll second that," Gavin said, relaxing visibly. The road here had been
plowed, and he was able to increase his speed. Within minutes, they were driving
through the tree-lined streets of Weston. Except for the two main ones, most of
the streets were still unplowed, and there was little traffic this early in the
morning.

Passing through Center Street, Gavin heard the bells of Our Lady's chiming
two blocks north, signaling that the early Mass was about to begin. He knew the
Episcopal service wouldn't start for another hour, and that his mother would
probably be there, as she was nearly every Sunday.

Four blocks west of the Mallory College campus, Gavin pulled into the
parking lot of Troy's apartment building. "I really am sorry about this morning."

"It was my fault," Troy said. "I'm really grouchy in the morning."

Gavin leaned over and kissed Troy's cheek. "I'm still sorry."

Troy smiled. "I'll call you after work."

Gavin returned the smile, as Troy got out of the car. With one last wave,
Troy turned up the steps of the brick building, and Gavin drove away. Heading
for the small parking ramp on campus where he normally left his car, he was
suddenly overcome by a wave of dizziness, and he realized it had been almost
fourteen hours since he'd eaten. Having little cash left over from the night
before, he decided a trip to the dorm's cafeteria probably wouldn't kill him.

Half an hour later, Gavin found his roommate in their dorm room, wearing
only a pair of boxer shorts. The heavy drapes were closed, and Lance was lit only
by the pale glow of his computer screen. "Hey, Lance. How can you sit here in
the dark like this?"

With a mock-menacing grin, Lance glanced up from the computer. "I'm a
Scorpio, remember? I like the dark."

Gavin hung his coat in the closet and began unbuttoning his shirt.
"You're up early for a Sunday morning."
“And you’re getting back late from last night.”

“Car trouble,” Gavin said, hoping Lance would drop the subject.

“A likely story.” He flashed his practiced sinister grin again. “Listen, you should have been here last night. I was talking to a guy who went to Mallory twelve years ago. I’m starting a project for your father’s class.”

“The mid-term? And you’re just starting it now?”

“No, the mid-term was in-class Monday,” Lance said, brushing long blond bangs from his forehead. “This is the final project, due after Thanksgiving. Twelve pages of local history.”

“And you’re writing about Mallory?” Gavin sat on the edge of Lance’s bunk and began untying his shoes. “You should check out the book Dad wrote a few years ago, make sure you don’t say anything he disagrees with.”

“That was my original plan,” Lance said. “Until I met this guy. God, weird things happen in Weston.”

Gavin’s hands froze on his shoelace. “What sort of weird things?”

“For starters, there are more UFO sightings in this county than any other in Iowa. And did you know that Weston has eleven listings in the National Registry of Haunted Places, including two on campus?”


“Sullivan Hall and this very dorm, down in the kitchen.”

“Oh, I guess I had heard about the Kitchen Ghost,” Gavin laughed. “No one takes that seriously. But what about Sullivan Hall?”

“You know, the radio station’s on the fourth floor, and the only open bathroom at night is on the ground floor. Okay, so every so often, when the deejay is heading for the john, he’ll hear all these weird moaning sounds.”

“Sullivan’s an old, drafty building,” Gavin said, moving behind Lance and looking over his shoulder. “It’s probably just the wind.”

“Probably,” Lance said, flipping through his notes. “Hey, did you know about the curse?”

“No, what curse?”

“In every war the US has fought in since the Civil War, there’s been a casualty from Weston. That includes Grenada and the Gulf War. In fact, the third death in Desert Storm was from Weston.”
“Oh, yeah,” Gavin said. “Philip Marsden. His family has been pestering the city council to name a street after him. I thought you meant the curse on the high school.”

“High school? What’s that curse?”

“Supposedly there’s been a death in every class for the past twenty or so years. Some are accidents or illness, some are suicides. There’s a really high teen suicide rate.”

“Highest per capita in the state,” Lance said. “According to my friend last night.”

Gavin sat at his own desk, opposite Lance. “In my class, a kid named Duke Penn drove his car off a railroad trestle, killing himself and his girlfriend.”

“Jesus,” Lance gasped. “And this happens in every class?”

“Like I said, they aren’t all suicides. In my sister’s class, a girl died of leukemia in seventh or eighth grade. But yeah, for a town this small, there’s a lot of death in the school.”

“Where would I find out more?”

Gavin thought a moment. “Yearbooks,” he said finally. “In every one I got in high school, there was at least one memorial page. I think the library has copies going back to the fifties or so.”

“What, the high school library?”

“No, the one downtown.”

“What about the origin of the curse itself?”

“That’s just a vague story. Something about a big group of kids committing suicide after being expelled for practicing black magic.”

“Really?”

“No, not really. It’s just a story. I don’t know much about it.”

“I’m betting your father doesn’t, either,” Lance said.

“Possible,” Gavin admitted. “Local history’s just his hobby. His real area is Medieval Europe.”

“I am gonna ace this paper,” said Lance, typing again on his computer.

Gavin stood again and took off his shirt. “I’m gonna take a shower.”
Chapter Three

When he returned later, his hair still damp, Gavin felt much better. He found his roommate dressed in jeans and a Mallory College sweatshirt, tying his running shoes. Lance glanced up. "Your sister called. Which reminded me that she called four times last night."

"Four times?" Gavin pulled on a faded blue tennis shirt.

"Yeah, the last time was after midnight. Sorry I forgot. Anyway, just now she told me to just forget about the calls last night." Lance grabbed his jacket from the closet.

"Where are you off to?"

"Public library, to check out those yearbooks." He slung his backpack onto one shoulder. "I also wanna find that National Registry of Haunted Places. The school library never heard of it."

"I doubt you’ll find it downtown, either. But good luck."

"Thanks," Lance said, leaving.

Gavin finished dressing, then dialed his sister’s dorm number. It rang five times, then there was a knock at his door. "It’s open," he called. The door opened, and his sister entered. "I was just calling you," he said, hanging up the phone.

"I figured you’d be out of the shower by now," Jessie said, closing the door.

"And just finished dressing. So what’s up?"

"Perry ran away last night."

Gavin sat at his desk. "Again?"

"Yes, and everyone was worried sick. But he just called me and he’s fine."

"Where is he?"
"He won’t say." Jessie sat at Lance’s desk. "But I did get him to agree to meet us for lunch today."

"Okay, when and where?"

"Noon at the D Cup."

Gavin glanced at his watch, compared it to his digital alarm clock: eleven fifteen. "What possessed him to run away again. He knows how Dad gets."

"You just answered your own question," Jessie said, brushing her bangs from her eyes. "He’s been riding Perry pretty hard lately. Did you know he lost his job at the Fast Fill?"

"No, when?"

"Two weeks ago. Turns out he’s been working somewhere else for the past two weeks, and he won’t tell anyone where."

Gavin frowned. "There aren’t that many places in town where a sixteen year old can get a job."

"Legally," Jessie said.

"You don’t think he’s doing anything illegal, do you?"

"I don’t know. He’s being awfully mysterious. Maybe you can get it out of him."

"I can try. What did he say when he left?"

"Nothing. I went home for dinner last night. He and Dad had another fight, and Perry stormed off to the basement. When Mom went down later to talk to him, he was gone, along with all his art supplies and half his clothes."

"Geez."

"We tried to keep it from Dad, but Mom was such a wreck, he started to suspect. Meanwhile, I was calling all his friends, trying to find him."

"But you didn’t?"

"Either they were all lying, or he’s somewhere else. Anyway, around midnight, Dad finally figured out he was gone, and went ballistic. He was gonna call the police, but Mom calmed him down enough to go to bed."

"Well, that’s good. Have you called yet to let them know you’ve heard from him?"

"He made me promise not to. At least until after we’ve met with him."

"That’s not fair. Mom’s gotta be worried sick. Maybe I should—"

"Don’t you dare! We’re like the last two people he trusts. If you call Mom before we talk to him, he’ll disappear, and we’ll never find him."
Gavin frowned again. "Okay, but after we talk to him, I'm calling Mom. She shouldn't be put through this."
"I agree. But she can suffer until after lunch."
"Okay, so what did he say on the phone?"
"Not much." She brushed back her bangs again. "Only that he was okay, and he'd meet us only if we promised not to tell Mom and Dad."
"Not a clue about where he spent the night?"
Jessie shook her head.
Gavin shrugged. "I'm at a loss."
"I guess we'll have to wait and ask him. Hey, where the hell were you last night? I must have called a dozen times."
"Sorry, I was out with a friend. I had car trouble, and didn't get back till this morning."
"Car trouble?" Jessie looked suspicious. "And you took it to a garage?"
"No, it started with no problem this morning. And no, I wasn't with Perry. I have no idea where he is. How could you even think that?"
"I'm sorry. I'm just worried about him."
Gavin stood and walked across the room to the closet. "Me too. And this sitting around is driving me crazy. Wanna go for a walk? I'll tell you all about last night."
"Sure. I'll run downstairs to get my coat, then meet you outside."
"Okay." Gavin grabbed his coat.
Outside, Jessie soon joined him, and they walked idly toward central campus. The sidewalks had been cleared of snow. "Damn, it's cold."
"It was colder last night," Gavin said. "And snowing pretty hard."
"Not till after midnight. Just where were you last night?"
"Okay, you know I've been seeing someone."
"Yes, and you've been pretty mysterious about who."
"Okay, you know I hang out at the D Cup a lot."
"Who doesn't? Oh my God! Not Troy?"
Gavin suddenly found a tree beside the sidewalk very interesting. Jessie said, "It is, isn't it? I knew he was gay."
"Bisexual. And you're not to tell a soul."
"Not even Perry?"
"Especially not him. You know how he feels about...you know."
"Give him a chance to get used to the idea that you’re gay. Besides, I’ll bet you and Troy make a cute couple. Damn, I wish I’d flirted with him more. How long have you two...?"

"Two months."

"So what happened last night? Did you...you know, for the first time?"

Gavin blushed. "Not the first, and I doubt the last. But last night, we went to Des Moines, and on the way back, we got lost in the snow. And the car went off the road just outside this little inn."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, and the car was fine this morning. But here’s the weird thing..." He went on to describe his strange encounters of the previous night, as they continued across campus. When he was through, they stood before a side entrance to the Student Union, and the clock tower chimed eleven-thirty.

"It’s freezing out here," Jessie said. "Let’s sit inside for a while."

"It’s warming up," Gavin said, but held the door open for his sister. They walked to the Commons, a large room filled with tables and chairs. Vending machines lined one wall. Other than a few silent students hunched over books, the place was deserted.

Gavin sat at one of the tables. "Well, what do you think?"

"I don’t know," Jessie said, sitting opposite him and unzipping her ski jacket. "It all sounds very strange. Are you sure it really happened that way? I mean, you didn’t just dream it?"

"Which part?"

"Any of it. I’ve never even heard of this Corbie Inn."

"Me neither," Gavin admitted. "I meant to check the phone book this morning, but I forgot."

"Ya know, it sounds like a guilt-induced hallucination."

Gavin rolled his eyes and muttered something about freshman psychology under his breath. Jessie asked him to repeat his comment louder.

"What do I have to feel guilty about?"

"I don’t know. Sneaking around with Troy. Keeping your sexual orientation a secret."

Gavin stood and began digging in his pockets for change. "That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard of. Besides, you can ask Troy all about it."

"Don’t be so defensive."
He walked to a vending machine and dropped in two quarters. "I'm not being defensive. But I don't have any pent-up guilt, and I didn't hallucinate last night." He pressed a button and waited for his coffee.

"No guilt at all?" Jessie prodded. "Not even a little?"

Gavin took the paper cup and blew over his coffee. It smelled bitter and oily. "No, not even a little. Now can we change the subject? How's Marc?"

He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw Jessie wince and avert her eyes. Just as quickly, she met his gaze with a smile. "Just fine," she said, her voice even.

"Are you sure?"

"Why shouldn't I be sure?" She forced her smile again.

Gavin sat again at the table, taking a sip of his coffee. As he'd feared: bitter and oily. "Did something happen?"

"It's nothing, really." She shifted uncomfortably under his scrutiny.

"Okay, he saw me talking to a guy from class at the D Cup."

"So?"

"So you know how jealous he gets. He threw a fit. Embarrassed the hell out of me. Scared the hell out of Dave."

"Dave?"

"The guy I was talking to."

Gavin sipped his coffee again. "You really should think about getting a new boyfriend."

"No, it was my own fault. I know how jealous he is."

He watched Jessie's eyes study the checkerboard pattern on the tabletop.

"Jessie, Marc's a jerk, and you know it."

Her eyes snapped up sharply. "He loves me. Do you understand that? He loves me. That's why he gets so jealous and possessive."

"I'm sorry," Gavin backed down. "Forget I mentioned it. Let's change the subject. Again."

There was a long silence. Jessie fingered a loose thread on her jacket, as Gavin sipped the awful coffee. "This is disgusting," Gavin said at last. "Let's go to the D Cup and get real coffee."

"Okay," she said, zipping her jacket.

They walked a block and a half south of campus and arrived at the Dancing Cup, the coffee shop popular with most college students. The fact that it was the
only cafe within walking distance of the campus had more to do with its popularity than the ambiance or the quality of the food served. As the only alternative to the dorm cafeteria, the D Cup was normally blessed with a large lunch crowd.

But as he glanced into the coffee shop's large front window, Gavin noticed only the owner, a middle-aged woman with dark red hair, sitting at the end of the counter. He held the door for Jessie and called, "Hi, Ida. Slow day?"

Ida looked up from her crossword puzzle. "I don't even know why I open the place on Sunday mornings. All you kids either sleep in, or go to your churches."

Gavin smiled, knowing Ida was one of only two Jewish residents in Weston. Her voice always reminded him of a cross between Harvey Firestein and the woman who used to make Bounty commercials. She pushed her large glasses up the bridge of her nose. "So what's your excuse?"

"Just wanted some of your coffee," Gavin said, sitting at the counter near her. Jessie did the same.

As Ida stood and walked behind the counter, Gavin checked his watch against the clock on the wall. "We're still a little early," he said to Jessie.

"Well, he'd better not be late. I don't know how much more of this waiting I can take."

"Who are you waiting for, Troy?" Ida asked, placing a cup of coffee before Gavin. "He won't be in for another hour."

"We're waiting for our brother," Jessie said. "And I'll take a Coke."

Ida forced a smile. "Of course you will."

If Jessie heard the sarcasm in Ida's voice, she gave no indication. Instead, she turned to Gavin. "Okay, our first priority is to find out where he's staying."

"No, our first priority is to get him to go back home. He's too old to keep running away like this."

"And not old enough to actually move out," Jessie agreed, as Ida handed her a glass of Coke.

"How old is he?" Ida asked.

"Barely seventeen," Gavin said.

"Hell, when I was seventeen, I was already married." With that, Ida returned to her crossword puzzle.

Jessie raised an eyebrow and whispered to Gavin, "She was married?"
Gavin shrugged his shoulders. “First I’ve heard of it.” He glanced at his watch again, then at the front door. No sign of Perry. “Where could he be?”

Just then, the city bus pulled up and came to a stop outside the D Cup, and Gavin watched in anticipation as a passenger got off the bus. But the young man, who wasn’t Perry, waited until the bus had rumbled away, then sprinted across the street to the Copy Place.

“That’s the twelve-oh-three,” Ida said. “Meanwhile, what’s the wife of an earl?”

“Countess,” Gavin said.

“It fits. But why isn’t her husband a count?”

“It’s an English title,” Gavin said, “left over from pre-Norman days. It’s basically the same as a count.”

“You kids spend too much time reading,” Ida said, pushing her glasses up her nose again.

A small bell over the door jangled, and Gavin looked to see his youngest sibling enter the D Cup. Perry’s lengthy blond hair was tangled and greasy, as though he’d forgotten to wash it in a few days. He wore a battered leather jacket Gavin had never seen before, and as soon as the door was closed, he pulled a pack of cigarettes from a pocket and lit one.

“You’re still smoking?” Gavin asked in his most disapproving tone.

“Don’t start,” Perry said, taking an empty stool between Gavin and Ida.

“Don’t you start,” Ida said, taking the lit cigarette from him and crushing it in her ashtray. “Even if your brother hadn’t just told me you were only seventeen, I wouldn’t let you smoke here.”

Perry gave Gavin a puzzled look and muttered, “Who the hell does she think she is?”

“Ida, the owner. And I wouldn’t cross her.”

“Not if you know what’s good for you,” Ida said, standing and walking into the small kitchen.

Perry rolled his eyes. “Why does everyone want to be my mother?”

“Ida wants to be everyone’s mother,” Jessie said. “Should we take a table?”

“Good idea,” Gavin agreed, taking his coffee cup and selecting a table near the back of the cafe. His brother and sister joined him.

Once they were sitting, Jessie said, “Where were you last night? You have us all worried sick.”
"You can see I'm fine."
"So where were you?"
"Doesn't matter. I have a place to stay for a while."
"But where?" Jessie persisted.
"I said it doesn't matter."
"No," Gavin said. "What matters is that you're going home. Today."
"No," Perry said. "Not today, not ever."
"Perry, you're too young to be living on your own," Gavin said. "What will you do for money?"
"I have a job."
"Jessie told me you were fired from the Fast Fill."
"I wasn't fired. I quit. I've got a better job now."
"Oh? Where?"
"Doesn't matter."
Gavin slapped his hand on the table. "Does anything matter to you?"
"I knew this was a mistake," Perry said, standing.
"Gavin, please!" Jessie said, then put a hand on Perry's arm. "Perry, sit down, please. We're just worried about you."
"Damn right we're worried," Gavin said, his voice louder than he meant for it to be. "Where the hell are you doing?"
"Gavin, calm down," Jessie ordered. Gavin glared at her, but held her tongue. Finally, Perry sat again. "Now if you don't want to tell us where you're living, the least you can do is tell us where you're working."
"I can't," Perry said.
Gavin sipped his coffee, which he found tasted immensely better than the coffee at the Union. He couldn't make himself look at either Jessie or Perry.
Chapter Four

Ida returned from the kitchen and sat again in her place at the counter. Gavin sipped his coffee, but Jessie left her Coke untouched. Perry sat quietly, running the fingers of his left hand along the left cuff of his jacket.

Finally, Jessie broke the silence. "Is there anything you can tell us? Anything that will put our fears to rest?"

"Just that I'm fine," Perry said. He took Jessie's glass and gulped Coke.

Gavin spoke, his voice much calmer. "Dad's going to call the police, you know."

"I know," Perry said, returning the glass to the table.

"You're still a minor. He can make you move back home."

Perry said nothing.

"I know what a bear Dad can be," Gavin said. "But come on, is it really worth alienating the whole family?"

"You'll be moving out next year anyway," Jessie said, "when you go to college."

"I'm not going to college. I dropped out."

Gavin tightly gripped the edges of the table. He struggled to control his temper, knowing that another outburst would send Perry fleeing the cafe. Besides, he knew the last thing his brother needed was a lecture he'd probably already gotten from their father.

"Oh, Perry," Jessie said in dismay.

"'Oh Perry' what?" he said defensively. "'Oh Perry, you're throwing your life away?'"
"I didn’t say that."

"But I will," Gavin said. "Perry, what are you thinking? You can’t drop out of school."

"Funny, that’s just what Dad said. Only when he said it, it sounded more like, ‘It’s legally impossible for you to do anything without my express permission.’"

"Well, I think you do need his permission, don’t you?" Jessie asked.

"Isn’t there a form you need to fill out?" Gavin asked. "I’m sure at least one of your parents needs to sign it."

"Beats me. I just stopped going. Haven’t been to school in over two weeks."

"I’m not going to tell you how important an education is," Gavin said. "You’ve heard that song since you were born. We all have. But, Perry, what are you going to do for the rest of your life?"

"I just told you, I have a job. And m---," Perry paused, and Gavin thought he was about to let the name of his employer slip. "My boss," Perry continued, recovering quickly, "says that someday I might even be able to take over his business."

"What sort of business is it," Gavin wanted to know.

"Nothing illegal," Perry said, but Gavin noticed he could not meet his brother’s eyes.

"Twelve-twenty-three," Ida said, and Gavin looked up in time to watch another bus pull away from the cafe. Ida continued, "This must be the only town on earth where the busses run on time."

But Gavin ignored her comment, for he noticed his roommate had gotten off the bus and was entering the DCup. Lance spotted Gavin and rushed to his table. "I didn’t expect to see you here," Lance said. "Hi, Jessie."

"Hi, Lance," Jessie said, and Gavin thought he actually saw her bat her eyes.

"And you must be the little brother, Perry."

Lance dropped his heavy backpack on the floor and sat at the table.

"I’ve gotta go," Perry said, standing.

"What’d I say?" Lance asked.

"Perry, don’t go yet," Gavin said. "We still need to talk."

"Later, maybe. But I really have to get back to work."

"Tell Mom I’m okay, would you?"
“Why don’t you tell her?” Jessie said. “Give her a call. She’s a nervous wreck.”

“Okay,” Perry said with obvious reluctance. “I’ll call her tonight.”

“Call me, too,” Gavin said. “We really need to talk. I promise not to...be like Dad, okay?”

“Sure, I’ll call you, too.”

“We only worry because we love you, you know,” Jessie added.

“Yeah, I know.” Perry forced a smile and zipped his jacket. “Later.”

After Perry had left, Lance said, “I hope he didn’t leave because of me.”

“No, it’s a long story,” Gavin said.

“Do you think we should go after him?” Jessie asked.

“He’d only lead us on a merry chase, and we’d be no closer to finding out where he’s staying.”

“You’re probably right,” Jessie said.

“So what’s going on?” Lance asked. “Or is it a private thing?”

“Nothing,” Gavin said. “Just a family matter.”

“I should get going,” Jessie said, rising. “My psych midterm’s due tomorrow.”

“I thought all midterms were due last week,” Gavin said.

“I got an extension.” She sipped a bit of Coke. “Pay for this, would you? It’s on me, next time.”

“That’s what you said last time,” Gavin said.

“But this time I mean it!”

After she had left, Lance said, “So you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Not important,” Gavin said, changing the subject. “Hey, how’d it go at the library? Did you find those high school yearbooks?”

Lance slapped his forehead. “I completely forgot. I was so excited about this.” He pulled a large book from his backpack and handed it to Gavin.


“Yeah,” Lance said, taking the book back and flipping through the pages. “Wait till you see this.” He found the page he’d been searching for and began to read: “Weston, Iowa. Two point six miles north of town on County 12, there is an abandoned farmhouse, formerly owned by the Markale family. Though there is no story connected with this site to explain the odd phenomenon, a mysterious light appears in the attic most every night.” Have you ever heard of that?”
"Nope," Gavin admitted. "Never heard of the Markale family either."

"I wanna check it out tonight. Think we could find it?"

"What do you mean, 'we'?"

Lance looked sheepish for a moment. "I don't have a car...."

Gavin nodded, understanding. "So you need me to take you. In my car."

"C'mon, it'll be fun," Lance pleaded.

Gavin frowned. "Stomping around some supposedly haunted, abandoned house, in the middle of the night? How is that fun?"

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I don't know," Gavin said, shaking his head. "We'll be trespassing."

"No one lives there! Who'll care?"

Something about the idea nagged the back of Gavin's mind. He wasn't sure why he was so reluctant to visit the house, but the very thought caused a chill to creep through his scalp. But the more Lance argued and pleaded, the more Gavin realized his fears were irrational, so at last he gave in.

"Great!" Lance said. "How does ten sound?"

Gavin was about to agree, when the small bell over the door jingled, and Troy rushed in, carrying a motorcycle helmet. "I completely forgot," Gavin said to Lance. "I have plans tonight."

Lance looked crestfallen. "Can't you cancel? I really wanted to go tonight."

"Go where?" Troy asked, approaching the table.

Lance smiled brightly when he saw Troy, and he launched into another excited explanation of his plans. Gavin watched as Troy listened with increasing interest. Finally, Troy turned to Gavin. "Sounds like fun. Why don't we go?"

_Dammit, Troy!_ Gavin thought. _You're gonna blow it!_

Lance appeared confused. "Oh, you two have plans?"

"I'm tutoring Troy," Gavin said through clenched teeth. "In French."

"Right," Troy said, obviously realizing his error. "Tonight we're going over irregular verbs. But we can do this afterwards. Come on, Gavin. It'll be fun."

"Why do you both keep insisting it will be fun?"

Almost in unison, Lance and Troy said, "Because it will!"

"Fine," Gavin sighed. "Lance, we'll pick you up at ten."
“Great!” Lance said, stuffing the book into his backpack and standing. “I’m gonna go get some flashlights.”

“What about the yearbooks?” Gavin wanted to know.

“Oh, right. I’ll have to go back tomorrow. There’s just too much to do!” He hurried toward the door.

“Hey,” Troy called. “I wanna read your paper when it’s done.”

Lance smiled and waved as he left. Gavin fixed Troy with an angry stare.

“You almost blew it.”

“How was I supposed to know your own roommate didn’t know?”

“Nobody knows,” Gavin insisted. “Just you, my sister, and my brother.”

“Ida knows,” Troy said.

“That’s right,” Ida called. “I know everything. Like the fact that you should be working about now.”

Troy looked around the empty cafe. “I dunno, Ida. I don’t think I can handle all this work.”

Ida frowned and lit a cigarette. Troy turned back to Gavin. “I wouldn’t worry about Lance. I’m sure he’s clueless.”

Gavin frowned and sipped his coffee, which had gone cold. Grimacing, he handed the cup to Troy. “Warm this up, would you?”

“Yes, sir!” Troy saluted, taking the cup to the counter. After stowing away his helmet, he poured a fresh cup of coffee and one for himself, then returned and sat at the table. “So anyway, what do you want to do after I get off work?”

“I really hadn’t thought of it.”

A gleam appeared in Troy’s eye. “I guess my French could use a little work.”

Gavin shot a nervous look Ida’s direction.

“Calm down,” Troy said. “Actually, I was kinda hoping you’d take me to Merle’s tonight.”

Gavin froze, his cup halfway to his lips. “Why?”

“Need a part for my cycle,” Troy said, sipping his own coffee.

Gavin saw no sign that Troy had noticed his apprehension at the mention of Merle. “Oh. Well, you’d better call ahead and make sure he has the part.”

“Actually, I want to test a theory. Childish really, but...Okay, every time I call out there, looking for a part, he says the same thing: ‘I just got one of those
in last week. It will be here, waiting for you.’ So I wanna see what happens if I just show up, without calling first.”

“You’re right, that is childish.”

Troy grinned. “So indulge me.”

Gavin was thoughtful for a long moment. “Sunday night...,” he muttered, then spoke up. “Yeah, I guess it will be okay.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing,” Gavin said quickly, looking into his coffee cup.

“No, tell me. What is it?”

“It’s just...well, a lot of high school kids hang out there.”

“Yeah, I know,” Troy said. “They sit around, playing cards, smoking.”

“Drinking that strange beer he brews.”

“I’ve had the stuff. It tastes...not quite like beer. Sweeter almost.”

“And no matter how much you drink—”

“You don’t get drunk,” Troy finished.

“A little buzzed, but never drunk.”

“You sound like you speak from experience.”

Gavin toyed with the handle of his cup, not meeting Troy’s eyes. “Would it surprise you to know that I was once one of those kids?”

“You? I thought all the preppy kids hung out at the Youth Club downtown.”

“It’s not like that. Anyone can go to the Youth Club.”

“On paper maybe,” Troy said. “But even I know that the Youth Club is for professor’s kids. If you’re from the wrong side of the tracks, you go to Merle’s.”

“Well, maybe. Anyway, when I was...I dunno, seventeen? I started dating this girl named Jenny. She was from, as you say, the wrong side of the tracks, so she and all her friends hung out at Merle’s.”

“And naturally, since she couldn’t fit in your world, you tried to fit into hers.”

“It was more than that. Merle’s was exciting, almost dangerous.”

“Gavin Welsh: Rebel without a Cause.”

“Okay, so I wasn’t a rebel, and it wasn’t really dangerous. But it was fun for a time.”

“I can just picture you there,” Troy said. “In your Polos and penny loafers. I bet you were real popular.”
"I made friends," Gavin protested. "I got close to one or two people."

"So what happened? Why'd you stop going?"

"Jenny and I had a falling out over another boy."

"Oh?" Troy arched an eyebrow. "And which of you was hot after this boy?"

"It was her ex-boyfriend," Gavin said, quickly skirting Troy's implication. "She went back to him. After that, it was a little too painful to go back."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. We were from different worlds."

"Now that's a cliché if I ever heard one."

"Yeah? Well here's another: within every cliché is a kernel of truth."

Troy groaned. "Where'd you pick that up?"

"Invented it just now. Gavin Welsh: Preeminent Poet."

"Yeah, right. But seriously, you're okay with going to Merle's tonight?"

"That was years ago. I'm fine now, honestly."

"Okay then. I figure, once I get outta here, I can go home, shower, change. We can grab a bite, go to Merle's, and be back at your dorm to pick up Lance by ten."

"You know Lance, don't you?" Gavin said, remembering that he hadn't needed to introduce them.

"We had a class together last fall. Besides, Mallory isn't that big a college. You get to know pretty much everyone after a while. Especially when you work here."

"Oh, you work here?" Ida teased from the counter. "I never would have known."

"Is there something you'd rather I be doing now?"

"Aside from giving me a four-letter word for unhorsing a knight?" Ida said. "Joust doesn't fit."

"Tilt," said Gavin. "Which isn't strictly true. To tilt is simply to ride at the knight with your lance or jousting pole. I don't think there's a word for actually unhorsing him. Well, except unhorse."

"Way more information than I needed, college boy," Ida said, scribbling on her crossword puzzle.

"That is too much information," Troy agreed. "How the hell did you know that?"
Gavin shrugged. “I read a lot.”

“You have way too much time on your hands. Maybe I should start filling in the gaps.”

“Had too much time,” Gavin corrected. “I haven’t read anything for pleasure since high school.”

Troy shook his head slowly. “Reading for pleasure. What a concept.”

“You should try it sometime.”

“No, sir. I’m spending all my free time keeping you out of books and in my...,” he paused, obviously seeing the panicked look on Gavin’s face, and the glance he shot at Ida. “…presence.”

“Has anyone ever said you have a one-track mind?”

“Anyone? No. Everyone! And most don’t complain about it as much as you.”

“Well,” Gavin said, finishing his coffee and standing. “Most people aren’t me.” Smiling, he gave Troy’s shoulder a quick, covert squeeze. “Call me when you get off.”

“Don’t you want to be there?” Troy said with his impish grin.

Gavin ignored him and turned to Ida. “Troy will pick up my tab. See you later, Ida.”
Chapter Five

Gavin spent the rest of the day shopping, trying to take his mind off Lance's haunted houses, Perry's mysterious new job and home, and Troy's blatancy about his sexuality. The latter is what bothered him most at the moment.

Sure, Gavin was gay. He admitted it -- privately. Why should it be otherwise? He didn't understand people like Troy, who so openly proclaimed their sexuality in an unaccepting society. Were they masochists, welcoming the scorn and ridicule they inevitably earned? Troy didn't seem the masochistic type.

Gavin strolled casually through the fiction section of the bookstore near campus. Despite the fact that he was trying to forget his problems, the issue with Troy continued to trip through his mind. What advantage was there to flagrantly announcing his sexuality? Certainly it would only cause pain for his parents. And doubt about their parenting abilities. Shouldn't he spare them that anguish?

The flashy cover of a fantasy novel caught his eye. Two knights, one in a crowned helm and the other armed in black, battled before a crumbling castle. He took the book and read the blurb on the back. The story didn't seem as appealing as the cover picture had suggested, and he returned it to the shelf.

He had to admit that Jessie's reaction to his homosexuality had come as a surprise. When he'd first admitted it to her three years ago, she seemed to take it in stride, almost as though she had suspected all along. No, he thought. As though she had expected it of him. She had been his strong and faithful supporter from the start. Perhaps it was the social activist in her. She belonged to several campus groups, including the Students for Socialism, a fact which gave their father no end of grief.
Perry was another story altogether. Gavin hadn’t known what to expect from Perry, whose life was a mystery to Gavin. Raised in the same environment of refinement and intellectualism as his siblings, Perry had rebelled against everything his family held dear. While Gavin and Jessie had been honor students in high school, Perry’s grades were poor at best. When his siblings spent their free time reading or playing challenging puzzle-games, Perry ran wild with his friends. His attention span seemed limited. He had been a guitarist in four bands in the past two years. The current band had risen from the ashes of a miserable failure of an engagement at last spring’s high school prom. The fact that the new band had all the same members as the previous one didn’t seem to concern Perry. To say he was a disappointment to his parents would have been an understatement.

He did show a surprising proclivity for auto mechanics. While Gavin could barely locate his car’s oil dipstick, Perry could usually determine what was wrong with an engine simply by listening to it run. What was more, he could repair almost anything. Just this summer, he had re-built Gavin’s transmission, though it had taken almost two months to do so.

Perry also fancied himself an artist, though a dark and grisly one in Gavin’s opinion. He splashed color on a canvas with apparent ease, creating portraits of tortured souls and his own teenage angst.

Gavin wandered out of the bookstore and decided to walk the half mile to downtown. The day had definitely warmed, and the bright sunlight had melted all but the most determined patches of snow. As he left the small campus town behind and entered a residential area, his mind drifted back to the day he’d confessed his sexuality to both Perry and Jessie. It was a month before Gavin was to graduate from high school, and the three were in the basement of the family house, in what had become Perry’s bedroom. It was actually supposed to be the rec room, and there were still a few battered pieces of furniture in the near corner. Here the three had gathered to play a rare game of Monopoly.

“What are you saying, you’re a faggot?” Perry had said. He dropped the dice and moved his piece four spaces.

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I’m saying,” Gavin said, checking to see if he owned the property Perry had landed on. He knew that he didn’t, but it was easier than meeting his brother’s eyes.

Jessie nodded and took the dice. “It figures. You show all the signs.”
"What's that supposed to mean?" Gavin wanted to know, but before she could answer, Perry spoke up.

"You can't be queer. What about Jenny?"

Gavin sighed. "Jenny and I are just friends. That's all we've ever really been."

"You're taking her to prom next week," Perry protested, as though this somehow proved Gavin was, in fact, as straight as he was.

"Actually, she's probably going with Duke."

"You're still not gay," Perry insisted.

Gavin was at a loss to understand Perry's reaction. Apparently, so was Jessie, who said, "Perry, you have gay friends. What about Connie?"

"That's different," Perry said, folding his arms over his chest.

"Why?" Jessie said. "Because she's a girl?" Gavin admitted the thought was also crossing his mind. Perry made little secret of the fact that the thought of two women together excited him.

"No," Perry said. "Because it's just an act. She pretends to be a lesbian so guys will go after her. She's really straight. And so's Gavin. Is that why you're doing this? To get Jenny back?"

The board game was forgotten, and the rest of the afternoon was spent by Gavin trying to explain his strange, as yet unexplored feelings for men. Jessie was immediately supportive, citing numerous famous gay people from history and contemporary times. But Perry was having none of it, steadfastly insisting that Gavin was going through a phase, or simply vying for additional attention. In the end, the only thing he would agree to was a promise not to tell anyone about Gavin's newfound gayness.

To this day, Gavin reflected, Perry refused to discuss his brother's lifestyle, quickly changing the subject whenever it was brought up. Gavin had hoped that, in time, Perry's attitude would soften, but instead it seemed like a wedge driven into their relationship.

Downtown at last, Gavin tried again to push thoughts of Perry from his mind as he stepped into Weston's only other bookstore. This one was actually part of a national chain which sold used books, and although the shop was relatively small, the inventory was continually traded with others of the chain. Therefore, it seemed constantly new. The manager was a woman named Vivien Lake, who
had been the town’s head librarian until she retired a year earlier to open the store.

Gavin loved this store, and he tried to get to it at least once every other week. Oblivious to the passage of time, he could spend hours poking though the stacks, sometimes finding rare, out-of-print volumes at very low prices.

Despite his love for the store, Gavin found his heart wasn’t really in shopping today. The folklore-mythology section had nothing new since his last visit, and the history section was filled with the same dusty tomes as his father’s own library. Literature held nothing new, and he gave only a cursory glance at the popular fantasy fiction.

As he passed the cashier counter on his way out of the store, he noticed a young woman he didn’t recognize behind the register. She didn’t look up as he passed, instead flipping through the pages of a fashion magazine and loudly snapping her gum. Of course, Gavin realized. It was Sunday, the one day Miss Lake took off from work.

Vivien Lake was something of an institution in Weston. She lived with her sister, Marge, in a huge house on what was popularly known as Professor Hill, not too far from where Gavin’s own parents lived. This wasn’t surprising, considering Marge was a professor at Mallory College. Neither sister had ever married.

It was impossible to determine their ages. Though Gavin suspected they must be in their sixties, neither looked older than forty...though sometimes he had to admit that Vivien seemed much younger. They were as unlike one another as two sisters could be. While Marge was pale and somber, wearing her raven-black hair in a tight, severe style, Vivien was bright and cheerful, her golden hair cascading around her shoulders like an animate thing.

Gavin didn’t much care for Marge, who worked with his father and was often a dinner guest at his family’s home. She had made it clear from her attitude when Gavin was very young that she had little use for children, even intelligent children who showed an interest in history.

Vivien was a different story. When he came to the library, she always greeted Gavin with a friendly smile, and they talked for hours about whichever books he was reading. As he grew in age, Vivien encouraged him to grow in mind as well, constantly urging him to read more challenging books and push out the edges of the envelope of his world. When she had left the library and opened the
book store, she continued this role, and this was one of the reasons Gavin so enjoyed his visits to the bookstore.

As Gavin stepped out of the store, the glare of sunlight momentarily blinded him. He paused on the sidewalk for his eyes to adjust, and he felt a hand tugging at his coat. At first he thought it was a small child, but when he looked more closely, he saw a tiny, very old woman. She was no more than three feet tall, and her body was hidden within an ankle-length coat of moth-eaten fur. Her head was covered by a scarf, so that no hair showed. Her face was that of a frog, with great bulging eyes and a wide, lipless mouth. When she spoke, her voice was high and nasal:

"Tine pardon, young Master," she said, and Gavin could not place her thick accent. It was at once Irish and German, or perhaps Italian. "Dost ye know vhere Ee might haff me shpun eefixen?"

"I'm sorry?" Gavin said, not understanding.

The little woman cleared her throat and repeated herself, much more clearly, "My spoon. Where may I have it fixed?"

It was then that Gavin noticed that in her gnarled hand she held the broken pieces of a wooden spoon. He estimated that, were it whole, it would be nearly as long as her arm. "No, I'm afraid not," he said. "But it looks like a total loss to me. Maybe you should buy a new one."

"Nuu whun?" She slipped again into her accent, looking shocked at his statement. After a moment, she recovered herself. "No, dat vould neffer die." She suddenly squinted her bulging eyes at him. "Ee know hugh!"

"I don't think so," Gavin said, sure he'd remember such a woman, had he ever met her before.

"Aye, yess," she said, pointing a gnarled finger at him. "Ye hight--" and she spoke a word that sounded to Gavin like a throat-clearing linked to a wheeze--"Gwalchmai."

"No, ma'am," he said. "My name is Gavin. Gavin Welsh."

Oh, chure, chure," she said, nodding her large frog's head. "Velsh, ya. Dat is what hugh are." And with that, she turned and started down the street away from him, with more speed and grace than he would have expected. No shuffling or hesitating, it was almost as though she glided on wheels. Gavin watched as she disappeared into a store.
He was certain he’d never seen or heard of her before, which was odd in a
town the size of Weston.

That evening, after a quick dinner, Gavin drove Troy to the motorcycle
sales and service shop known simply as Merle’s. It was located in a converted
barn beside a small, overgrown apple orchard. The front half of the barn had
large, barred windows looking into showroom, while the back half housed the
repair bay.

The long driveway to the barn had been paved and repaired many times
over the years, and Gavin navigated around the small potholes that spotted its
surface. As he parked in front of the barn, he noticed the lights of the showroom
were off, and the sign in the door read CLOSED. This meant nothing, he knew, as
Merle was almost always to be found in the service bay, as any serious customer
would know.

“She’s a beauty, ain’t she?” Troy said, getting out of the car. Gavin followed
his gaze to a bike in the window. It was a huge motorcycle, white and chrome,
with blue flames charging up the sides of the gas tank. Although he was
personally rather afraid of motorcycles, Gavin had to admit this one was beautiful.

“C’mon,” Troy said, nodding toward the side of the barn. Gavin followed
him around to the back door, which they found unlocked.

The repair bay was crowded with work benches, tool chests, and
motorcycles in various states of repair. In one corner of the room was a big,
round table covered with green felt and surrounded by mismatched chairs.
Behind the table was a huge couch, bleeding white fluff from the holes in its ratty
upholstery. On the wall hung a well-used dart board.

The sight of the room brought a flood of memories to Gavin’s mind, like
water rising in a poorly sealed basement. For a moment, he saw Rick Whitehawk
and Joker Sanders, arm wrestling at the table before poker, as Kevin Boorman
watched with dull, bored eyes. Duke Penn was perched at his usual place on the
couch, reading one of the paperback novels Gavin had suggested. Jenny was in
the corner at the dart board, trying to talk Rick’s sister into trying a new eye
shadow.

So real was the illusion that Gavin almost called a greeting to his former
friends. But when he blinked his eyes, they were gone, and Gavin felt a little
foolish for seeing them in the first place.
“You okay?” Troy asked, concern written on his face.

“Fine,” Gavin said, recovering from his momentary hallucination. Before he could say more, Merle emerged from his tiny office.

Merle was a tall man, well built and hairless except for an iron-gray goatee. Despite the chill in the room, he was bare-chested, exposing the Celtic-knotwork tattoos on his arms. When he noticed Lance, he began to walk forward, but he stopped when he caught sight of Gavin.

“Gavin? Gavin Welsh?”

“It’s me, Merle,” Gavin smiled. “How have you been?”

“It’s been too long, Gavin,” Merle said.

As Merle said this, Gavin was assaulted by more memories, which crept from the corners of his mind like bold dust bunnies. Foremost were the images of the double funeral, where Gavin had last seen Merle. He swept the memories back under the rug in his mind. “Too long,” he agreed at last.

“Do you ever see any of the others?” Merle asked, his voice a low rumble.

“Joker? Rick? Marcie?”

“No,” Gavin said. “But I heard Rick joined the army.”

“Hmmm,” Merle grunted, nodding. “I heard that too.” He turned to Troy. “What can I do for you?”

Gavin noticed that Troy, who had been looking almost nervously around the room, snapped his attention back to Merle. “What? Oh, right! I was wondering if you had a left-handed skyhook.”

Without hesitation, Merle said, “Just got one in last week. Want me to get it for you?”

Troy appeared surprised. “No, that’s okay. I was just --”

“Won’t take but a moment,” Merle said, walking into the small parts room beside his office. “I’ve hired a new boy, and he’s taking inventory now.”

“What was that about?” Gavin asked when Merle had disappeared behind the door. “What’s a left-handed skyhook?”

“There’s no such thing,” Troy said. “I made it up.”

“Then why did you ask for it? What about the part you really need?”

“I don’t need a part,” Troy admitted. “I made that up too.”

“But then why are we here?”

“There’s something here I thought you should see.”
"What?" Gavin looked around the room, and his eyes fell on a young man emerging from the parts room, carrying some mechanical device Gavin didn’t recognize. It was Perry.

"Is this what you—" Perry stopped suddenly, his eyes growing wide when he saw his brother. "Oh shit."

"That," said Troy simply, "is what I thought you should see."

Gavin turned to glare at Troy. "You knew about this?"

"I came in here this morning, before work. I saw him here, and I knew right away he was your brother. When Merle said he was living here...."

"Living here?" Gavin shouted, turning back to Perry. "You’re living here, too?"

"Not here," glancing around the drafty back half of the barn. "Merle’s letting me stay in his house."

"This is insanity," Gavin said. "You’re coming home right now."

"No, I’m not," Perry said, raising his voice as loudly as Gavin’s. "Why should I?"

"Because you can’t live here. It’s bad enough you spend all your time out here, and now you work here. But live here? No sir. You’re going home."

"Why don’t you just get out of here, Gavin."

"Actually," Troy said, making his way toward the door. "Why don’t I get out of here and let you two discuss this."

"You stay right there!" Gavin commanded with so much force that Troy actually sat meekly on a short stool beside a badly dented motorcycle. Gavin tried to bring calm back to his voice. "Perry, give me one good reason why I shouldn’t call Mom and Dad right now."

Perry also seemed to calm down a bit. "Because I ask you not to. As your brother, I ask you to keep my secret."

The implication was clear: Perry had so far kept Gavin’s secret sexual desires from their parents, and now he asked Gavin to return the favor. Was it a threat? Would he expose Gavin if he told his parents where Perry was living?

"Please?" Perry said, and from his tone Gavin could tell there was no threat, just honest pleading.

"They’re worried about you," Gavin said.

"You can tell them you saw me, and that I’m fine. Just don’t tell them where I am. Not yet."
"When can I tell them?" Almost without realizing it, Gavin found himself agreeing to his brother's terms.

"Later," Perry said. "Soon. As soon as things calm down."

"I'm not happy about this, Perry."

"I know. I'm not really thrilled to be sneaking around either. But it's something I have to do."

Gavin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "All right. For now."

Perry smiled, obviously relieved. "Thanks."

"If you need anything, call me."

"I will," Perry said, still smiling. "And I mean it, Gavin. Thanks."

Almost as though he'd received a director's cue, Merle emerged from the storeroom. He nodded to Perry as the boy returned to work, then moved closer to Gavin. "I assume things are cleared up?"

"I suppose," Gavin said. "Why didn't you--" He paused, reflecting. It had been over three years since he'd even spoken to Merle, so there was no reason to expect the man to phone him with the news that Perry had moved in. "It's okay for him to stay here?"

"Perry? He's no trouble. In fact, he's been very helpful. And he's become quite the artist."

"Yeah, well." Gavin was unsure how to respond.

"Listen, Gavin, and this is important, though I can't tell you why. No, don't bother to ask. Just listen. It's very important for you to make peace with your brother."

Gavin was puzzled. He started to ask what Merle could mean, but the older man simply raised his hand and said, "Just trust me in this. Have I ever steered you in the wrong direction?"

"No," Gavin admitted.

"Very well then." Merle would say no more, instead lifting a large rubber mallet and beginning to pound the dents from the fender near Troy.

"Let's go," Gavin said to Troy. There was nothing else to say.
Chapter Six

It was still early evening as they left Merle’s, and Lance wasn’t expecting them until ten, so they decided to see a movie in town. But Gavin’s mind wasn’t really on the picture. He kept wondering why he had so easily given in to Perry’s request for secrecy. Was it because he sympathized with his brother and the difficulties of living with his parents? Gavin valued the limited freedom he had found in the dorm. No stern, clock-watching father imposing a curfew. No health-conscious mother watching everything he ate. And best of all, no eagle-eyed parent scrutinizing every friend he brought home.

Granted, with freedom came responsibilities. He had to wash his own laundry, an act he doubted Perry would ever be capable of. The dorm cafeteria was only open at certain times, and if he missed a meal, his mother wasn’t there to warm something up for him. And if he stayed out too late, there was no one to make sure he awakened in time for class the next morning.

But there had been something in Perry’s eyes, a desperation that went beyond a desire for freedom from his parents. Gavin wasn’t sure what it was exactly, but when he saw it, he was overcome with a sense of brotherly love he hadn’t felt for Perry in some time. And when he finally agreed, he thought he saw more than relief on Perry’s face. It was as though Perry too felt that bond, and maybe it was a desire to see that in Perry that had been the real reason Gavin had agreed to keep his brother’s hiding place a secret.

When he stepped out of the theater with Troy, Gavin found the temperature had fallen again. Pulling his coat closed against the chill, he walked in silence toward his car, as Troy chattered about the movie.
Suddenly, Troy stopped on the sidewalk. "Are you okay?"

Gavin also stopped and looked at Troy, realizing he hadn't heard a word his boyfriend had said. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm a little distracted."

"Thinking about your brother?"

"No," he lied. "He can take care of himself."

"Merle's a good guy. He'll watch out for Perry."

Gavin had to admit that was true. Despite the fact that Merle allowed minors to smoke and drink his home-brewed beer, Gavin held great respect for the man. "I'm sure everything will be fine," Gavin admitted at last.

"Good," Troy smiled. "So then what's on your mind?"

"Lance and his haunted house. I don't know if this is a good idea."

"Why not? We won't be hurting anyone."

"But someone could get hurt, stumbling around some abandoned house. At the very least, we could all wind up needing tetanus shots."

Troy shook his head, obviously amused. "You need to lighten up. You worry more than my mother."

They arrived at Gavin's dorm at nine-thirty to find the room lit only by the pale glow of Lance's computer screen. Reaching to his left, Gavin flipped on the light switch. "You're going to go blind one of these--" He stopped short when he saw that in the center of the small room was a fine-foot-tall stepladder. "What's this for?"

Lance looked up from his computer. "You're early," he said simply, then returned to his internet conversation.

"Why is there a ladder here?"

"We'll need it," Lance said. "The mysterious light is in the attic, remember?"

"Where'd you get it?" Troy asked, squeezing past Gavin and into the room. "Borrowed it from a guy down the hall. I've also got four flashlights, so we're all set." Lance shut down his computer and stood. "You ready to go?"

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea," Gavin said, noting the stern look from Troy. "But yeah, let's go. I hope this ladder fits into my trunk."

The ladder didn't fit in the trunk, of course, but hung out two and a half feet, even when they tried to wedge it in sideways. Conscious that Troy would
probably be ready with another biting remark about worrying too much, Gavin said nothing as Lance tied the trunk lid closed as far as possible.

As Gavin started the engine, Troy climbed into the back seat, silently consenting to Gavin's equally silent plea to allow Lance the front seat. "Okay," Lance said, clutching his Haunted Places to him like a bible. "You know where County 12 is?"

"Of course," Gavin said. "Forrest Way in town."

"Right," Troy said. "Runs past Union Cemetery."

Gavin glanced in the rear-view mirror to see Troy's grinning face. Two months ago, when the weather had warmer, Troy had taken Gavin to the cemetery one night to make out. Gavin also smiled at the memory, for though it had been creepy or first, the graveyard had proved a very peaceful, romantic location.

Gavin drove northward, and when a roadsign indicated that Forrest Way had become County 12, marking the city limits of Weston, he noted the mileage. "How far again?" he asked.

"Two point six miles," Lance said.

After another few minutes of driving, Lance pointed excitedly to the left. "There!"

Gavin looked to his left, and by the light of the nearly full moon, he saw a small farmhouse set half a mile from the road. As advertised in the book, there was a light burning in an attic window. There were no other lights evident about the farm.

As Gavin pulled into the long driveway, a thought occurred to him. "What if it isn't abandoned anymore? How old is that book?"

"Two years," Lance said. "And it doesn't look like anyone lives there."

Gavin saw that Lance was probably right. The house was unpainted, and most of the windows were boarded up. As they drove closer, he could also see the barn's roof had fallen in.

"Maybe it's just reflected moonlight," said Troy.

"No," said Lance, jumping from the car as soon as Gavin parked it. He pointed to a window on the second floor which was only half-boarded. The top half of its glass shone in the bright moonlight. "That's what a window looks like reflecting the moon."

Gavin got out of the car and, without thinking, hit the power locks for all the doors. The attic window was definitely lit from within, a steady yellow glow
unlike the pale light of the reflection. Troy stood beside him, nodding.
“Definitely a light.”

Lance tossed them each a flashlight and began untying the trunk. Troy said, “Why don’t we leave the ladder until we’ve had a look around?”

“Good idea,” Lance said, sliding on the switch of his flashlight.

“It could be a homeless person,” Troy said, following Lance toward the house. The front door was boarded shut, so they walked around to the back. The yard was overgrown and littered with boards and rusty pieces of metal. On the back porch was an old sofa, rotting in the elements. The door was a black gaping hole, the boards which had once covered it leaning on the wall.

“Well, someone’s been in there,” Troy said.

“So much for your ghost,” Gavin said, shining his flashlight into through the door. A carpet of dead leaves covered the otherwise empty kitchen floor.

“Doesn’t mean anything,” said Lance, adding his beam to Gavin’s. “Anyone could have pried the door open. Kids from town, wandering bums.”

“And they same kids could be in the attic even now,” Gavin said with increasing dread. “Who knows what they’re up to.”

“Only one way to find out,” Lance said, stepping cautiously through the door.

“Maybe someone should stay out here,” Gavin said, afraid and ashamed at the same time. He felt foolish being scared of an empty house, but he also couldn’t ignore the stirring in the pit of his stomach. Something about the place seemed unnatural.

“If you want to stay out here alone,” Troy said, his voice ominous. He placed the flashlight under his chin, eerily illuminating his face from below. “All alone, with no one to watch your back.”

“That’s enough,” Gavin said, walking slowly into the kitchen after Lance. “Don’t overdo it.”

They flashed their lights around the room. The doors of cupboards had been removed. The sink was filled with dirt and dead grass. “Amazing,” Troy commented, looking at the sink. “Doesn’t take nature long to reclaim, does it?”

“Listen,” Lance hissed. Gavin could hear nothing. Lance stomped his foot on the floor, a loud sound which echoed in the small room. Then silence again.

“I don’t hear anything,” Gavin whispered.

An uneasy feeling began creeping up Gavin’s spine, settling in his scalp. He ran the fingers of his free hand through his hair, trying to chase the feeling away.

“Don’t mice live in haunted houses?” Troy whispered.

“I dunno,” Lance said. “I just think it’s weird.”

“Lance,” said Gavin. “Why are we whispering?”

Lance looked puzzled a moment, then burst into laughter, a noise which filled the room and caused Gavin to jump half an inch. “I don’t know,” Lance said, his voice at a normal level now. “You started it.”

“Let’s just keep talking,” Gavin said. “If there is someone in the attic, I want them to have plenty of warning that we’re coming.”

“Nothing worse than a surprised ghost,” Troy joked.

Gavin shot Troy a sour look, but Troy just pushed him gently after Lance, who was heading down a short hallway toward the front of the house. Their feet rustled in the dry leaves which blanketed the bare floorboards.

The front room was as barren as the kitchen, except for a few scattered books, swollen with moisture. Moonlight forced it’s way through cracks in the window boards, casting shadows on the faded wallpaper. Lance’s flashlight beam fell on a rickety staircase up.

“That doesn’t look too safe,” Gavin said before he could stop himself. He turned away from the weary look on Troy’s face.

“So we’ll be real careful,” Lance said, stepping onto the first riser. It creaked loudly, but held him. Cautiously, the three made their way up the stairs and into another hallway. Three open doorways yawned on either side of the hall. Lance didn’t bother flashing his light into any of the rooms, instead scanning the ceiling. “There,” he said at last.

Gavin looked up at the pale circle of Lance’s light. A small trapdoor was closed ten feet over his head. Troy said, “Turn your light off.” They clicked off their flashlights wordlessly.


“And it isn’t moonlight,” Troy said. “Too yellow.”
“Someone go get the ladder,” Lance said.

Troy turned on his flashlight and started back toward the stairs. “I’ll go, too,” Gavin said, flicking on his own light.

“You stay with Lance,” Troy whispered. Gavin hesitated, but Troy gave him a stern look. “I can handle the ladder alone. You guys check out the bedrooms.”

Reluctantly, Gavin turned back to Lance, whose eyes were still locked on the ceiling. “What do you think it is?” he muttered.

“We’ll find out,” Gavin said. The stairs creaked and groaned as Troy descended. “Probably a kerosene lamp.”

“But who’s up there? I don’t hear anything.”

“They probably took off when they saw our headlights.”

“And left the lamp?”

Gavin shrugged his shoulders, at a loss. “Maybe they wanted to frighten us off. They’re probably outside right now, laughing their asses off at us.”

The moment he voiced that thought, another one came to the front of his mind. If there was someone outside now, and they weren’t laughing at them, Troy could be in some danger. An image flashed through his head of a shadowy figure clubbing Troy. Gavin tried to remember which window on the second floor had been partially uncovered.

The sound of leaves rustling downstairs startled him, and he called, “Who’s there!” more loudly than he’d intended.

“It’s me,” came Troy’s voice. “With the ladder.”

Gavin let out a long breath of relief. What was he so frightened of? Troy’s clomping feet on the whining stairs did little to put his mind to ease.

Troy set the ladder up under the trapdoor and turned to Lance, whose gaze had not left the ceiling. Troy said, “You want me to go first?”

Lance’s eyes snapped to Troy, as though shocked from a daydream. “No, I’ll go,” he said, quickly climbing the ladder. Immediately Troy and Gavin grabbed the ladder to steady it. Lance seemed to take no notice. Standing on the second to top step, he turned his flashlight back on and placed his free hand on the trapdoor. Instantly, the gold glow at the edges of the door vanished.

There was a screech from the rusty hinges as Lance pushed the door upward and flashed his light into the attic. Gavin suddenly felt light-headed, and panic struck him until he realized with a gasp that he’d forgotten to breathe.
Lance’s head and shoulders were through the trapdoor now, and he silently scanned the attic with his flashlight. After a few moments, Troy said, “Well?”

Lance leaned back through the doorway, his beam falling harshly on their faces. “There’s noth--” His voice was cut off suddenly when the trapdoor slammed shut, narrowly missing the top of Lance’s head. The crash of the door caused both Gavin and Troy to jump, and Lance nearly fell from the ladder. All three dropped their flashlights.

Gavin’s heart was pounding in his chest as he bent to retrieve his fallen light. When he stood again, he saw Lance had come down the ladder and was walking swiftly toward the staircase, his flashlight beam bouncing in front of him. Gavin looked to Troy, who only reflected his own confusion.

“What about the ladder?” Troy called, but Lance was already heading down the stairs. Troy quickly folded the ladder, and he and Gavin followed Lance.

They found him at the car, trying vainly to open the locked door. “Lance, what was it?” Gavin asked, as Troy wedged the ladder back into the trunk.

“Open the door,” Lance said, his voice cracking. “Open the goddamn door!”

Panic seized Gavin again as he fumbled with the car keys. He dropped them and stooped to find them. Lance continued pulling at his door handle. “Open the door,” he repeated as a litany. “Open the door. Open the door.”

“I’m trying.” Gavin said, finally getting the right key into the slot and unlocking all the doors. Lance got in, fastened his belt, and sat white-knuckled, staring out the windshield.

“Let’s go,” he said, starting a new chant. “Let’s go. Let’s go. Let’s go.”

“Okay, hang on,” Gavin said, sliding behind the wheel.

Troy got into the back seat. “What’d you see?”

“Let’s go,” was all Lance would say, until Gavin started the engine and began backing out of the driveway. By the dashboard lights, Gavin saw that Lance was beginning to relax, color returning slowly to his face. Gavin cranked up the car’s heater.

“Look,” Troy said, pointing to the light which had re-appeared in the attic window.

Lance went white again and refused to speak until they had reached town. As Gavin slowed through the streets of Weston, Troy prompted Lance again. “What was it? What did you see up there?”

“Nothing,” Lance said, his voice small.
“You must have seen something,” Troy said.

“No, that’s it. I saw nothing. Not a lamp, not a candle, nothing. I swear to God, there wasn’t even dust on the floor.”

A shiver ran through Gavin, despite the heat pouring from the dash.

“That’s impossible.”

“You’re welcome to go back,” Lance said. “After you drop me off.”

Gavin noticed his roommate’s hands were shaking, and he turned the heater up to its highest setting. “You okay, Lance?”

“I’m not going back there.”

“You know,” Lance offered. “There has to be a rational explanation. Maybe we should go back in daylight.”

“I’m not going back there,” Lance said more forcefully.

“Okay,” Gavin said. “You don’t have to go back.”

“Take me home.”

“Okay, let me drop Troy off first.”

“No!” Lance said emphatically. “Take me home first. I need a shower.”

Gavin glanced in the rearview mirror and saw concern on Troy’s face.

“Maybe we should stay with you,” Troy said.

“I’m fine,” Lance said. “I just need a shower.”

Lance’s hands were still shaking. Gavin noticed as he stopped in front of the dorm, but not as badly. “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Gavin said.

“I’ll be fine,” Lance insisted again, but he would not meet Gavin’s eyes as he slammed the car door and started up the steps to the dormitory.

Troy got into the front seat. “You think he’s really fine?”

“I dunno,” Gavin said, watching his roommate disappear into the building.

“I want to get back as soon as possible.”

“Good idea,” Troy agreed. “I’d stay, too, but it might look weird.”

“ Weird things happen in Weston,” Gavin said, suddenly remembering Lance’s words from that morning.

“What?” said Troy.

“Nothing,” Gavin said, shaking his head and putting his car into drive.
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