2005

Crypts

James Robert Wicka

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Crypts

by

James Robert Wicka

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Stephen Pett, Major Professor
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2005

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Graduate College
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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

James Robert Wicka

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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Chapter 1

“I came out here to tell you I’m taking that farmstead job at Lois’s, the one you told me about.”

Tanner’s grandmother shook her head. “But that job is manual labor. It’s a kid’s job. I told you about it so you could tell one of the college students at work.” She folded her arms, hugging her elbows. “Goodness, that must have been two months ago. I don’t even remember what Lois was going to pay. It can’t be very much.”

“No. But it’s a free place to stay. Plus Lois said she’d feed me, so I wouldn’t have that to worry about.” Tanner looked out the bay window in her living room. The view of Rapid City was better than he expected, but he hated that in exchange his grandmother had to give up her garden. It was mid May and normally she would be outside most days planting and weeding.

They were in her small apartment on the third floor of a retirement complex. The kitchen was connected to the living room, a space too small for the large table Tanner remembered from his childhood. In its place there was a square plastic table supplied by the complex. Tanner thought it would be perfect for light lunches alone and bridge games. He sat down, noting how shaky it seemed on its legs.

His grandmother walked over to the counter, and he expected her to make him a snack or to pull a Tupperware bin out of some hidden crevice, like she had years ago. Instead she took a coffee can out of her cabinet, adding two scoops to a cone-shaped filter. “It’s late for coffee, but I don’t have anything for us to munch on, and we can’t just stare at our hands.” She stepped carefully back to her chair. “I guess I don’t understand where this is coming from.”
"I owe back rent and the lawyers. Without a job, there’s no way for me to pay anyone. And with my picture in the paper those times, there’s no chance of me getting one soon."

"I have good credit," his grandmother said. "Your mother works at the bank, did you get her advice?"

"You’re not going into debt for me, and Mom doesn’t have enough. Besides, she disowned me the last time I talked to her, remember?"

"Tanner, you know she wasn’t serious. She’s just upset."

Tanner rose to get the cups so she wouldn’t have to. The coffee was long from done, but he wanted to be standing there when it was. Seeing her wince whenever she lifted herself up or guided herself down troubled him. In his memory, she had always looked old, but in the past few years, she had started to act old as well. She moved slower and complained about arthritis in her hands and hips. Tanner leaned against the counter, putting his back to the bubbling coffeepot. She could still hear it, but not seeing it might dissuade her from trying to get up.

"When I last talked to Lois around Easter time, she said she needed someone to clean out the old buildings on the farm. That doesn’t sound like you at all, Tanner."

"Change could be good for me. I’ll be working with my hands. Man’s work."

Tanner heard the coffee’s drip cease and turned to retrieve the pot.

"Even so, you’re not a farmer. You’re a telemarketer. Well—" she paused there. "You’re not even that. What about traveling along the coasts? You’ve got the tourism degree. If you’re going for a change, why not move to some resort. It’s what you’ve always wanted."
“Not only do I not have traveling money, tourist places usually do a credit check before they hire.” He handed his grandmother a cup, steam rising above the brim, and sat down. “Besides, I don’t have money to haul my stuff.”

“If you didn’t have so much, it wouldn’t be so expensive to haul.”

“Speaking of my stuff, I have something for you.” Tanner unzipped the backpack that rested near his foot. He placed a small juicer on the center of the table. He knew his grandmother hated it as soon as her jaw clenched into a smile. Her eyes floated down to the juicer, then back to him, the same smile stuck on her face.

“Why, Tanner. I never thought I’d own one of these.”

“To be honest, it was left in my Trailblazer after my last trip to the pawnshop. Even they didn’t want it, so don’t feel bad about not liking it.”

His grandmother’s grin slackened and became more natural. “Was I that obvious?” she asked.

“No, you were good. But you do have that same expression every time Mom wants you to meet a new boyfriend.”

His grandmother chuckled at this and joined him at the table. “What in the world do you use a juicer for anyway?”

Tanner thought for a few seconds. “There are hundreds of recipes in this book that came with it. Strawberry-banana and kiwi smoothies. That sort of thing. It’s healthy.”

“And did you ever make any of those?”

“Well, no,” Tanner admitted. It was his turn to chuckle.

“I suspect I won’t either. But I appreciate the gift.”
His grandmother spun her cup slowly, pushing the handle with alternating hands.

“You’re not staying in South Dakota because of Miss Hot Britches, are you?”

Tanner looked up, surprised at the question, but her eyes remained on her cup, sparing him some embarrassment. “No. I told you. I haven’t seen Kara for almost a month, maybe more. There’s a court order against us seeing each other. But you shouldn’t call her that. That’s not what it was like at all.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I just think that after what you’ve been through—what you’ve both been through—there isn’t much chance of a relationship.” She stopped spinning her cup and met his eyes. “But enough of that. Tell me more about the job. I haven’t been out to that farm in, oh God, it must be close to forty years. Lois and I usually just phone around the holidays. Did she explain what she needs?”

“I didn’t find out much. I checked to see if she had hired anyone. She hadn’t, and I accepted the job. She said that room and board were free, but the salary was up to her son.”

“Dennis. I forgot about him. He moved to Denver a long time ago. What about Chester?”

“Chester?”

“Her husband. He’s been sick. I hope he hasn’t died.”

“She didn’t mention it,” Tanner looked away from his grandmother, embarrassed about his next question. “Lois doesn’t know about my…situation, does she?”

“Not that I’m aware. It made the paper about the time I spoke with her. If she knew, she didn’t say. Us older people are like that, though. We know how to mind our own business.” His grandmother stared at him long enough to bring his attention back to her. “So you don’t know what you’ll be doing? How do you know you’ll be able to do the work?”
“She said it wasn’t farming.” Tanner shifted in his seat. “Look, Grandma. It’s not like I have a choice. I’ll be evicted soon, and I have no money for another place. Besides, I’d be helping someone out. That has to be good for my karma, right?”

His grandmother lowered her voice. “Tanner, you make penance with God. No matter what good deeds you do, you still need to talk with God.” She raised her coffee to her lips. “When are you leaving?”

“Early tomorrow. I have to pack tonight, then I’m taking off.”

“So is your mom getting a similar visit?”

“No. See, that’s why I came here. I wanted to tell you that I’m leaving and you’re the only one who will know where. That’s the way I want it. If I disappear for a while, maybe my troubles won’t be as big when I get back. Plus, if I’m out in the country, I won’t have anything to spend my money on. I might actually save up a little.”

“But people will be worried.”

Tanner shook his head. “Just you and Mom.”

“She won’t like not knowing where you are.”

“She won’t search too hard.” He poured the rest of his coffee down the drain and gave his grandmother a kiss on the cheek. “There was one more thing, though. Could you hold on to this?” He pulled a wrinkled envelope out of his back pocket and slid it across the table. “Just keep it until I get back. Don’t tell anyone, ok?”

Eight months before Tanner was fired, Roger, the owner of Eagle Telemarketing, had started dropping hints about a slump in sales between three and four, but he was too vague. He made offhand comments in his goodbyes or asked questions about shift changes around
the three o’clock hour. Once Tanner figured out what Roger was talking about, and figured out that he had been talking about it for some time, Tanner started flipping through his books to find a solution. Tanner assumed the slump was because it was directly after the last break for the day and right before people got to go home at four thirty. They were bored. He could see it on all their faces.

Over the weekend, Tanner finished a section in *Management’s Best Little Book of Big Secrets* about keeping people on their toes. The book said if your meetings were getting tedious, you should do something completely unexpected: come out of the bathroom with your clothes on backwards, bring in a set of tennis balls and throw them at people while you’re talking so they maintain alertness, or hop up on desks and other office furniture while you’re talking. Tanner read this and decided to tightrope walk the divider between two rows of cubicles and then turn around and walk back during the three o’clock sales slump. The stations at Eagle Telemarketing were comprised of miniature cubicles lined up against each other, stretching down a row. For support, a metal divider was between each row, about four feet off the ground and five inches thick. This was what he slowly inched his way down.

He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, but his tie swept in his vision. He looked up and saw everyone staring at him. “Bet you guys always wanted to try this.” Most of the employees had curious expressions, but a few towards the back were smiling. He noticed Kara among them. She was the youngest person at Eagle Telemarketing and fit in well. He had hired her last week, but she had already become the office sweetheart. Her smile reassured him, but he had hoped more people would see the humor.
He passed by Mrs. Rollin, one of his older telemarketers. She had her neck craned up towards him and he started briefly, afraid that he might fall on her. He saw fear in her eyes, and also a little reproach.

Despite Mrs. Rollin’s expression, Tanner gained confidence when he made it to the next station without stumbling. This confidence almost made him speed up, but he wasn’t that cocky yet. Billy, a hippy kid who complained incessantly about not being able to drink coffee at his desk, gave him a bemused look. Tanner couldn’t tell if this meant he was spreading the interest that the book promised or only creating confusion.

*Before I know it, I’ll be pulling coins out of people’s ears and hiding bouquets in my sleeve,* Tanner thought.

Shelly, the girl next to Billy’s station, leaned over and whispered in Billy’s ear. This was better than meeting blank face after blank face, and he burned to hear what she was saying. Shelly spent more time talking with Billy than she did on the phone. Tanner wouldn’t be surprised if she was talking about her weekend, totally oblivious to everything going on around her.

He had planned on doing an about face when he reached the end and then walking back the way he had come, but he could already feel the sweat on his temples and at the base of his ears. He was three people away from the end, where there was a small space between the row and the wall for people to pass through. Now he expected to get down as fast as possible and never haul his managerial butt up here again. But as he passed the next station, Susie Delver, a short housewife who spent time on the phone during the winter while the kids were at school, looked excited. Her eyes were wide and she was glancing around at people to her left and right.
Regina, Susie’s neighbor, had a similar tickled expression. Tanner considered that maybe the college kids were just too cool to show excitement about something like this and Mrs. Rollin was just an old shrew. It was possible this little stunt was doing exactly what he had wanted it to. Maybe they would be talking about this for weeks after. But the last face, Betsy Wilmot’s, returned his fears of looking foolish. She had dead eyes and the corners of her mouth were turned down.

He reached the end of the divider, and started to jump, but stopped. This distance looked farther than it had when he had climbed up, plus his legs were tired now and he didn’t know if he’d be able to stick his landing. He looked over at Betsy and she said, “Don’t jump on my desk, Tanner.”

“Wouldn’t even consider it,” Tanner said, obviously winded. The drop was only four feet, but that was what worried him. If he stumbled as he landed, even slightly, it would be the one thing they would remember.

He jumped and trembled as he landed on his right foot, but he doubted anyone except a few people right next to him noticed. He spun around slowly and met the sea of blank faces that he had feared. Some people were giving him a nervous smile, others were just giving him an empty expression. Almost everyone had pulled their headphones partway off—just enough to still hear, but far enough off so they could catch whatever explanation he was going to give them.

He picked Kara out right away because her smile hadn’t faltered. Even in the other faces that were smiling, Tanner saw discomfort. Kara looked genuinely pleased.
Three seconds passed. Insignificant really, but seemingly longer with everyone’s eyes on him. Kara’s adoring expression gave him the confidence he needed to say, “Just something I always wanted to do. You guys can get back to work now.”

The employees righted their headsets and returned concentration to their screens. Tanner slinked back to his office, relieved that everyone’s attention was off him. Everyone’s except Kara’s. Her eyes followed him and he smiled as he passed her station. He was too embarrassed to come out the rest of the day. He was even more embarrassed when the reports showed no improvement in sales.
Tanner slammed the door of his Trailblazer and walked up to the doublewide trailer at the end of the driveway, the newest looking building here by forty years. Tanner didn’t realize he had formed a mental picture of the farm until he actually saw it. He had imagined something like Green Acres, a polished, Technicolor farm with white picket fences and neatly squared fields. In reality the farm looked like what Tanner assumed the Manson family compound had. The buildings closest to him had a hint of paint, but most of it had flecked off years ago. Even in patches where paint still clung, the underlying boards looked warped. Tanner was also surprised by how many buildings he saw. He counted twenty, but he thought there might be more hidden from his view. Surrounding each structure were piles of what appeared to be garbage: rusted parts, junked pieces of farm equipment, collections of wire. Some of the buildings had pieces of metal on their roofs which reflected the morning sun.

Tanner had driven over forty miles after leaving Spearfish, passing through Belle Fourche. Judging from his map, he should have hit another town called Tiber, but he hadn’t seen one. It was drier here than in Spearfish; the grass was a lighter shade of green and turning brown in places. The grass would become drier and drier as spring turned into summer. As soon as Tanner started to climb the porch steps, an older woman emerged from the trailer. He stopped halfway up, three steps from the top.

“Tanner, how are you?”

She addressed him like an old friend, and her lack of an introduction set him back. She was gray and wrinkled, but her skin seemed paler than a healthy person’s, almost blue.

“I’m fine. Lois?”
"Yes. I'm Lois. You're a lot smaller than I imagined. Your Daddy was tall. Taller than my Dennis by at least six inches, and they weren't but a few months apart in age."

Lois's reaction was familiar, an annoying one he had learned to ignore completely. His father had been tall, nearly six three, and stocky. Tanner had been told his entire life that he was one growth spurt away from his father's size, but the spurt never came. "I didn't know you knew my father."

"He and your mother came out to visit twice. Must have been back in the seventies when the boys were still in high school. You got the same light brown hair, I see." Lois examined him for another few seconds. "I'm glad to have you lending a hand. Really, though, we don't need anyone. Chester'll be back on his feet in no time, but I suppose there's no harm in getting a head start."

Tanner felt awkward looking up from his spot below her and climbed the remaining steps. When he was on the same level, he looked at the liver spots on her forehead. "And what is it that I'm getting a head start on? You mentioned cleanup, but I'm not sure I understood you."

She appeared to reflect on this for a few seconds, then answered, "Didn't I explain that over the phone? My son Dennis thought it was time to clear out some of these old buildings. It was his idea to hire someone like you to come out. Not that I'm saying I don't want you out here. I'm just saying it was his idea." She stopped, seemingly to wait for a response.

"And what does he want me to do?"
“You’ll have to ask him. He specifically said he wanted to speak with you before you begin. I’ll call him later so you can get the details. Meantime I’ll give you a tour. That should let you know what needs to be done.”

Lois took Tanner down a worn path that led between all of the buildings. “This used to be the Richter’s Boys Home. It was a work-release farm for juveniles in the fifties. Some of the buildings were bunk houses for the boys, others are from the actual farm. That there was the old chicken coop,” she said, pointing to a building with red trim. “You can tell because of the small door on the side.”

“Did you ever have chickens?”

Lois looked down. “I wanted to when we first moved out here but never got around to it. Chester said it was cheaper to just buy them in the town. He’s right. Plus you don’t have to worry about animals getting them or keeping them alive in the winter.”

“I hear they’re pretty dirty things anyway.”

“Yes, you’re right. But it’s what I dreamed about when we first got married. I always wanted to live on a farm, like I did growing up.” Lois stared over the roofs of some of the buildings. “Did you grow up in Spearfish?”

“I’m from Rapid City, but I’ve lived in Spearfish since I finished college. I was in telemarketing, but I’m taking some time off. Needed to get away for a while.”

She stopped, causing him to turn back when he had advanced past her. “Were you with the phone company? You’re not one of those that call all hours of the day? Interrupting supper and everything else?”
“No. Of course not,” he answered quickly. “We only called businesses. Never people at home.” While this was true for their smaller campaigns, the largest portion of their business was home sales.

“Oh. Good. I’m glad you’re not one of those,” she said, continuing her stride. “And are you Catholic, like Jeanie?”

It took Tanner a moment to realize she was referring to his grandmother. “Yes. I was confirmed at St. Anthony’s in Rapid City.

“I always tried to talk Jeanie out of that place. Community is really what it’s all about. That’s what makes a church. Catholics have no sense of community. You’ll have to come with me this Saturday. The Adventists, they’re a wonderful group.” She grabbed his arm. “Oh, I have to show you the Kitty Bungalow!”

She turned him around, leading them back the way they had came. Lois wore a pink, short-sleeve blouse and white pants. Tanner couldn’t imagine anyone doing farm work in white clothes. She stopped in front of the building closest to her trailer. This building looked like the others but had two open windows with chicken wire tacked into the frames. The smell hit him as they neared. Cat shit and piss. An odor with weight to it. She twisted a latch and Tanner followed her through a small entryway which led to another door. She pulled the outside door closed. “Little buggers are always trying to get out.”

She opened the inner door and the smell intensified. In a large single room, cardboard boxes sat on top of one another, lining the walls and piled in the center. The boxes were shoulder height to Tanner and had small circular holes cut in them. Tanner saw more traditional cat houses scattered around these, the kind covered with carpet that people bought in stores. The cats ran atop the boxes and all over the floor. Black, grey, calico, white.
Thousands from what it seemed at first look. They were all mangy: some with clumps of fur matted into their backs and tails, others with large patches of hair torn or chewed off, all looking like they had survived some sort of cat apocalypse. Several rushed the door behind Lois. Others fought for positions around Tanner and Lois’s legs, rubbing their bodies against them. Tanner felt like pulling his limbs inside his body.

“See that one there?” She pointed to a calico perched on top of the sky rise of boxes. “That’s Gregory. He used to be with Lady, but now I think he’s got his eye on Guinevere. I hope nothing comes of it, though. I can’t have Lancelot and Guinevere splitting up. I’d have to change their names.”

Tanner couldn’t tell if she was joking or not, but he couldn’t bring himself to laugh. He couldn’t breathe. He realized Lois was staring at him, waiting for some kind of a response, so he asked, “How many do you think you’ve got in here?”

“I’ve got thirty-five right now, but Ginger’s pregnant. Here, help me get them back.”

He kicked the cats out of the entryway, sweeping with the side of his leg, mimicking Lois in her actions. More kept rushing at them, but they soon had them corralled enough to close the inner door.

Once outside he wheezed and fought the urge to wipe his eyes. “How often do you let them out?”

“Oh, never. A raccoon or a fox might get them. Maybe even a skunk. Then I’d have to give my babies a bath. You know how much cats hate baths. But you don’t need to worry about that building, though. It’s the only one you won’t be cleaning.”

She walked him past several more buildings, describing them by what their function had been thirty or forty years ago. His trailer was at the very end. It was a single, tiny
compared to her own, and it looked dilapidated. The windows were covered with a brown filth Tanner couldn’t identify and there were several holes in the fiberboard that made up the trailer’s lower half. Tanner suspected it would be condemned if inspected, but it was better than the buildings he had just seen. Plus it was on the other side of the farm, away from Lois’s trailer. *Probably want as much space between that woman and her cats as I can get.*

On their way back to Lois’s trailer, they passed by the building Lois had called the duck coop. “Lois, do you mind if I take a look inside? I’d like an idea of what I’ll be doing.”

“Sure, Tanner. Nothing should be locked.”

Tanner twisted the rusted knob. Through the open door, he could see newspapers, stacked all the way through, reaching at times above his head. He stepped inside alone and grabbed the nearest stack, flipping through the top few papers. June 1987, May 1986, and earlier. Another stack had later dates, another seemed to be from earlier in the 80’s. There was no path inside to the deeper stacks, but Tanner was already intrigued by how far into the past they would go.

He stepped outside and pulled the door closed. “Lois, what is all this?”

“Oh, you know how people love old things. Chester saved all of our newspapers. He also found a lot at the dump.”

“The dump?”

Lois smiled. “Yep. Back before he got sick, Chester made two or three trips everyday. He never came back with an empty load.”

“And he put everything in here?” Tanner asked, gesturing towards the open door.
Here and everywhere. He had everything planned out. Let’s see…the papers went in here. Most of the furniture went in the barn. He put all the electronics in the…well I don’t remember where everything went. That was Chester’s business.” She stopped abruptly.

“Hey! Chester. You have to meet Chester. Plus I can make you a sandwich to get you started.”

Lois led him back towards her house, but Tanner stopped her at the next building. He turned the knob, but it just spun around and around, not catching. Tanner let go and pushed the door open with his palm. Three sets of bunk beds sat in the center of the room, built from mismatched boards, but expertly cut and placed together. On the left sides of each bed, someone had nailed miniature ladders, though these were of an inferior quality, obviously not constructed by the bunk bed’s carpenter. Cardboard boxes and milk crates filled the rest of the building’s one room. Tanner stepped inside but Lois didn’t follow. He didn’t bother opening the boxes, because he suspected the contents would be the same as the crates. Light bulbs. Everything was covered with a thick layer of dust, but each lidless box or milk crate was full of light bulbs. Tanner saw assorted sizes, but most looked like household socket size.

Tanner picked one up, using his thigh to brush the dust off of the end before bringing it to his eyes. Seventy-five watts. He set it back inside the crate, the glass tinkling against the others. What's she going to pay to clean this out? Doesn’t seem like hard work, just tedious. I could stretch this out until the start of winter. If Kara can still graduate early, this could shape up nicely.

Lois yelled in to him, “Chester really wants to meet you.” He met her outside, but stopped again to look at the next building. At first, he thought he had found Chester’s garage
because the building was filled with larger pieces of equipment, but there was no space to work. On the floor, Tanner saw an antique generator with cut and fraying wires spilling off in every direction. Next to this sat two engines on blocks, which Tanner assumed came from farm vehicles, but he didn’t know a lot about mechanics. He saw more boxes, but they were grease covered and taped shut. *There’s five refrigerators packed into the corner,* Tanner thought. *That must have been a lot of work. This guy was one hell of a pack rat.* He took one more look around the room, then joined Lois outside. *Maybe Chester can explain some of this.*

Chester was spread out in a reclined lazy boy in the living room, hooked up to an old-fashioned respirator, a web of tubes covering his body and connecting down to an oversized suitcase. The image reminded Tanner of the props from the old nineteen fifties sci-fi movies. He met eyes with the old man and saw anger.

Lois spoke as soon as Tanner was fully in the room. “Hi Tanner, I’m Chester. I’m very happy you’re coming to stay with us.” Lois stood next to Chester, one arm resting on the back of his recliner.

Chester wailed through his respirator, giving off a higher pitched squeal than what a human normally produces, and rocked back and forth, trying to get out of the recliner. Two straps across his chest held him fastened to the chair.

Chester’s respirator wailed again and kept making a soft sputtering noise. “See, he likes you,” Lois said. Lois spoke for Chester, just like she dictated the romantic lives of her cats.
Tanner doubted Lois's assertion. From the look of the farm, Chester had been collecting things for the last thirty years, turning the buildings into crypts of everyday crap. Now Tanner was out here to throw it all away.

The eeriness inside Lois’s trailer reminded him of the light bulb building. Everything was neatly arranged and placed on shelves with an accompanying doily, but ceramic animals stood next to plastic figures of Jesus, next to postcards of malnourished children. The decor was so odd that it almost drew attention away from Chester, the dying cyborg who dominated the room.

“Lois, weren’t we supposed call your son?” Tanner was grasping for any reason to get them out of the room.

Lois took her eyes off Chester and stared at Tanner. “You’re right. Go have a seat at the kitchen table. I’ll get him for you.”

Tanner was thankful the phone was in the kitchen and not near Chester. He sat down at the round formica table and before he even saw her dial, Lois said hello to someone and was pressing the phone to his ear.

“Uh, hello?” Tanner asked.

“Yeah. This is Dennis. You the guy my mother hired?”

“Yes. I just drove out a couple of hours ago.”

“She was supposed to clear you with me first. I hope you haven’t settled in.”

“No. Not yet,” Tanner said. “But I don’t understand what the problem is.” Tanner wanted to mention that Dennis had met his father, but Dennis didn’t sound friendly.

Tanner talked on the phone for close to twenty minutes, eventually winning Dennis over. Tanner suspected Dennis had been worried that Lois had hired some college kid who
had no intention of doing actual work. When he learned that Tanner was twenty-six and four years out of college, he eased up. But Tanner didn’t win Dennis over as quickly as he had anticipated. Tanner was awkward in person, but a master at selling himself over the phone—or at least he had been. Since getting fired, his confidence had dried up.

“So in terms of the buildings, what am I supposed to do? What’s worth saving and what do I throw out?” Tanner asked.

“Nothing. Save nothing. Anything you can’t resell, haul to the dump. I don’t care if my mother or father start calling something an antique, get rid of it. I hope Mother didn’t promise you a salary because there won’t be one. Some of that junk has to be worth something. You take that to the pawn shops or wherever. Give half to Mother, keep the rest for yourself. It isn’t going to be enough to start a savings account over, but with a free place to stay and free meals, you’ll do fine. I’ll be out in August to check up on you.”

“You’re coming here?” Tanner asked, but his mind was elsewhere. He’d left the key to his apartment. He had no other place to go, but no pay changed their arrangement drastically.

“Up for the motorcycle rally with my boss. Don’t worry about the how or why. Just get the buildings clean.” Dennis said nothing for a few seconds and Tanner almost asked if he was still on the line. “One other thing. Mother really protested when I asked her to hire someone to clean. Try not to upset her, but also watch out for her a bit. She gets confused sometimes.”

“Confused how?”

“Listen, I have to get back to work. Good luck.”

Tanner handed the phone to Lois to hang up. “Looks like I got the OK.”
“That’s wonderful. I knew Dennis wouldn’t mind. He just likes to be in the loop. Now, are you hungry?”

“No thanks. I have a lot of unpacking to do.” Tanner was more worried about Lois’s cooking abilities than his timeframe. If she spent much time in the cat house, he didn’t want her preparing his food.

“Sure. Sure. You have to get settled. If you need anything just look around. We have everything out here.”

Whoever had lived in Tanner’s trailer last was foul. Lois hadn’t mentioned anything about the previous tenants, but they’d had pets. Pets seemingly with more run of the house than the people. He found dried up curls of feces in several of the rooms, along with moldy pieces of food left in containers on the floor. The furnishings turned out to be a stain-soaked mattress in the bedroom—which he dragged into the sun to air out—two couches covered with animal hair, a coffee table and end set, a microwave, a fridge, and a TV that only picked up CBS. *No TV, no pay, and a million cats. I guess this what I’ve earned myself,* Tanner thought.

He laid the dustpan flat and swept what was left of the kitchen floor’s dirt onto its surface. He emptied the dustpan in the cardboard box he’d been using as a garbage. To the left of the box, he noticed a phonebook in a pile of books he had discarded. The pile had shifted and the phonebook now stuck out partway. The cover was one he recognized—an old design from his childhood. He slipped it from its spot, setting the other books off balance and causing them to spill towards him. He carefully flipped through the book, knowing exactly what picture he would find on page 147. Lois was right. He did have his father’s
hair, but that was all. He clearly had his mother’s eyes, but the rest of his face was a mystery. There wasn’t any resemblance. His father had a thick chin with distinct cheekbones. Tanner’s own features were understated, his eyes almost sunken into his head. And Tanner was almost seven inches shorter.

In the months after his father’s heart attack, Tanner had ridden his bike all over town, finding this exact phone book and tearing out all the real estate ads that had his father’s picture. He saved them in a folder that he kept hidden under his bed. He wasn’t sure what someone would say if they found it, but the folder seemed like something that he shouldn’t tell people about. Thinking back, Tanner couldn’t remember where it had ended up. He slowly peeled the page from the binding, folded it and slid it into his back pocket before returning to rinse his rag in the sink.

He wiped down the windows, but quickly realized he’d need cleaner. There was none with the other supplies he had found under the kitchen sink. He stepped out of his trailer, surprised that it was already getting dark. He walked towards Lois’s trailer, but stopped when he saw lights on in a camper.

He remembered seeing the camper earlier, but Lois hadn’t mentioned other people, so he had assumed it was just another junked-out vehicle. He approached slowly, trying to pick out the voices he heard as he drew near. One was Rush Limbaugh, but it was accompanied by a low, guttural voice that seemed to grumble in agreement. Tanner stopped a good distance away, sure whoever was inside was used to privacy, and debated how to continue. He cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, “Hello,” hoping this would seem less obtrusive than a knock. Instantly a shadow popped up in the window and then the screen door flew open. A shirtless man, somewhere in his late fifties or early sixties, emerged with
his hand extended. He had a full head of scruffy white hair and similar patches covered his
arms, chest, and ample belly. His skin was a deep red and looked like it would peel if
touched.

“Howdy. Tanner, right?” He grabbed Tanner’s hand and gave it a brief but tight
shake. “Pleased to meet you.”

“You too. Did Lois tell you I was coming?”

“Lois told me you’re cleaning up the whole lot. She tried to talk me into helping you.
Don’t get any ideas, though. This place is a shit hole, no mistake about it. I’m not touching
an inch of it. Come on in, I’m just getting dinner started.”

Tanner was embarrassed about not knowing the man’s name, but he accepted the
invitation. He knew he should get to Lois’s before she went to bed, but the camper’s owner
had already turned to go back inside.

He motioned for Tanner to sit down at the kitchen table. Tanner could see that the
table was fastened with a hinge to flip it completely into the wall. “You might hear Lois call
me Ollie, but don’t follow suit. It’s Oscar. Just Oscar. Sometimes she forgets that. I was
Ollie to some people back at the mine, but no more.”

“Up at Homestake?” From his reception, Tanner could tell that Oscar had no idea
about his past.

“Yeah. I was a mechanic. Worked with Chester. Course that was before the
gambling came in. Deadwood went to shit real fast after that. The property values didn’t
skyrocket like they predicted, and anything that couldn’t make a buck off gambling moved
out of town. After the mine closed, there was really no reason to stay.” Oscar pulled a
package out of the freezer and set in on the counter. “Dinner’s frozen waffles with pork and beans. If I’d known company was coming, I would have chilled the caviar.”

“You must entertain a lot. Have you been out here long?”

“About two years. I planned on finding something close to Deadwood, then Lois brought up moving out here, and the rent was too cheap to pass up. She said I could have your place, but my old camper suits me fine. I could afford more on my pension, hell I’d have enough saved up to buy this damned place, if the bar in town would close up.”

“Spend a few nights there?”

“Just those that end in –y,” Oscar said, chuckling in a deep voice.

Tanner forced himself to laugh too. He was surprised he and Oscar were getting along. He didn’t enjoy dealing with people face to face. Part of what Tanner liked about telemarketing was that he interacted with people that were hundreds or thousands of miles away. But Oscar seemed like he could make a friend to pass the time spent in isolation, or if things got particularly boring, they could go tear things up in town. Tiber was pretty far away from Spearfish, people might not know his story there.

“We’re almost done here,” Oscar said. “We’ll eat in about two minutes.” He pushed the waffles down into the toaster. Tanner noticed Oscar had a large scar on the back of his hand that ran to his wrist.

“So what is Tiber like exactly? I thought I’d see it on my way here, but I missed it somehow.”

“Missed it? You drove right through it. The gas station slash grocery store, Rickey’s bar slash restaurant, and the post office.”

“That’s it?”
"Yep."

While Oscar stirred the beans on the stove, he explained that Tiber was really only a town in name. The buildings that constituted “downtown” were more of a pit stop for the people that lived out here. Everyone had to go forty miles to Spearfish if they needed a major purchase or thirty to Belle Fourche for the smaller things. There was postal delivery, but all residents had to haul their own garbage to the dump. Tiber had other businesses, but they were all run out of people’s homes and didn’t advertise other than word of mouth. Sheryl had a workshop in the back of her husband’s barn where she could fix almost any electrical appliance. Jerry informally ran an auto repair shop out of his garage. May had a state-of-the-art computer and would type anything for a small fee. Almost all the women over fifty claimed to have a crocheting or knitting business.

The first batch of waffles popped out of Oscar's four-slice toaster and he divided them up onto two plates. He grabbed syrup and butter from the fridge and placed the huge pot of beans on the table. Oscar handed Tanner the syrup after drowning his two pieces, then started spooning beans onto Tanner’s plate with an oversized ladle. Tanner picked at his food, wishing he had taken Lois up on her sandwich. He thought cat hair on his lunch meat might be preferable to this. They ate in silence, though there was still much that Tanner wanted to know.

When they were nearly finished, Tanner asked, “So when did you meet Chester and Lois?”

“Oh? I’m not the best with dates. Probably around the time I started at the mine. Had to be in the late sixties. I only worked for a year with Chester, but he was still around, even after going on disability. Miners tend to stick together.”
“What happened to him? You mean he’s been on that machine since the sixties?”

Oscar looked up from the last of his meal. “Hmm? Oh no. What happened at the mine was just a bump on the head. He was out for a couple of days, but nothing like this. This is cancer. Lung. Real bad.”

“Oh,” Tanner said. “But if his injury wasn’t that bad, why’d he stay on disability.”

Oscar sighed. “Chester’s always been...different. People that didn’t know him before blamed the knock he took to the head. But those of us who knew him didn’t notice a change. He’s always just been different. He stirred up a lot of trouble at the mine, always talking about race wars and the evils of unions. Things that made the higher-ups uncomfortable. And Chester had been in the machine shop for a long time. He was up for a promotion. I guess someone thought it was easier to leave him on disability.”

Oscar pulled a 1.75 of cheap Canadian whiskey out from under the miniature sink, and poured two oversized shots into plastics cups he drew from his cabinets. Straight whiskey was not the best follow up to the rich syrup, but Tanner didn’t want to be rude. He accepted and they touched cups, not bothering with a toast. Oscar slammed his back and Tanner tried to do the same, but there was too much for one swig and he had to take two.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Do you have any window cleaner?”

Oscar didn’t answer but pointed to the dirt tracks on his floor and the grease spilled on his stove. “You may be looking in the wrong place for cleaner.”

Tanner thanked him for dinner and said goodnight, deciding to skip getting supplies from Lois. He moved past building after building, noting that each was surrounded by different piles of metal. But none of the surrounding debris offered hints about what the building contained. Tanner was happy that he wasn’t going to be alone out here with Lois
and Chester. But that was all he really had to be happy about. The deal had gotten worse and worse, but it kept him in South Dakota and close to Kara—even if she didn’t know where he was yet. She’d called him close to a month ago from a payphone so the conversation wouldn’t appear on her cell phone bill. He’d been thinking about the job then, but hadn’t mentioned it. But she had to know wouldn’t leave for good without saying goodbye. He’d explain everything to her, if he could figure out some way to see her without getting caught.

Tanner stepped over to a building with a large piece of farm machinery tucked snuggly against its wall. The machine appeared to be a powered scoop with a series of interlocking wheels and spires in the front. He couldn’t tell what its purpose had been, nor could he tell if it would be valuable to sell as scrap. Tanner was only halfway concerned about pawning things for money, though. The envelope he’d given his grandmother had four thousand dollars in it. It was two hundred dollars short of paying off his lawyer and his landlord. But Tanner intended the money to get him and Kara somewhere far from South Dakota. As long as he dropped his landlord and his lawyer a hundred dollars ever few months, they wouldn’t come after him. He was confident he could still make enough for that out here. There were close to forty building, and he was sure to find something valuable. As he walked back to his trailer, he grabbed his sleeping bag from the Trailblazer. The mattress inside his bedroom was too soiled to sleep on. Instead he slept in the living room on the sofa, the whiskey and syrup battling in his stomach.
Chapter 3

Tanner found the keys to Chester’s ’78 pickup in the ignition. Yesterday Lois had indicated this was the vehicle he should use for runs to the dump. He backed the truck up to the newspaper building and started chucking bundles into the bed. Everything inside was so close to the door he was able to throw papers directly into the truck rather than walking back and forth. In between one of these tosses he saw Lois approaching.

“Tanner, getting started already I see. I came out to invite you to lunch. Chester and I are having Ramen noodles and toast.”

“That’s OK, Lois. I’ve almost got a full load here.” Tanner stepped out of the doorway to meet her. “I’ll take you up on it later, though. Where did you say the dump was?”

She stepped closer to the pickup and traced her fingers on the hood, indicating roads with a straight line and landmarks with an x. Her map was more elaborate than he needed. The dump was just five miles outside of Tiber. On his trip out here, he would have passed it if he hadn’t turned off to get to Lois’s.

“And remember, Tanner, the truck hasn’t had tags for quite a while and Chester never did believe in insurance. Make sure you don’t get pulled over.”

“I don’t suspect I’ll be doing any hot-rodding,” Tanner joked.

Lois stared at him. “Right. You probably shouldn’t. And you may want to pick up some groceries while you’re near Tiber. I’ll fix something during the day, but you’ll need something for supper unless you and Ollie want to get together and start a supper club.”

“Oscar and I actually shared waffles last night, when I met him.” Tanner left the pile he was about to pick up and faced Lois. “You say you’ll only feed me during the day?”
“Didn’t I introduce you? I could have sworn that I did.” She kept her eyes on him, waiting for an answer.

“Yeah. You must have.” Her son had said not to upset her. Tanner turned to the pickup and started pushing papers around so they lay flat. “Well, I’ve got close to one load here already. I better get moving.”

“Ok, come on inside if you need something.”

Tanner stepped back and looked at the truck. If he had been more careful loading, he could have fit more papers, but he didn’t want to unload and reorganize. He patted the stacks. He didn’t think he needed a tarp to hold them down because most were old and thick with dust.

Tanner found the highway. Tiber was three miles to his left and the dump was two miles to his right. He kept his foot planted on the brake while deciding. He thought about driving to Tiber first for groceries, but feared going highway speed might whip papers out of the back. *First she says there’s a salary, and there isn’t. Then she’s says she’ll feed me, then she won’t. Pretty soon she’ll be charging me rent,* Tanner thought. He had never enjoyed cooking but knew he could get by for one summer on frozen burritos and canned spaghetti. The problem was that he had put nearly all his money into the envelope, everything except ninety dollars, which would only last him a few weeks. He’d have to get something to pawn soon or he’d starve.

Tanner had doubts about surviving this way. With the exception of the engines, he hadn’t seen one thing he thought he could pawn. But he hoped something would appear soon. Chester had been a pack rat, but Tanner assumed there was a higher purpose. He
couldn’t believe that someone would save all of their garbage—or make trips to the dump for more—without a reason.

Tanner scanned the left side of the road for signs of the dump. Small hills smoothed out into flatlands the further one traveled outside the Black Hills, but when Tanner turned onto the road marked dump, he saw that it led down into a small depression. A single chain, the gate which had closed the entrance, lay spiraled in the dirt and Tanner drove straight through. There were several sections of bare rock that looked like they had been mined out. He backed up to a small pile and dropped the tailgate. He heaved bundles behind him and felt guilty he was wasting this much paper. *Hell, if the recycling plant paid for paper the way they paid for aluminum, I’d consider taking this stuff there,* he thought. Tanner remembered what a pain the push for recycling at work had been. He always had to beg for a volunteer to come in on Saturday to bag and haul the cans. After he and Kara kissed for the first time, he stopped looking for volunteers. *It became a perfect excuse for them to be together on the weekends.*

But Tanner was glad the plant in Rapid City didn’t accept paper. Instead of hauling his load three miles to the dump, where it seemed he could come and go as he pleased, he’d be driving eighty miles south to Rapid. He paused to read a Peanuts comic that was on the top of his next stack. Lucy sat in her psychiatrist booth. Charlie Brown was confessing that sometimes he felt unbearably lonely, other times he longed for solitude. Lucy advised him to live somewhere in between those two feelings and asked for her two cents. Tanner shared Schultz’s view of psychiatry. His mother had forced him into several visits with Dr. Lions, a child therapist, after his father’s death. Tanner knew the sessions hadn’t helped him. He
tossed the remaining papers out of the truck bed. Unloading proved to be much faster than loading because he didn't have to aim where he was throwing.

Three dump trips later, Tanner had cleared away most of the small piles from the doorway, and now he was in the heart of the mess. The heaps were tallest near the walls, and they decreased in size as they moved closer to the center, like an upside down pyramid. Tanner tried to grab papers from the same height as far as he could reach. If he worked with one stack and cleared it to the bottom, he usually found that he had removed a load-bearing pile that brought three others down around his feet. He had learned to pile the stacks neatly into the bed instead of just throwing them in, maximizing the amount of space he had with each trip.

“There had better be something to hock in the next building. Sure isn’t shit in here.”

Tanner grabbed parts of a stack that had fallen over. These papers were dry and thick. He could see that they hadn’t been folded on their original seams, which allowed air inside and dried them more than the others, becoming like cardboard. Papers still soft and pliant were all tightly folded. In both cases the ink was dark and came on off on his hands. Once he was in the middle of the room, all the papers were from the 80’s. Tanner, happy that he was halfway done, stopped to read some of the headlines. Most were of politicians he had little familiarity with. He saw a story about how the Sturgis Fire Department spent more time getting cats out of trees than they did fighting fires. Further back he encountered the Iran Contra scandal. He read the entire article because he knew almost nothing about it.

He hit a patch near the left wall where the papers became damp and extremely yellowed. He guessed a hole in the roof had let rainwater in, but it was too dark inside for
him to see the ceiling. The more he dug, the softer the paper became, until he was pulling out clumps instead of shreds. The further down he got into the four waterlogged stacks, the more claylike the papers became. He clawed his way through, but when he found himself doing more scooping than carrying, he decided go ask Lois for a shovel.

He rapped lightly on the door, and Lois answered in what appeared to be an off-pink nightgown, though it was still an hour away from sunset. "Tanner. Why, I wondered when you was going to stop in." He could hear the television.

"Hi, Lois. Do you know where I could find a bucket and a shovel?"

"Sure. Come on in."

He followed her into the living room. Chester lay spread out in his chair, his mechanized breathing device barely audible over Jeopardy. She waved for him to sit on the couch while she situated herself in a recliner that was next to Chester’s. He sat on the far end of the couch, away from Chester and Lois. A wooden pineapple with sunglasses and an oversized sun hat rested on a coffee table next to him.

When Tanner finally forced himself to look directly at Chester, he saw Chester’s red-streaked eyes widen. He could smell stale sweat though Chester was several feet away. Tanner doubted Lois was a good nurse and wondered if she ever helped Chester out of the chair. He must have bedsores growing out of bedsores. Tanner shuddered at the thought. "I can’t stay," he said, "I just need the bucket and shovel. I also wanted to know if the dump closes."

Lois stared at him with her mouth slightly agape. Finally he asked, "Lois?"

She closed her mouth and her eyes seemed to sharpen. "Yes?"

"The dump. Does it close?"
“Oh, not that I’ve heard. But you can’t move in the dark. How would you see what you were tossing?”

“I just wanted to make sure it didn’t close up at eight or something. What about the bucket and a shovel?”

“Why?”

“There’s some soggy newspaper that I’m cleaning up. It’d be a lot easier to just shovel out the wetness. It comes apart in my fingers.”

“How’d water get in there?”

“Probably through a hole in the roof.” With the lights off and the curtains drawn, everything was dim except for the television.

“No—Chester gets up there and checks the roofs every year.” She looked over at Chester and dropped into her imitating tone. “That’s right, Tann-er, I put up that roof up myself. Made sure to lay extra tar so nothing got through.”

“Right. Well it could be from something else. Do you have a bucket. A shovel?”

“Sure,” she said, rising up and disappearing down a hallway. “I’ll fix you a sandwich while I’m at it.”

“A bucket and shovel will be fine,” he called after her, but he could hear her digging in a faraway closet and didn’t get a response. Chester wheezed through his respirator. In looking at Chester’s eyes, Tanner became sure Chester was saner than Lois—had to be. Tanner could see pain, and Tanner thought that pain had to be some sign of intellect. Lois could be on fire or missing a limb, but she would have that same vacant wide-eyed look. Chester’s right arm rose and faltered in the air, moving from side to side. It took several repetitions of this motion before Tanner realized that Chester was waving him over.
He stood and inched his way toward Chester, nervous in his approach. The sweat smell strengthened the closer he got, and a faint hint of urine added itself to the mix. He reached the point where his knees were almost touching the recliner and he could see Chester closely for the first time. Tanner had known that Chester was thin—too thin to be healthy—but he had never been close enough to see how twig-like his frame really was. Even in the dim light, Tanner could make out the deep purple and contours of the veins in his arms and legs. Chester was shirtless and his ribs jutted out, keeping a harsh rhythm in sync with the respirator. A clear plastic mask engulfed his entire mouth and nose, making him look oddly like the corpse of a fighter pilot. Tanner wondered how Chester ate, then saw the hand flash again, moving quicker than he would have expected from someone so frail. Chester appeared to be motioning towards a notepad that was on top of the coffee table between his chair and Lois’s. Tanner looked to the hallway but didn’t see any indication of Lois’s return. He leaned over Chester and this closeness made Tanner’s skin feel dirty. He grabbed the pad, then flipped it open to a page where a thick marker acted as a book mark. He popped the top off the marker and set them both down on the armrest next to the only arm that Chester seemed capable of moving.

Chester took the marker in a claw like grip, then pulled it across the page. The angle was wrong and Chester couldn’t see his own writing, but he finished and tapped the pad several times with the marker’s point. Tanner took the pad and tried to read Chester’s squiggles.

“Take off mask?” Tanner said for him.

Chester nodded his head in quick jerks.
Tanner put the pad back and leaned closer to look at the breathing mask. Two plastic straps ran around the sides of Chester’s head to accommodate his ears, then rejoined into a single piece in the back where it buckled tightly. Chester leaned forward as far as he could, a maneuver that looked difficult and desperate.

Tanner fingered the buckle, trying to pull the excess strap back through the clasp, his stomach curling at the slick, greasy feel of metal and hair under his fingers.

“What’re you doing? Leave him alone.” Lois rushed at him, a small bucket held in front of her with both hands. Tanner backed up against that wall, and Lois followed him until she was in kissing distance.

“Sorry. I just—he looked uncomfortable.” Lois’s face, usually plagued with smiles, had turned into a hate-filled grimace. She held the bucket, poking it uncomfortably into his stomach and pinning him against the wall. Tanner pressed himself back even further, trying to get distance from Lois. A miniature ceramic squirrel, visible on a shelf just behind her head, had a frozen and terrified expression on its face that captured the way he felt.

“Chester is sick. Very sick. He can’t be fooled with. I’m the only one who knows how to take care of him. You keep your hands off.”

The bucket pushed harder into his stomach and Tanner reached up to take it from Lois. His stomach quivered as his hands brushed the undersides of her breasts. As soon as the bucket left her hands, her face went dead, as though the bucket had been a battery fueling her anger. Her eyes hung down and her features drooped. Chester looked curiously at both of them. Suddenly, like a puppet being reared to life, she looked directly at him with her dopey grin. “How bout that sandwich. It’s late, but you didn’t get your lunch today.”
He stared at her, unnerved enough to let his gaze last longer than would ordinarily be polite. “I should get going. I only have so many hours of daylight.”

“Of course. Of course. You come on back if you get hungry. I’ll make an exception for today. But Chester and I usually turn in around eight thirty.”

He sidestepped his way around Lois. He was uncomfortable having his back to her, fearing the other Lois would return and strike. He walked to the newspaper shack, inspecting the bucket she had brought him. It was really a pail, a plastic one from McDonald’s that had mini spires in the bottom to make a sand castle when flipped over. There was a matching plastic shovel, no larger than a serving spoon, but he supposed it would work.

Once the truck bed had a thick layer of papers, Tanner started in on the sludge. He carried a pail of the wet paste over to the back of the truck, and flipped it upside down, testing if it worked without sand. The resulting column was too heavy for its own weight and it quickly collapsed. The paste was too thick to come out of the top of the pail and there were no little spires. He was in the middle of scooping out more of the wetness, when he heard Oscar call out sharply, “Tanner, you still lollygagging around?”

Tanner jumped and nearly dropped the bucket. “Oscar. Don’t scare me like that. I’m in deep thought here.”

“Yeah. I’m sure it takes a lot of concentration,” Oscar said in his usual gruff voice. “Looks to me like you’re a not-so-glorified paperboy.” He grabbed some papers from the truck and skimmed the headlines. “You know what building you’re going into next?”
“No. I’ll probably pick one that has something salvageable. I thought about the building with all the light bulbs, but since everything’s all boxed up, I’ll probably save it for one of the hot days.”

“Well, don’t burn yourself out.”

“I was thinking we could go into Rickey’s this weekend. I’m guessing they have a pool table or darts?”

“They got both. That sounds like a pretty good idea. I’ll check with you later this week.” Oscar gave Tanner a minor grin, then turned and walked out.

Tanner tossed the bucket and the shovel into the corner.

Tanner made a can of soup for dinner, one of several meal-in-a-can items he had picked up in town, and watched a rerun on CBS, but the blurred reception hurt his eyes. He got up from his spot on the cleaner sofa—refusing to sit on the other one until he could bring in a vacuum—to turn off the TV. The lights were already off, so he rolled up in his sleeping bag, looking at the TV long enough to see in the reflection that he had left the porch light on and to catch Lois’s ghostly face staring in at him. The porch light wrapped around her, bringing out the whiteness of her hair and the paleness of her skin. He stayed on the couch, pretending to sleep. She stood motionless, gazing at him, for what seemed like an hour, but he was afraid to check his watch.
Chapter 4

Tanner picked up a blender and turned it around in his hands. It seemed unusually light and he discovered it missed all of its inner components. He dropped it into the wheelbarrow. He was on his second day of cleaning the building he had dubbed the “Appliance Hutch” because it contained all electronics. There were large shelves lining the walls and set up as rows in the middle. Each shelf had three levels with two and a half feet of space between. They were all cluttered with outdated kitchen appliances and office equipment. Most of the products he found in this building were newer and easy to identify, though some designs hadn’t been used during his lifetime. Others he couldn’t figure out. He had turned a metal clamp over in his hands for several minutes before guessing that it was some sort of leather press and throwing it to the side.

To his far left he saw Lois standing in the doorway, but he decided not to say anything. She had done this once before today, sneaking up and then staring at him until he said something. He wanted to turn and look at her, but he was afraid she would just stare back. Lois was not someone he could win a staring contest with. She lingered.

“Lois, didn’t see you there.” She kept her gaze blank. “Did you need something?”

She came to life, stepping forward and gesturing with her arms. “No. No. I just wanted to see your progress. My, there is a lot in here.” She grabbed an orange, dust-covered toaster off the shelf. “Think this still works?”

He lied and said he’d been checking most of the appliances and that so far none had shown life. In truth, he’d only plugged in things that looked like they had resale value, the larger electronics like lawn trimmers and kitchen mixers. He had found a surprising number
of both of those items. But he feared even the ones that worked wouldn’t be worth more than a few dollars.

“Is there anything I should watch out for in here, I mean anything of sentimental value you might want to save?”

She looked at him with a sagging, fish-eyed expression. He was sure she had gone dead on him again, but she quickly said, “No. All my pictures are in the house. Everything should be in the house.” She moved to hand the toaster to him, then paused and placed it back on the shelf. “If you ever aren’t sure though, just come and ask.”

She left without saying more, and he continued to toss electronics on the floor. He’d cleared off all the shelves on the left wall and started on the space underneath the bottom shelf.

He’d spent a total of four days cleaning out the newspaper building, then taken a day off, trying to decide which building would come next. In his search of eight buildings, he had found several items that he thought might be valuable: the old sign for the Richter’s Boys Home, some dented milk cans, an old ringer washing machine—the kind with a tub and roller to squeeze the water out—and several metal toy trucks. He’d told Lois about an antique shop near Mt. Rushmore that might be interested. He’d also kept several appliances from this building but had more faith in the antiques.

A footlocker was underneath the lowest shelf, pushed far back behind a cracked blender and a box of railroad spikes. It had been painted black, but most of the paint had pealed off to reveal metal. He knelt down and pulled the locker forward. Its two metal latches were corroded, but when he lifted the lid, it opened partway. The footlocker was too far under the shelves to open fully. He stood and grabbed the side handle and pulled it
completely free. There was little room with the footlocker out this far, so he started to kick back all the junk he had piled on the floor. He was facing away from the chest when it popped open completely and he was stabbed in the back of the thigh.

He lunged forward in surprise, throwing himself on the heap of junk, catching the upturned leg of TV tray just above his eye as he landed. His grabbed the thigh of his right leg, and when he sat up, he saw that his first two fingers were bloody. He inched his way off the pile, and sat in front of the chest. He was looking at a small, square piece of wood with seven razor blades worked into grooves along its face. He slid to the left, giving the chest wide berth as he peeked over the side. The wood had been spring loaded and set to pop out when the locker was opened far enough. He marveled for a few seconds at the ingenuity of the design, before remembering that he was bleeding.

He stepped outside for better light, glanced around briefly, then dropped his pants. He saw an inch-length incision on the back of his leg, but it looked like only one of the blades had hit him. He pictured himself sitting directly in front of the chest as it opened, all the blades hitting him directly in the face. The wound didn’t appear to be deep, but each step opened it and by the time he reached his trailer, he could feel blood soaking into his sock. He grabbed the first aid kit from under the sink, the one useful thing the previous tenants had left him. After disinfecting the spot, he wrapped his leg in gauze, and hoped the wound wasn’t serious. He didn’t know anything about first aid, but since his thigh only bled when he moved, he didn’t think it could be too bad.

“What the fuck did I get myself into.”
The booby-trap convinced Tanner that he needed to get off the farm for a while, but he didn’t yet have a full load for the trip into town. He walked back to the Appliance Hutch and grabbed some random appliances, ones that he was sure wouldn’t sell, but enough to make it look like he had a full load. While picking through the pile, he stared at the contraption that had sliced his leg. The razor blades were menacing and Tanner couldn’t help counting all seven again and again. He’d been lucky. His leg no longer bled, but his injury could have been more serious.

When he had what looked like an acceptable amount of items, he pulled his truck up to Lois’s trailer. He didn’t know if she would want to approve what he took to pawn, but he thought he’d better check. Lois stepped outside, walking to the edge of the porch. “Got a dump already?”

“No. I’m taking this to Rapid. Might be some good stuff in here.” He was nervous whenever he was near the house, but Lois hadn’t acted maliciously towards him since she caught him near Chester.

He didn’t even consider mentioning the trap that looked like something out of a Wile E. Coyote cartoon. She moved closer to the truck and pushed aside a milk can to see the box of railroad spikes behind it.

“Iron,” he said. “Could be worth something if I can get it weighed.”

“Sounds fine. Just make sure there’s nothing else on the scale. It can mess with the weight. They tried that once on my father at the elevator.”

“But that would make it weigh more.”

“ Exactly,” she said.

He told her that he would be careful.
Chapter 5

Tanner headed south on 85, passing through the middle of Belle Fourche. Belle was far enough away from the Black Hills to be spared from the area’s hundred tourist traps. But all along the way he saw signs—gaudy displays advertising the attractions that surrounded Mt. Rushmore and other parts of the hills.

Twenty minutes later Tanner was on the interstate which ran alongside Spearfish. He turned on his blinker and took the second exit in. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt a need to see Eagle Telemarketing again. It was a quick trip. Three rights and one left off Jackson Blvd. and he was sitting in the parking lot. The building looked small from this angle, but in the back it stretched out in a longer wing. The blue tiled roof gave the structure more character than the drab hallways it contained. He wondered about his office and who was in there now. Probably Margery. She was great on the phones and had been up his boss’s ass for the last few years. She had been his main competition for the Director’s position two years ago. He had won out, but the fact that he and Roger got along so well had more to do with it than anything else.

Roger sat on the opposite side of Tanner’s desk, chomping on his gum and glancing around the room, looking like he wanted to avoid eye contact. He began, his eyes locking onto Tanner’s own. “How? I mean what…”

Tanner put his elbows on his desk and folded his hands together, making a small triangle. He had read in Master Shepard: Leading Your Flock that pyramids and triangles were signs of power. This position was supposed to exert authority. This time, as well as all the others, it felt false, and he pushed his hands between his legs under his desk.
“It was innocent at first. Then it just happened. I don’t know, Roger. She…” He trailed off. He wanted to blame her for what happened, which he still thought to be the case, but he didn’t think it was the best thing to do with Roger. He had a daughter of his own. Tanner didn’t feel all the blame should fall on him, but he knew any attempt to explain this would only look like he was weaseling out of it.

“It’s Kara they’re talking about, right?” Roger asked.

Tanner just met his eyes.

“Jesus.”

“It isn’t like it sounds. They put one hell of a spin on it. Journalists always make it a bigger story than what it is.”

Roger slid forward and pressed his hands down on Tanner’s desk. “But you did. I mean you had…sex with her?”

Tanner pushed his hands down further. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you come to me before? How could you let me read about it in the papers?”

“I didn’t know it was going to make the papers. I though it would blow over.”

“She was sixteen!”

“We were dating. It’s not like it was just about sex.”

“Dating? You think that makes it better? No. No, you can’t date someone in high school. You can take advantage of someone in high school. You can’t date them! It doesn’t work that way.”

“Roger, she—”
“No. Clean your stuff out. You...you can’t be here anymore. This. I can’t even believe this. They mentioned our name, you know. I’ve had over thirty phone calls in the past two days. You’re lucky they’re just suing you and not the company. Who knows, they might. You—Jesus, Tanner, I just can’t believe this.”

Tanner wanted to explain that it had been hard on him too, that even before her parents found out, it had been hell working with her—fighting the urge to put his hand on her shoulder when he passed down the aisle, over analyzing everyone’s comments to see if they knew. But Roger wouldn’t understand any of this. He kept seeing his daughter every time they mentioned Kara.

Roger stood and walked to the door, but stopped a few feet away. “Not that you were planning on it, but don’t give a goodbye speech or anything like that. Just go. Everyone already knows anyway.”

Tanner shifted the truck into drive and traveled up and down Spearfish’s Main Street. He played with the radio, trying to distract himself from admitting what he was doing. He paused at the Brew Top, a coffee house where he knew she hung out. Her parents had put her under house arrest when they realized that she was sneaking out to see him, but that had been almost two months ago. He was relieved at first, had in fact been trying to tell her not to come for some time. Getting together was too risky and he suggested they keep the relationship going over the phone, but he had missed her when she stopped showing up.

Her green Neon sat out front and he knew she had to be inside. Every bit of instinct Tanner had told him to keep driving, but he pulled into the empty lot across the street. The Brew Top was home to intellectuals and neo-hippies, the type of crowd that scoffed at
Starbucks and insisted their beans be shade grown and organic. He didn’t see her fitting in with this crowd, but he supposed it was one of the few places high schoolers could hang out. That and it was trendy now. He tried to think back to where he had spent his time in Rapid City when he was her age, but could only remember a few parties at his friend Justin’s and keggers in the country. He recalled a few nights cruising Eighth Street, but that crowd was usually high school gasket heads and older guys that were still looking for high school girls.

He realized that’s how some might see him now, but he really hadn’t sought her out. He hadn’t given her much thought until he saw her from on top of the beam. That had been July, right after her sixteenth birthday when he had hired her. Her parents wanted her to earn some extra money to help pay for part of the new car they were buying her. She wouldn’t make much, but enough to teach her a bit of responsibility and make them feel better about just handing the keys of a new automobile over to her. But, in his mind, she had started things.

He left a note in her cubicle that she should come and see him at the top of the next hour. She crept in, letting the door close slowly behind her. She stepped carefully and he could see a slight tremor in her movements. He reminded himself that she was young, and this was probably her first job. Depending on the program, phone personnel were supposed to sell a certain number of items or services per hour. No one, even the exceptionally good made goal every hour, but after two weeks of not making goal more than once or twice, they had a mandatory conference with Tanner. He had given her an entire week, but she had only achieved her goal three times.

“Kara, please sit down.”
She made her way slowly over to the chair, her eyes bright, wide, and intently focused on his.

“'I wanted to talk with you about your stats. You haven’t been—’

“I know, I know. They’re horrible. I haven’t been making goal, but I’m trying really hard. You don’t have to let me go, I swear I’ll do better.”

He did his best not to laugh and gave her a big smile. “That’s not what this is about at all.”

She laughed and mimed wiping sweat off her brow. She relaxed in her chair, then leaned forward and put her elbows on his desk, staring at him.

Later, when he thought back on it, this would be the first time he remembered being attracted to her. She was touching his desk, something his books told him was a threat to his authority, but he didn’t take it that way from her. It felt innocent, sweet, playful. “Basically, I just wanted to review some things with you. I’ve listened to your tapes and you have a good lead-in. You stick with the script and answer all of their questions. The biggest thing you need to work on is your rebuttals.”

“My rebuttals?” she repeated.

“Yeah. When people say no, you’ve got to stick it to ‘em. Don’t let them give you any excuse.”

“But I feel bad when they say they’re busy or don’t want the magazine anymore,” she said, dropping her hands from his desk. She was on a periodical campaign, one of the programs where employees called people receiving a free business publication to see if they wanted to renew. A lot of people still said no, but it was the easiest program and a great place for new employees to cut their first teeth.
“Yeah, I understand. Everyone feels that way at first. But look at it this way. They’re business people. Their first response to anything that seems like it might take time is no. It’s like a reflex to them.”

“But when they say they don’t read it anyway, it’s hard to push them.”

“Then you just say, ‘Even if you only get one idea from our publication that helps your business, it’s worth it for us to keep sending it to you free of charge.’”

She bit her lip. “Yeah, I remember that one.”

“I can tell you know all the scripts; I’ve heard you use them, which was another thing I wanted to talk with you about.” She kept staring at him, the way girls did in a bar when you were giving them a bullshit story or they had just been talked into having another shot with you. “You stick to the scripts, which is good, but you need to work on getting more of a conversational tone.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. Her brow wrinkled and her bottom lip slipped out slightly.

“I mean, stick to the script, but don’t sound like you’re reading from a script. Some of that will come after you get more comfortable with your lines. You need to get friendly with these people. Most of them are lonely guys stuck in offices. Picture this. You’re sitting on the sixteenth floor. You’re secretary’s been at you all day to get some boring report filed. People are calling up, barking orders at you, demanding this and that. Then, this young, attractive girl calls you up and just wants to do you a favor. She wants to ask you a few questions from a survey so you’re guaranteed to keep receiving a magazine you’re already getting. It’s a treat to them.”
She beamed but looked away. Then shyly she said, “They can’t tell what I look like over the phone.”

“Sure they can. They can hear it in your voice,” he said, pleased that he was having an affect on her, but hoping that she wouldn’t ignore the rest of what he said and only remember the last little bit. “That was all I really wanted to address with you. Now, why don’t you take your fifteen minute break and then go back on the phones. Your goal will be cut in half since you’ll only be on the phone for half the time. Easy, right?”

She smiled and stood. “Sure.” She walked back to the door, her head tilting around the room.

“What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” she said, turning back to him. “It’s just that everyone has pictures all over their cubicles. I’ve only been here a week and I’ve got mine all decorated. You don’t have any, not even on your desk. Doesn’t your wife or girlfriend get upset?”

“Nope. But I don’t exactly have either so there’s really nobody to get upset with me.”

“No pets?”

“None, not that they’d be hurt one way or the other.”

She laughed. “Maybe I’ll have to get you some.” She turned her back and stepped out the door.

He wasn’t stupid, but there was nothing wrong with a crush, especially if it helped her make goal.
He saw her stepping outside the Brew Top. School had only been out for half an hour, and he was surprised she was leaving this quickly. Kara pulled away and he did the same, staying far behind her.

He planned on following her into her neighborhood, then stopping to turn around well before he got to her house. The last thing he needed was her parents seeing him and having a stalking charge added on to the others. But before they even neared her part of town, she pulled over to the side of the road. He wasn’t sure if she had seen him or not, but he couldn’t imagine another reason why she would be stopping, unless she was on her cell phone.

He pulled up behind her slowly, assuming she had seen him. He sat for nearly a full minute in the truck, uncertain whether he should go to her or if she would come to him. *I never used to be this timid,* Tanner thought. He remembered that this was a strange truck to her, and feared that she had stopped for another reason. If she saw a stranger sitting directly behind her, she might call the police.

This thought pulled him from his seat and he rushed over to the driver’s side of her Neon, mindful of the cars that whizzed past them on the service road and conscious of how many could recognize him. Her name had never made the papers, so most didn’t know her, or at least didn’t know her face. However, Spearfish was small enough to have a lean and efficient rumor mill. It didn’t take long for most of the townspeople to learn that there was just one sixteen year-old girl working at Eagle Telemarketing and to figure out who that girl was.

Her straight blond hair maintained some of streaks from her last highlight. Since the last time he’d seen her, she’d started fake baking again, and whether from bottle or booth, her skin was darker than a normal suntan. But her eyes hadn’t changed. They were light blue,
almost azure but with black flares that created a misleading darkness. These eyes looked at him, wounded, and gave no indication that their owner intended to drop the window.

But as Tanner reached out to touch the glass, the window did descend. It was clear to him that she wanted him to speak first, but he couldn’t figure out the best words. It felt like one of the moments that forever change the directions of a relationship, like the first time having children comes up and someone answers incorrectly. He didn’t want to taint their future with an incorrect greeting. It seemed ridiculous to greet someone he had gone to jail for with hello.

She said, “What’s wrong? You get horny again?”

“Kara, that’s not fair.”

“Bullshit it isn’t. You haven’t talked to me for close to a month. How dare you follow me. Where did you go?” She shifted the car into park, indicating that she had been ready to flee at any moment. “You know there’s some Spanish woman living in your apartment? Loves your furniture by the way.”

Suddenly he worried about his appearance. His hair was long past his usual five-week haircut schedule, past the point where gel was useful. He was wearing an old pair of jeans that he found in the shed. It hadn’t even occurred to him that he should dress up for a trip to town. He looked rural. His shirt was a plain blue t-shirt from Banana Republic. It had cost over twenty dollars but could have easily come from the Pamida in town. He wondered if she would still find him attractive or if it was the polished image that had drawn her in.
“This is killing me too,” he said, trying to push back and take her off the offensive. A car swerved particularly close and whipped his clothes in its tail wind. He gave her a desperate look.

“Get in.”

She stretched her body lengthwise next to his. Their clothing had been peeled off layer after layer and piled in the backseat. She couldn’t tuck her shoulder in his armpit and rest her head on him as she always had in the past but settled for setting her chin on his chest, staring up at him as he stared back. A lot was settled in this gaze. He thought she forgave him in that moment for not disappearing, and he realized how much he had missed her the past month—even on the farm where he’d pushed everything out of his mind. He had forgotten how simple and wonderful their relationship was.

The fuzziness of post-coital bliss started to fade and they awkwardly reached in the backseat to fish out and sort clothes.

“I don’t want to go,” she said.

They were parked on one of the back roads leading into the hills. Minutes before they had pulled off, praying they weren’t in some farmer’s driveway, their talk had been innocent—her classes, things that were new at school, and how most people knew it was her. Then he had started to caress the back of her neck, playing idly with her hair.

“I don’t want you to go either,” he said. “But you have to get back soon. They’ll be looking for you by now. You’ll have to come up with a pretty good excuse for where you’ve been.”

“Mom’ll know the minute she sees me.”
“What?” he asked, uncomfortably trying to snake his jeans back over his knees in his seated position. He wanted to tell her she should be driving while they discussed this, but he was worried she would think he was trying to get rid of her.

“Come on. My lips are raw, I’m completely flushed, and...I haven’t seen you for a while...I’m probably glowing.”

He grinned but tried to hide it. He looked at her knees, surprised she had managed to get her pants up so fast. His were still bunched around his ankles. “Come up with something.”

“What? Tell her I just dropped ecstasy?”

“No, tell her you met someone. That you made out with him.”

“You want me to tell my mother that I met some guy tonight, made out with him, and then make no mention of him again? Why don’t I just tell her I was in a gangbang? What’s wrong with you?” She sounded angry but began smiling halfway through her speech.

“What else is there?” he asked. The sick feeling of hiding a secret was one of the things that he had been happy to get rid of. They’d had this conversation several times in the history of their relationship—times when she had missed curfew and they’d had to come up with a last-minute excuse for where she had been. She only had so many friends and after a while her parents had started threatening to call them to verify. She hadn’t had anyone that she could trust with a secret this big, so they were left to their own devices. Once they had slashed her tire and left her car in out in the country, claiming she had gone for a drive and had had to walk back to town. Their excuses got more and more ludicrous after that; it was miracle they hadn’t gotten caught, that she told her parents on her own. Now her parents were not so naive. They looked for anything unusual to call her out on.
“I can’t go back like this. Why don’t you take me wherever you’ve been hiding?”

He turned to her to see if she was being serious or not.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

“I can’t take you there.” He managed to get his pants all the way up and pulled his shirt over his head.

“I know that, I’m not stupid. But I want to know where it is.”

“I’m helping out on a farm outside of town. Far outside of town.”

She looked over at him as she fastened her bra in the front, then spun it around and pulled the loops up over arms. She laughed. “You’re a farmer now?”

“Hey, it’s not as bad as it sounds. There aren’t any animals out there. It’s more just cleanup. I’m actually more of a garbage man.”

“Really?” she asked, chuckling at the idea. “I was wondering about your new attire.”

“Hey, it costs a lot to look this good. These are authentic vintages. People in the cities pay hundreds for stuff like this. It’s trendy. The trucker look and all. Ashton Kutcher in John Deere hats. That sort of thing.”

“Right. And how much did you pay for those designer jeans?”

He feigned shame and muttered, “Found ‘em.”

“So where are you at exactly?”

He paused. “I don’t want you to know.”

She said nothing but proceeded to start to car, violently turning the key and then shifting into drive.

“Oh, come on. Look at it from my perspective. I can’t exactly have you showing up there. If we got caught I’d go back to jail.”
“Fine. You just let me know next time you need a good lay.”

He grabbed her chin and forced her to look him, dangerous at this speed on a gravel road.

“Stop,” he said.

“I didn’t mean it.”

She dropped him back at his vehicle, this time not waiting to make plans as to how she would explain her absence. She said that her parents had relaxed over the past few weeks and they hadn’t really been pressing her much about where she’d been. That was why she had risked trying to visit him at his home last week when she discovered he had moved. They kissed goodbye several times while he stood outside of her car, and after each kiss he would drop back down for another or she would claw at his head to pull him in again.

It was the kissing more than the sex that brought back the full weight of his feelings for her. He considered running away with her, though the news would probably paint it as a kidnapping. She pulled away and he followed, until she took the turn that would lead to her house. He drove back to the on ramp for the interstate, continuing his journey to Rapid City. Could they wait another year and half until she turned eighteen? He also wondered if she would be the same after all that time—if this was the person she really was or if he had just caught her at a transition period between the personalities that high schoolers assume. He also feared the he had done something to stunt that growth. The dream of fleeing with her was not a new one; he had rehearsed it for months, though with no real intention. After his time on the farm, it seemed closer than it ever had.
Tanner drove to Jerry’s Pawn on the north side of Rapid City, as rough as a neighborhood could get in South Dakota. Even on the proverbial wrong-side-of-the-tracks, the businesses were newly built and had well lit parking lots. It was hard not to feel safe. He pulled into one of these lots and parked next to a dumpster in the corner. He tossed the items he had used to fill the pickup, then drove to the front of the store. He hoped he could get someone to come out instead of hauling everything in.

Tanner was surprised by the layout of the store. He’d been here two months ago, when he thought the pawnshops in Spearfish weren’t paying enough. Jerry had been nice and paid him more than any other place. The counter was in the rear of the store, behind rows of tall shelves containing refurbished electronics: Playstations and X-boxes, bruised amps and cracked instruments, late-model computers and thousands of compact discs. The lighting was brighter than he remembered, and he felt like he was walking into a grocery store rather than a pawnshop.

Judging from what he saw on the shelves, Tanner didn’t expect to make much money here. He saw almost no kitchen appliances any more. Everything here was for entertainment, and most of it looked newer than what he was bringing in. Behind the counter were three teenagers, two pimpled and the other with a massive shock of hair he had moussed up to become extra pointy. They were all wearing the same polo cut t-shirts with the Jerry’s logo above the heart.

“Can we help you?” the moussed boy and obvious spokesperson of the group asked, his eyes dripping with distain.
“Yeah, I have some stuff that I’d like you too look at. Possibly for pawn. It’s in my truck.” Tanner could sense the boy fighting the urge to roll his eyes, and when no one answered, he asked: “Is Jerry around?”

They all laughed at this, the smaller of the pimpled boys giggling hardest of all. “No Jerry anymore. We work for the Dawson company. They bought him out over a month ago.”

“Why keep the name Jerry?”

The moussed boy, fearful of losing his role as spokesman—or spokesboy—answered. “Image, man. Dawson has three shops in town. They can’t all have the same name. People wouldn’t like it.”

“Right.” Tanner turned and looked around the room. He wished he had stopped in Spearfish. He had some minor appliances, but the closest thing he saw in this store were several dingy microwaves stacked in the corner. He had planned on taking the bulk of his merchandise to the antique store, but he had hoped to unload his newer items here. “Listen, I’ve got some toasters, two blenders, an old Simon Sez machine, and some power tools. You take any of that?”

“Dude, I think you want a garage sale, not a pawnshop,” the spokesboy chuckled. “The power tools sound okay if they’re in the right condition.”

“And I’ll give you a buck for the Simon Sez machine,” the smaller boy said, “if it works.”

“See,” the spokesboy followed. “A garage sale.”
He left Jerry’s with eighteen dollars in his pocket, almost enough for a tank of gas. He felt like he was being screwed, especially on some of the power tools, but it only bothered him because the kids were so young. Pulling out of the lot, he was reminded of Kara. *Those are who she hangs around all day? No wonder she fell for me.* He wasn’t sure if this made him feel better or worse.

The antique store was outside of town, and Tanner had to drive through the heart of Rapid City to get there. It was difficult to determine whether or not Rapid City earned the latter part of its name. It was the second biggest town in South Dakota and had a high crime rate, but it was barely a city, even by Midwestern standards. There was no bus system, and only a handful of buildings that reached over ten stories. Tourism was its biggest draw and the biggest source of revenue. The Black Hills were exotic enough to bring the tourists in, but there really wasn’t another reason for the city to be here. Rapid City thrived because it was so close to Mount Rushmore, and it was the largest town for three hundred miles in any direction.

But Tanner had enjoyed growing up there. Rapid was big enough to provide some excitement, even for teenager in South Dakota. Often he and his friends would make trips to the poor side of town, paying the drunks outside of the grocery stores to buy them booze. Albertsons was the best bet because it was next to one of the city parks and that was where many homeless lived. Some had the vomit of last night’s binge on their clothes, though most had sobered up and washed in the creek that passed by. Some had gold or silver around their mouths, a sign of spray paint inhalation.

But these were the extremes of his experiences. Usually they spent their time in parking lots. Those that cruised Eighth Street crowded in the lots that lined either side of the
road. It was more common for Tanner’s crowd to hang out at someone’s house, preferably someone with a bedroom in the basement. Mostly they lamented how shitty it was to live in South Dakota and how they wished they were somewhere better. Which, Tanner discovered after meeting out-of-state kids in college, was how teenagers everywhere spent their time.

He passed by his grandmother’s complex and almost put on his blinker. But meeting Kara had taken too much time and he was running late. Minutes later though, as drove by a karaoke cowboy bar, Tanner saw his mother. She was coming out of the Busted Knuckle with several coworkers, her arms around some man who could have been a bank employee but probably wasn’t. She had changed out of her conservative bank clothes and was now in a black skirt and a low cut shirt that hugged her wider frame. Tanner knew she went out for drinks after work, but assumed she would be home by now. Tanner saw her slide her hand around the man’s collar, tugging lightly at the back of his head. “I guess Grandma will be meeting him next week,” Tanner said.

Tanner took Eighth Street out of town, noting that the quality of the cars had increased since he’d been in high school. Some, however, were ungodly modifications of lower end vehicles: Ford Escorts with stockcar roof attachments and Corsicas with racing stripes. Nonsense. Pillerton’s Emporium was past all of this, halfway to Keystone, the last pit stop before you hit Mount Rushmore. Tanner assumed they stayed open to catch the crowd returning from the night viewing of Mount Rushmore. Tanner had never actually seen the night lighting ceremony, but he doubted it was much different from when the sun lit it during the day.

Tanner saw the Emporium and signaled to take the next exit. The Emporium was the last of what remained of Rockerville, an old mining town that had nearly disappeared into
history. All of the houses and businesses were now abandoned, had been as long as Tanner could remember. A developer had tried to turn Rockerville into a ghost town tourist attraction, but it had failed. The only two buildings recently used were the Emporium and a restaurant masquerading as a bar and soda shop. Apparently the business attempted to grab the sixty and up crowd by looking like an old soda fountain, then got the younger generation’s business by dishing out the hard stuff at night. From the boarded windows, Tanner guessed the hybrid had failed. Not that anything else should be expected.

Rockerville was ten miles from even the smallest towns on either side and those places had their own bars. Tanner doubted that many fathers passing through with a troupe of kids had much success in talking Mom into a pit stop so he could grab a gin and tonic.

Tanner rolled through the gravel parking lot and pulled up to a hitching post that looked like it had been constructed from old telephone poles. Somehow it seemed fitting to Tanner. He got out of his Trailblazer, noting the darkness of the buildings around him. He had been to several of the other ghost towns in the surrounding area, but the problem was that they all tried to repaint things in bright colors, almost imitating the Technicolor westerns of the fifties and early sixties. This seemed more real to him. He liked the faded boards and the grass that sprung up in the middle of the unused street. These details were unbeautiful, but believable. Holes of gaping darkness met his gaze wherever he turned. If ghosts lived anywhere in this part of the country, it would be here. The last ghost town he’d been to had streetlights.

He entered the store, noting the thick glass door and the air conditioner. Somehow he’d been expecting batwing doors and the same stale heat. Once inside the store there were no more surprises. One section seemed to be dedicated to old farming tools, and Tanner saw
rakes and oversized saws. Behind these were some items that had clearly been used in the
kitchen: flat irons, wash tubs with the scrub attachment, old jars. The other side of the store
contained mostly mining equipment—hammers and chisels, gold pans, augers and drill bits.
Suspended from wires above all of this was an intricate system of harnesses, presumably
what pioneers used to attach horses up to a stagecoach.

An man in overalls ambled over with an eager step and grabbed Tanner’s hand.

“Pleased to meet you. Welcome to Pillerton’s Emporium. I’m Pillerton, of course,
and who might you be? I don’t see a family with you. Didn’t just stop to use the bathroom,
did you? Cause this is an antique store. All we’ve got is an outhouse.”

“Tanner. I called on the phone yesterday.”

Pillerton seemed to brighten, but Tanner didn’t think Pillerton had any idea what he
was talking about.

“Wonderful. Wonderful. Well you just have a look around. Everything in the store’s
for sale, even the cash register,” he said. He slid over to Tanner’s side in one smooth motion
and elbowed him in the chest. “Though you’ll have to do some pretty sweet talking for me to
give up what’s inside.” He then let go with burst of laughter that sounded almost like a
child’s squeal.

“No. I called because I have things you might be interested in.”

Pillerton’s countenance dropped instantly. “Oh. Should have known from they way
you’re dressed. Can never be too sure, though. I had a guy in here last week that looked like
he’d just escaped from a commune. Son of a bitch bought four antique mixers. You got it
out front?”
Tanner helped Pillerton carry in everything that he had in the back of the truck, believing Pillerton when he said that it was best to see things in the light, but halfway through the load he realized his error. If the deal went sour, Pillerton could easily pretend to be busy and he’d be forced to carry all his loot back. It was going to be easier to sell, no matter the price. Tanner was glad Pillerton had dropped the overeager hoity-toity local act. Pillerton didn’t say much as they carried things, but Tanner could tell that he was nothing like the dancing bear he had seemed when Tanner first entered. His act had been convincing, however, and Tanner respected him for it.

“So let me see what we’ve got here,” Pillerton began as soon as they’d finished. “I see some milk cans, though that one’s far too dented to be of much value. Some old board games, though these would probably fair better on ebay. They’re not exactly antique yet. What else? There’s a can of...why look. It’s Billy Beer. Just like the one I got here.”

Pillerton walked behind the counter and came back with a similarly designed can. “But mine, unlike yours, is free of fading and corrosion. What, did you pull this out of the dump?”

Tanner neglected to answer.

“Rust is good on some things. Hell son, if I could buy a oxidizing machine, I’d be a millionaire. An outside piece of farm equipment almost needs a healthy coat of rust. Makes it look more antique-like. But what you’ve got here looks more like inside decorations. And not in the best condition. No tourist is going to pick this stuff up.”

“What about a local? Somebody that played with these games as a kid.”

Pillerton laughed. “Local business? Most people in this area have more sense than that. Everyone here is trying to look metro, like they don’t live in Bum Fuck Egypt. Most of the people in cities try to make it look like they live here. The simple life, they call it.
Funny, ain’t it? I’ll give you forty for the whole lot. That milk can’s worth ten and I can probably get fifteen if someone's really interested. Everything else in here is a gamble. I can’t go over forty.”

Tanner tucked his hands in his pocket, trying to look as innocent and as yokel doke as possible. “I don’t know. I mean, you can put this stuff out and somebody will pick it up eventually.”

Pillerton, apparently not expecting an argument, squinted and looked at him crossly. “True. But I’ve got to hold this stuff until they do. And that somebody you’re talking about might not come along for another ten years. Would you keep this stuff around until that somebody shows up?”

“No. But I’m giving you a commodity. I’m feeding your business and keeping you here. You can fleece people on the other side, when they buy this stuff.”

“Fleece? Let me explain something to you. You have garbage here. It just happens to be garbage that some fool might want. You’re other alternative is to take it to the dump. There isn’t another place in town that would even look at this. Are you really going to dick?”

“I’m just saying that this haul is worth more than forty. At least fifty.”

“Fifty?”

“Fifty. And I tell you what. I won’t dick with you on the next few loads.”

“Next few?”

“That’s right. I’m cleaning out several old buildings. This is just the beginning.”

“Well... if we’re starting off a new business relationship, I suppose I can go up to fifty. But let me tell you what’s really worth money and what isn’t.”
When he returned it was dark. He had forty-eight dollars in his pocket, twenty of which he planned on turning over to Lois. He felt like giving her less, but he feared she would discourage more trips to Rapid. Technically he was stealing, but if Lois could change the deal, so could he.

It was close to eleven, and he knew Lois would have been in bed long ago. He parked the truck at the Appliance Hutch, where he would start up tomorrow. He returned to his trailer and searched the cupboards for something to eat. He’d stocked up in Tiber, but he really didn’t like preparing anything that took longer than a few minutes. Tonight he grabbed a can of tuna, finding the self-twist can-opener and breaking the seal.

A knock at the door interrupted the process and he walked over to the door, the can still in his hand. Oscar stood outside. His face appeared agitated, but he simply said, “Evening partner. Not interrupting dinner, am I?”

“Not yet. I’m just getting started. I’m not that hungry anyway. Come on in.”

“Thanks,” Oscar said, pushing his protruding belly through the narrow doorway. Tanner noted with some humor that this was the first time he had seen Oscar with a shirt on. He could smell whiskey on him. It was thick, but he didn’t detect any slurring of Oscar’s words. They sat at the kitchen table, which was actually a card table Tanner had found while looking around for a hammer. “So what’ve you got on the agenda for tomorrow?”

“Just cleaning out the Appliance Hutch. Should make five or six trips to the dump. I’m hoping it will be done in a few days.”

“I see you left today for a while.”

“I ran to Jerry’s Pawn and an antique store. Didn’t get much, though.”
“I wouldn’t have guessed that you had enough stuff set aside for a trip yet,” Oscar said, phrasing it like a question.

“Didn’t really, I guess. I just needed to get away. You may be used to living out here, but it takes a while for someone like me.” Tanner meant it as a joke, but Oscar didn’t laugh.

“What all did you sell?”


“No reason. I just happened to look at the pile you started outside that building you’re cleaning out. I assumed it’s what you set aside to pawn. Didn’t see much of anything in there. You know, buddy of mine used to run a pawnshop. I could take a look next time you go to make sure you’ve got a good load.”

“I think I’ll be alright. I really just wanted to test the waters, you know, see what people would buy and for how much.”

“Still, I’m always around. Just ask.”

“If I’m ever not sure, I’ll find you. I don’t foresee a problem, though.”

Oscar slapped one of his hands flat on the table, almost as if he were holding himself up, looking for the first time like he’d had too many. He dropped his voice low, almost to a growl and said, “Just find me. I’ve a few years on you, you know? You might not...understand what’s valuable and what’s not. Just find me before you go next time, all right?”
“Sure, sure, Oscar,” Tanner conceded, puzzled by Oscar’s reaction. He had wanted to ask about the trap, but he didn’t like Oscar’s present mood. He quickly changed the subject.

“I’d ask you to stay for dinner, but I’m just having tuna tonight. Maybe tomorrow?”

“That sounds all right. Say I didn’t mean to...whatever. I just want to make sure you’re getting your money’s worth.”

“Yeah. I understand.”

Oscar mentioned briefly something about having to talk to Lois, then excused himself. Tanner went back to his dinner, trying to figure out what had set Oscar off. He assumed it was the alcohol and didn’t think back on it until much later.
Chapter 7

The week passed with intermittent trips to the dump and one to the pawn shop, yielding sixty dollars this time, thirty of which he reported to Lois. She counted it and gave him half back. He felt guilty about getting his “half” twice, but it was really the only money he had for groceries. The Appliance Hutch was cleared out; he had actually swept it clean, more out of reluctance to start another building than from a desire to improve the look of the place. Tanner had been planning on moving in a row, hitting the buildings nearest to his trailer, and then moving toward Lois and Chester’s. But, after looking through the buildings closest to his home, he couldn’t commit to cleaning one out. One was entirely porcelain—toilets, bathtubs, sinks, and bird pools, though the building had no plumbing that Tanner could see. It smelled like gym locker room. He passed on this building instantly. The building next to it had couches and end tables stacked on top of each other as far back as he could see. He was impressed by how meticulously Chester had placed each item to fit in as much as possible. But maneuvering all that furniture around was more work than he wanted today. I’d rather burn this one down than clean it out, Tanner thought. He knew it would be best to clean out the building with the heaviest lifting before the temperature topped ninety, but he couldn’t bring himself to start a project like that yet.

Tanner expected some sort of treasure—some golden antique that had been forgotten about long ago. Something he could sell to Pillerton for hundreds of dollars. He hadn’t decided if he would tell Lois about it or not. Technically, whatever he sold was just getting spared from a trip to the dump. He knew there wouldn’t be a stamp collection falling into his lap, or a jewelry box that just happened to get misplaced as he had earlier hoped. His treasure would be much less conspicuous—like a rare piece of furniture. He had also
encountered a lot of rusted farm equipment, which Pillerton had mentioned. But without a camera Tanner couldn’t get feedback on what was valuable.

These were the ideas he had in his head when he came upon Chester’s Den. After passing over one building of rags and clothes, and another of old subscription bottles and small containers, Tanner found the original farmstead. Unlike the rest of the buildings, this one had a concrete foundation, a chimney, and windows on each side. This building had more features, but was just as run down as the others. The door opened on a room that was cluttered like the rest, but seemed lived in. Where the other buildings had been a single room, this building had many. A desk was against the far wall, covered with papers that spilled off in all directions. A couch sat perpendicular to it on the next wall with magazines stacked on its cushions. Tanner flipped the light switch, and to his surprise the overhead light came on. He stepped into the middle of the room and saw to his amusement that some of the magazines were pornographic. The rest of the room was filled with boxes, but unlike the other rooms, there were paths around them and obvious spacing in between. In the corner, directly across from the couch, Tanner spied a miniature fridge with a radio on top. With its oversized buttons and large block lettering, Tanner guessed it was old, but as he approached he saw that it had an FM dial. He turned the knob to a local rock station playing Pink Floyd.

He walked under a plaster archway and found himself in the kitchen. There was a space where the fridge had been and the counters were bare, but water flowed when he turned the sink’s handle. It felt good to be in a building where evidence of life remained. Judging from the papers and magazines, Chester had taken the original home and turned it into his den. The kitchen wrapped around to the same hallway Tanner had seen from the
living room. The first door in the hallway led into the bathroom. The tub and sink had been
removed, leaving corroded pipes jutting out of the wall, but the toilet sat undisturbed and
Tanner noticed rolls of paper stacked in the corner. Tanner couldn't resist a flush. The
murky water, which had left a ring around the inside of the bowl, was instantly replaced by
clean. The other two doors led to empty bedrooms with water damaged ceilings.

Tanner returned to the living room. At the foot of the desk, he saw razorblades
attached to a board, similar to the contraption that caught him in the leg. He picked it up and
then noticed the bottom drawer of the desk. It was open and completely empty, most likely
the place this trap had come from. He tossed the spring into the corner, turning to watch
where it landed so he wouldn't catch himself on it later. He picked up a stack of papers from
the top of the desk and started to thumb through it. The desk was a roll top, one he
associated with 30's hard boiled detective movies. Most of what lay on top of the desk were
old tax papers and receipts, nothing of interest to Tanner. He started to pull open the roll top
of the desk, then remembered the trap and stepped to the side, almost standing behind the
desk. He worked his fingers into the grooves of the lid, pulling backwards until it was open.
He peered uneasily over the edge, expecting razor blades or acid to come shooting out at him,
but inside were only more papers. He gathered a few of them up and started to read. They
were political tracts, monthly newsletters from something called the American Patriots of the
Soil.

...and until Americans stand together against the international bankers, the ones that
control the market and handle the farm loans, this trend will continue. The international
bankers, who refuse to eat pork bellies, have no qualms about raising their market prices
while keeping the prices at the sale barn low...
Tanner set this stack down and pulled from lower in the pile. These newsletter dates reached further back, into the mid 60's. The font was rougher and obviously typed, however the paper was just as fresh as the others and the type was not faded like Tanner would have expected. The rhetoric was much fiercer.

...many of you are asking, what business is it of mine that the Negroes want to ride buses in the South? What you're unaware of is that it's all connected. The International Jews and the Communists are working together on this one. They've joined forces and are trying to incite a race war. After they get whites fighting blacks, they'll sweep in and rebuild on the ashes of this Once Great Nation. They've set the blacks up to fight for rights they don't even...

Tanner flipped through the rest of the stack, not bothering to read more than the headings. The dates from '66 to the recent years were addressed to the farm. The rest had no address and didn't look like they had ever been folded. Tanner couldn't figure out how Chester had received them because there was no postage or address. Then he caught the last page of a mid 70's paper. “Don't write in unless you've gotten the whole story! Submit $4.00 to Bixby Inc. and get all of our past issues. Over three hundred in all. That's less than 15 cents per issue.”

“Jesus,” Tanner whispered. “He was that into this shit that he ordered the back issues?”

Tanner tossed the rest of the stack into the desk. He stepped to the side and pulled open the first drawer, worried about another trap. He almost expected a Nazi flag to greet him, but the drawer only contained a checkbook and four jars with coin rolls in them—one for each type of coin. He bent the checkbook open. The last check written was in July of '94
to the Walmart in Spearfish. A piece of paper slipped out of the back and Tanner snatched it in midair before it could join the other papers strewn about the floor.

Savings – 15,000
Checking – 2,352
Safe – 10,000 (roughly)
Other – 20,000
Desk (cash) – 385.00
Desk (coin) – 18.23

Tanner began pulling out the other drawers, looking for any sign of the money mentioned on the sheet. The drawer below the first had cigarettes, stationary, envelopes, and twenty-seven cent stamps. The top drawer on the other side was empty, as was the one below it; the one he had assumed held the trap. He checked the piece of paper again, then scanned the room. Suddenly it all fit. The empty boxes, the sprung trap. Someone had already been here. Lois? Oscar? He wondered, but had no way of knowing.

He looked back at the paper in his hand, reading the “Other” line again. Twenty thousand. But what did “Other” mean? Investments? Tanner didn’t think so. Chester didn’t seem like the type of have a portfolio. Also, the list distinguished between cash and coins in his desk stash. If the twenty thousand had been invested, Tanner was sure it would have said. Tanner suspected small amounts of cash stashed around the farm. But where? When he tried to think of a place, he realized his error. No. Chester wasn’t the type who would keep it in one spot. He’d have several. Hell, I’m surprised he even has an account somewhere. Figured he’d keep the whole wad out here.
Tanner had hoped he would find something valuable, something he might sell behind Lois’s back, but he didn’t think he could take Chester’s money. Everything else on the farm was junk, she would have thrown it out anyway. But money was different.

*She does have you out here like a serf though. And she had agreed to feed you more than lunch,* he thought. *If she could change the deal, couldn’t he?*

Chester’s money, even a small portion of it, could pay his back rent and his lawyer. Police error won him the statutory rape case that Kara’s parents had filed against him, but he’d had to cover all his own legal fees.

Tanner moved over to the couch, brushing away the *Playboys,* which all had models with 80’s hairstyles, and sat down. He noticed a particularly alluring woman, a star he thought he recognized, and it hit him. *Oscar. It had to be Oscar. Lois would have burnt these. Too religious. Or was she the type that thought “Boys’ll be boys?”* He brushed through piles of newspaper clippings that sat on the coffee table in front of him, which he now saw was just two boxes turned upside down. *He’s got a building full of coffee tables, and this is what he uses?* The clippings ranged from “Sioux Radicals stage sit-in atop Mt. Rushmore” and “Standoff at Wounded Knee Memorial Ends in Bloodshed” to “Native Americans push for Return of Federal Land.” All of the clippings, varying in years, tied into local Indian political activities. “Guess it wasn’t the only the Jews he was afraid of,” Tanner said. “Jesus, Chester, what kind of a nut are you?” He spent more time leafing through Chester’s “paperwork,” not finding the thing he’d wanted most since arriving here—a map.

He moved over the boxes and pulled open the one nearest to him. It contained old Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly records. Tanner thought this was probably the most valuable box he’d encountered to date, though he didn’t know how much records were worth. The
next box held knickknacks from Las Vegas: an oversized poker chip that advertised the Lucky Zebra, a guitar pick from the Music Ladle, and several others.

He walked back over to the desk, trying to decide whether or not he should put the slip of paper back. He knew he wasn’t going to clean this room yet, perhaps never. It felt like the last bit of humanity that Chester had left. He wouldn’t rob him of that, even if Chester was a psychotic fascist.

He slid the paper back in the checkbook and closed the drawer. He walked around the den one more time, making sure he hadn’t missing a safe stashed in the corner. He didn’t bother trying to set things back the way they had been. Someone might be able to tell he was in here, but he doubted they could tell what he had seen or moved.

Oscar had been outright rude the last time they spoke, but Tanner thought his mood might have changed from yesterday. He suspected the money now. Maybe Oscar was afraid Tanner would sell something that had cash hidden in it. It explained why Oscar was even out here, and why Lois had taken an interest in his cleaning. Suddenly he wondered about the Appliance Hutch. Did he miss something there? Couldn’t have, he thought. Too many small pieces. Unless Chester hid something in a toaster, which the bastard was just crazy enough to do. He imagined himself back at the dump, checking everything he had left there. No. Definitely not. I’d pay a thousand dollars not to do that.

He knocked on Oscar’s door and a happy grin met him behind the screen. “Tanner, come in.”

Tanner picked his usual spot at the kitchen table and sat down.
Oscar began, “Hope I wasn’t too gruff the other day. Just want to make sure you’re getting some cash for your trouble.”

“Of course. I understand.” Tanner paused. He had come here for information but wasn’t sure the best way to get it. “You know, it’s interesting going through all of Chester’s stuff. I’m starting to feel like I know him a bit. When did he get cancer?”

Oscar sat down, creating a serious mood. “About four years ago. Took him right down. Course I didn’t see him much then. Heard about it, though. He was in for chemo and all that. Looked like he’d beat it. Spent about two years without hair.” Oscar smiled at this. “Luckily his disability covered most of it. Started to get better, then, well you’ve seen him now.”

“It came back?”

“Yep. Lois said she begged him to see the doctor again, but he didn’t want to go through that again. Would rather live the last few years he had left like a normal man. According to her, prayer was going to do more for him than what the doctor could anyway.”

“When was the last time you actually talked to him?”

Oscar got up from his seat and started searching through the cupboards. “Gosh. Hard to remember. Must have been when he first started going through treatments.”

“You mean you haven’t spoken with him since you’ve been living out here?”

Oscar shook his head, but kept his eyes in a cupboard. “He’s got that respirator on. Not the type of thing you can really talk through. Besides, he’s not in the kind of health where you exactly want to chitchat.”

Tanner considered this, then changed topics. “I’ve been meaning to ask, I mean before he got sick, he was out here a long time.”
Oscar stopped his search, not finding anything, but closing the cupboards.

“Did he ever explain what he was doing?”

“I guess you just had to know Chester.”

Oscar said nothing more and Tanner sensed he had said all he would on the subject. As Tanner was leaving, he asked what building Oscar thought he should clear out next.

Oscar looked surprised then quickly responded, “The one with all the shitters in it.”

Tanner left and walked back to the truck. He took Oscar’s suggestion and backed it up to what he was starting to think of as the “Locker Room.” He chose to start here, partially because Oscar suggested it and Tanner didn’t want to seem rude, but mostly because it didn’t have small parts.
Chapter 8

One month after he had asked Kara to come into his office for the first time, Tanner discovered that it was going to be a fight to keep her working there. Her sales had improved more than he could have ever suspected, but he had new problems. He had just gotten off the phone with her father. The rally was still three weeks away, but her father was already worried. Tanner assured him a security guard would escort her through the parking lot and she would be home well before dark. Her father had grudgingly agreed. Most of the bikers were safe—some in fact were doctors and lawyers playing dress up—but there were always a bad few. Though serious incidents were rare, crime skyrocketed that week.

Tanner opened his top desk drawer and pulled a cassette tape out from the very back. He’d heard it yesterday afternoon and had listened to it ten times since. Each telemarketer activated a tape recorder once they realized that the person whom they were speaking with was agreeing to a sale. This had been Kara’s twenty-second sale yesterday. He knew he’d have to call her into his office, but he didn’t know what he’d say. He had two hours before she would leave. Kara worked the late afternoon shift because she was hoping to stay on after school started to be a tape verifier. Usually a group of two or more stayed behind and listened to the tapes and confirmed the sale. Since telemarketing hours ended at four-thirty, verifying tapes was the only way she could get in enough hours after school. She could come in and be on the phones for an hour, then start reviewing tapes.

Having her only on the phones for an hour would be a loss to his sales, but it was better than losing her altogether. After their first meeting, Kara had showed small improvements, then a week later she exploded. Tanner listened to the tapes to see what the change had been. Some of it, he had to admit, was from her becoming more confident on the
phone; however the majority of it was from her flirting. Once she got past the secretaries, it
was almost a guaranteed sale. She was still on the re-subscription program and would start
off by saying what magazine she was with and asking whether or not they were enjoying it.
If they claimed not to be familiar with it she would chide them for not being more up to date
on a significant publication in their business, especially one that they were receiving for free.
Usually they would agree the publication was great, but Tanner could tell in some of their
voices that they had no idea what magazine she was talking about. Tanner had been right.
Men will talk to a pretty girl about anything for any reason. And she did sound pretty—not
only because she was young, but because she had an official quality to her voice that sounded
cute coming from someone so young. The entire time she was on the phone with a client, she
gave off the feeling: If we can only get this business out of the way, then we can get to the
real fun.

Tanner had always listened to tapes whenever it seemed the crew was having a bad
day and no one wanted to remain to verify sales. After he heard the first few of Kara’s, he
started staying every night to help verify, ensuring that he always ended up with her stack of
tapes. He was successful at lying to himself about it the first week, but slowly admitted to
himself that he loved hearing her voice. She was playful, but with her own grace at the same
time. Alluring, but not smutty. If he hadn’t hired her, he wouldn’t have known she was
sixteen. He wasn’t alone. He often heard the other employees remarking about her age and
how surprised they were that she was still in high school. Some of the middle-aged women
wanted to know if she knew their son, hinting at a possible fix up.

Tanner left his office and walked down one of the rows. He heard dozens of people
talking at once, though just one side of the conversation. He missed being on the phones. It
was so much simpler than what he was doing now. If you made a mistake on the phone, you hung up and dialed someone else. Every day you got a hundred different chances to make a first impression. But as the Director of this branch everything he did was remembered.

He passed Kara’s cubicle and slipped a folded piece of paper onto her desk. Trying to catch people in between calls was too awkward; Tanner found this to be the best way to communicate. He heard Mrs. Rollin running through the survey, her speed and efficiency something he wished everyone could pick up, though Kara was well on her way. But yesterday’s conversation made him question the advice he had initially given her.

Kara: Are you active in metal refurbishing?

Mr. Johnson: No.

Kara: Are you active in the sale of metal once it’s been processed at your facility?

Mr. Johnson: No.

Kara: Are you active in—

Mr. Johnson: Actually, I’m more interested in what you’re active in.

Kara: [laughs] Oh, you don’t want to know what I’m into.

Mr. Johnson: I bet I do.

Kara: Girl stuff. I wouldn’t want to bore you. Are you active in the storage of raw metals?

Mr. Johnson: Yes. That we are. But I want to get back to your interests. I bet you’re a hell raiser.

Kara: I’ve been known to get crazy.

Mr. Johnson: Even in bed?
Kara: Oh, I didn’t know you meant *those* kinds of interests. I suppose so. But we’d better finish these questions.

They continued on like this for another six minutes. Thankfully, after it had been verified, he could hide the tape. If he was required to keep an archive, he would have taken the loss of the sale and destroyed the tape. His note said for her to meet him when she finished her call, but Tanner still didn’t know how to handle this. If she had said something improper, it would be easier. But she hadn’t. But she hadn’t discouraged anything either.

There was a quick knock at the door and Kara opened before he could say come in. He had congratulated her often after she started making goal, but these conversations had never really gone past a handshake in the aisles after work or some small talk on the few times she had stayed after to review tapes.

When she sat down at his desk, she plopped down quickly in the chair, any hint of the timid girl that had first crept into his office gone. She beamed at him. She was a top seller, by no means the best in this branch, but laying a foundation that would take her there.

“I assume you know what this is about?” he asked her, well aware by the smile on her face that she had no idea.

“You... want to congratulate me?” she asked, still grinning.

“No. I want to—” he paused there, unsure of how to begin. He didn’t want to accuse her of anything, but he didn’t know how to start talk without making it sound like a chastisement. “On the phone yesterday. Things got detailed.”

She scrunched up her face, then grew wide-eyed. “Oh. The weirdo. What about him?”
“Well, I think you’d agree that things went a little too far there.”

“But you said to flirt.”

He stared back at her. He wanted to tell her that he had told her to flirt, not to whore herself out over the phone. But he was too surprised at what he saw in her face. She really didn’t feel like anything wrong had taken place. “Flirt, yes. But that’s to make them comfortable. To get them to open up to you. Not to engage in anything.”

“I agree it got weird, but nothing happened. It’s not like I gave him my number. As long as I’m not bothered, what’s the problem?”

Tanner, getting flustered, said, “The problem is you have two people right next to you and someone checking the tapes. We’re just lucky I’ve been reviewing all your tapes.”

“You’ve been listening to all of my tapes?” She asked, dropping her hurt expression.

“There was a shortage of volunteers. I was picking up the slack,” He answered her without missing a beat. She said nothing, but looked down and blushed.

“Besides, someone overhearing aside, it’s just not right. You shouldn’t be talking that way. Not to strangers. I mean, not to anyone. You’re—”

She looked back at him, her smiled returning. “I’m not as young as you think I am.”

“You’re still too young to be having those kinds of conversations though,” he retorted, trying to sound more like a peer than her boss. She didn’t answer him, but her gaze remained constant and fixed. He had expected her to blush and look down again.

The second time Tanner spoke to Kara’s father was during the rally. An accident between a motorcycle and a Dodge truck had shut down an already congested interstate. Kara lived on the other side of Spearfish, almost in the hills, and it was faster for her to take
the interstate home. While she was stuck in traffic, her father had called, livid she wasn’t home. Tanner had to admit she had left a half an hour ago. It took some heavy convincing from both of them to convince her father to let her come back. Now Tanner watched the clock, making sure Kara was out the door by six.

It was the fourth day of the rally, and she was wearing a rally bandana, snug around head with her hair streaming out the sides. The bandana accentuated her ears, which were red and looked like they were close to peeling. Her shirt was rolled up to show off a henna tattoo—a round circle with wavy lines flaring off from the sides—on the small of her back. Tanner felt an irresistible urge to run his fingers over its surface to see if it was smooth like it appeared or if it had given the small of her back a rough, charcoal texture.

The week after he and Kara had met about the obscene phone call, they had talked every day, before and after work. Then the next week they had started sharing looks and finding excuses to touch each other. Last week things progressed rapidly. During a summer storm, he’d been helping her retrieve her jacket from the closet and her entire backside had pressed into him, then lingered, long enough for him to lift his arms to caress her. But they had both pulled away, Tanner so flustered that he had sat in his office for a full twenty minutes before he felt composed enough to return to oversee the people left on the phones.

Today he sat with Sue and Kara at the round table in the conference room, a pile of tapes scattered before them. Tanner dropped his headphones around his neck when he saw she had hers down to switch tapes. Earlier, when everyone had been on the phones, he had wandered up and down the aisles, entranced by the new decoration on her back, wanting to drop down on his knees and inspect it further. “Your Dad must love your new look,” he said.
She looked up at her bandana, “This? Yeah. He said something about it just as I left.”

“I meant your back.”

She laughed. “Like I’d let him see that. I’ll unroll my shirt before I get home.”

“But he’ll see it eventually.”

“It wears off in two weeks. I can keep it covered until then. If he saw it, then he’d know I made it to Sturgis.”

“Who’d you go with?”

“Some friends.”

“Katie and Sara? The girls?” Tanner asked.

He saw her glance over at Sue, presumably to see if her tape was still running.

“Why? You jealous?” she whispered, then pulled her headphones back on.

Seconds later Sue dropped her headphones and Tanner was instantly terrified that she had heard something.

“Tanner, listen,” she began, “we got in-laws visiting that were hoping to catch The Clandestines at the Full Throttle Saloon and you know how much of a bitch it is to get into Sturgis much past seven. Is there any way you could leave a note for someone on morning crew to finish up my share?”

Tanner felt a deep tingling in the bottom of his stomach. He spoke, but didn’t hear himself say, “Sure Sue. That’d be fine. You just go on ahead.”

After her departure, he and Kara stared at each other for along time, like two people who had accidentally trashed talked their way into a fight. Tanner knew they’d pushed
things too far to turn back. He waited, wondering who would be the first one to stand. It was he.

He walked to her side of the table, her eyes following his slow progression. He extended his arms down to touch her shoulders, but she grabbed onto him and pulled herself up. He wrapped her in his arms, surprised at how petite she was now that he was actually touching her. Their embrace slackened and she lifted her eyes up to his. Her look made him feel guilty, so he closed his eyes and kissed her.

Tanner tried to think back to the sexual experiences he’d had early in life, a brief kiss on a ski slope in middle school, a make-out session in the church parking lot, actually losing his virginity at the start of his junior year. He didn’t know how far Kara had gone and where she’d be comfortable with him putting his hands. He tried to compose his thoughts, to respect the boundaries he was unsure of, but soon let everything take him away.

Before he really understood what was going on, he spun her around and sat down in her chair, pulling her into his lap. They pawed at each other, her sitting sidesaddle, until she briefly stood and straddled him completely. He was careful to control his urges to press himself roughly against her.

Eventually she lost her composure and started rubbing her body against his, rocking in the chair. He felt like taking her skin off with his teeth, lapping at the henna on her back until it came off brown on his tongue.

Tanner started to lift up her shirt, then stopped and things began to slow down. Tanner eyed the clock and saw that it was five minutes past her usual departure time. He eased her off his lap and they both straightened their clothing, she smoothing the wrinkles he
had created on her shirt, he trying to rearrange his pants for better concealment. They parted with a brief kiss, making no plans to meet up somewhere or to try this again at work.
Chapter 9

Tanner spent three days hauling hulks of cracked porcelain out to the truck and made roughly fifteen trips to the dump each day. He found nothing of value. Lois interrupted him on Friday, the day he hoped would be his last in this building. She came in, this time not pausing by the door, approaching as he struggled to move a huge gray bathtub. He dragged one side forward, then the other, working it to the door the best he could. He had no idea how he was going to get it on the truck.

"Tanner. My, that’s a big fella, isn’t it?"

"Sure is. Might have to get Oscar in here."

She looked back from him to the tub several times. "I just wanted to make sure you were still coming tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" he asked, not bothering to stop tugging on the ends of the tub. Sweat streaked into his eyes.

"Church. We talked about you coming this time."

They had actually discussed last week’s service. When she hadn’t asked him to go, he assumed she had changed her mind. He hadn’t been disappointed. Sitting through service, something he hadn’t done in nearly ten years, didn’t interest him. He remembered the calisthenics routine of his Catholic days—up-down, sit-kneel-stand, feign interest-nod.

"Sure, Lois. I’d love to check out the Adventists."

Pleasure spread across her face, deepening her wrinkles. "Great! We leave at eight tomorrow morning. I’ll pick you up at your door," she said, turning to leave before he could respond.

_A car? With Lois? I wouldn’t trust that woman to drive me in a go-cart._
He pulled the tub, inching each side forward, until he got about a foot away from the door. He looked at the tub and then at the spacing of the door. Impossible. He wondered how the hell Chester got it in here. Tanner knew he was poor with spatial organization, but truly couldn’t see a way to get the tub outside. Even with Oscar’s help, they’d have to lift it up well above their waists, then angle it just right, then—no, even that wouldn’t work. He lined the tub up with the door, then flipped it on its side, letting it crash down rather than giving himself a hernia trying to ease it down. The tub, though heavy, was beautiful: a classical style, deeply carved claw feet and a smooth surface—though cracked in several places. He thought that this was the type of antique that Pillerton would buy, but damned if Tanner was going to haul it to Rapid.

He shoved the tub forward so it was flush with the door and then flipped it upright. He looked from different angles, but no ideas came. He climbed into the tub, his feet scraping the cracked, gritty surface, and sat down on the lip, placing his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He looked out the door and could see birds dancing above the buildings, flitting from one roof to another, playing tag with each other. There wasn’t another door. Chester certainly didn’t peel back the roof and drop it in here. Tanner looked at the door itself, trying to gauge how much extra space would be gained if it were off its hinges. He noticed the frame of the door was a good four inches all the way around, a sure sign that this door didn’t belong to this building. If the frame were removed, he’d have an extra eight inches to work with, more than enough to pull the tub through.

He slid from his spot and crawled forward in the bottom of the tub, getting close enough to touch the frame. It was composed of two 2x4s put together and nailed into the existing building. Removing them was the only way that Tanner could see Chester getting
the tub inside. He spent hours pulling this frame out? All for a tub that would weather the same outside. Who would do that?

Tanner knew someone who wouldn’t do that. He walked to the Hutch and returned with the rubber mallet, one the tools he had kept because it was too chewed up to resell but looked useful. He checked the roof above him, making sure he wouldn’t catch himself on the ceiling, then drew the hammer up and forcefully down.

The upper lip on this side of tub split cleanly off. Thin cracks ran out from the break and he tested the spot with his foot. Pieces dropped out like cartoon characters’ teeth. Technically, he could have pushed the tub out now, but he chose not to. Breaking this little part had felt too good. He brought the hammer back twice more, until the tub was in three larger pieces, then started up again. In a minute there were only fragments left, but Tanner aimed at them anyway, breaking them down into smaller pieces, then even smaller. This seemed to drain and exhilarate him at the same time.

He leaned against the door frame, panting and sweating. He was also smiling on his own for the first time since he arrived at the farm.

“Is she dead?” Oscar’s voice pulled Tanner from his meditation.

Tanner turned, startled, to see that Oscar had approached. For a second he thought he was talking about Lois.

“What?”

“Whatever you were just beating the hell out of. Must’ve done something pretty nasty to your family to deserve that,” Oscar said, smiling.

Tanner regained his composure. “Nah. Just wouldn’t fit through the door. Spent so much time trying to push it through that I thought it deserved a little chin music. Almost had
to come and get you to help.”

“Well, then I’m glad you decided to teach it what for. Lifting was never one of my favorite pastimes,” Oscar said, stepping closer. “I was just thinking about making a trip into town, maybe hitting up Rickey’s later. Interested?”

Tanner considered it, letting the mallet slip out of his hand and rest against the door frame. “Nah, I better not. Lois roped me into going to church with her tomorrow. I’m sure you’re welcome. Should I wake you around six or seven?”

“I’m likely to come out shooting if you do,” Oscar said. “You enjoy the Adventists. I think I’ll spend my morning sleeping one off. If I make it home that is.” He dropped Tanner a slight wink. “What else are you doing in town? Stopping by anywhere else?”

“Nowhere that I need to go. Probably just following Lois’s regular routine. Why, was there something you wanted me to pick up for you?”

“No, oh no. I was just curious.”

Oscar left seeming pleased. Tanner turned to the mess at his feet. It was going to take a while to pick up the pieces, but he didn’t regret the extra work.

From the beginning, Tanner was uncomfortable at the Black Hills Seventh Day Adventist Church. There weren’t many people present, probably no more than twenty-five, but the building was small and people formed clusters, tightly packing in some sections while leaving others completely vacant. They sat pews, something familiar to Tanner, but the walls were bare plaster and the front of the church only contained a short stage with single podium. The people that swarmed around Lois were all very interested and eager to learn about him.
A man named Clark turned in his pew, laying one arm over the back so he could talk to Tanner.

“So you’ve already got three buildings cleared out. That’s wonderful,” he said, then turned to Lois. “Why, you may not be able to keep this guy around for very long. He’ll have it all cleared out before the Fourth of July.” He gave them both a wide grin.

“So Lois, how is Chester?” she asked, dropping her voice down to an almost inaudible level.

“Oh, the same as he’s been. He has his good days, when the pain is mild and his breathing is normal. Then there’re the others when he can’t hardly speak or move.”

Clark’s wife nodded gravely.

Clark returned his attention back to Tanner. “I’m a youth counselor at the YMCA. We’re always looking for volunteers, especially young men. Let me know if you think you’ll have free time.”

Tanner felt a tap on his shoulder and he turned to meet another couple sitting behind him. It was too much. Not only did Tanner prefer to converse with people one-on-one, he was technically in hiding and didn’t like his name and face spread around so much. These people were too friendly. He’d prefer to go unnoticed. Though it was probably his imagination, he felt like the center of attention at this church.

After he had been introduced to everyone in handshaking distance, two women approached. One leaned over Tanner, her strong perfume stinging his nose, to squeeze Lois on the shoulder. “Lois. How are you holding up? We mentioned you in our prayer circle as usual.” Lois thanked them and they left to find seats in the immediate front. Almost as if on queue, another couple approached and questioned Lois about Chester’s health. One after
another groups of varying size circulated, sometimes introducing themselves to Tanner, other times just asking about Chester.

Tanner whispered to Lois, “Is it like this every Sunday?”

“Oh yes,” she said.

Pastor Higgins emerged from the crowd in the back. He stepped up to the podium and raised his hands. “Let’s start things off with a song.” Tanner grabbed the song book in front of him and faked his way through the singing as best he could. The music score above the words meant nothing to him and he stumbled trying to keep the same rhythm as everyone else. Afterward Higgins welcomed everyone, then called out a Bible verse in the book of Daniel.

The reading carried on, longer than what Tanner remembered of the brief readings from his Catholic days. Higgins finished and closed his Bible, setting it on the podium. “Does anyone have prayers of intercession?” Several old men and women rose to announce some illness they or their friends had. Tanner was familiar with prayers of intercession, but had always known them to be silent. Clark’s wife stood and Tanner noticed that she was wearing a suit coat with shoulder pads, something Tanner hadn’t seen since the 80’s. “The problems Clark and I’ve been having are better, but this week...I just don’t know. We just weren’t talking like we should be. Everything’s a grunt or a murmur.” Tanner couldn’t believe she would speak like this while her husband was sitting right there. He wondered if some teenager was going to pop up and confess that he was having problems refraining from touching himself. In mass people muttered greetings and then sat down, zoning out and only awakening to check their watches periodically.
Lois stood next. She grabbed the back of the pew in front of her for support, and the people in front of her turned to watch, something most hadn't done for the other speakers. “You all know that Chester’s been doing about the same. He can still speak, something I thank God for every day, but he doesn’t move around much and is pretty much confined to his chair. I keep watching for the telltale sign of difficulty breathing that the doctors warned me about, but so far there isn’t anything. He’s been having trouble keeping food down, but that’s been normal. I just ask that you keep us in your prayers, as I know you have been.”

Nearly everyone in attendance gave an “Amen,” and Tanner found himself saying it too. A woman in the back rose next, but Tanner felt awkward turning to look at her, so he kept his gaze on Pastor Higgins.

“Michael took off this week. I...I just don’t know how it could have happened,” she stammered. “He’s the one who brought me here, had me convert, and he’s abandoned us.” Several of the faces in the crowd looked down or completely turned around, almost as if they were shunning her. “I told him that me and the children were his only family, would be his only family in the eyes of God, but he said that it’s just not his life anymore.” She broke down into sobs and Tanner could hear someone getting up to comfort her.

Prayer of intercession? It feels more like the airing of dirty laundry to me.

Higgins moved through more songs and prayers, pausing in the middle for tithing. Tanner had a five dollar bill ready and tossed it in as the wicker basket went around, hoping that Lois would notice and be pleased.

Higgins’s sermon was on the challenge that accompanies faith, though something about it troubled Tanner. Higgins made it sound like these people should expect and want to be challenged. His sermon lacked the usual the-Lord-works-in-mysterious-ways feel that
Tanner was used to. It was fiercer, Old Testament based. He could see why Chester had fit in so well here.

At the end of service Lois stood. “Aren’t we staying for the study afterward?” Tanner asked.

“Oh, we can’t do that. Chester needs lunch. And I can’t leave him alone for more than three hours.”

They had ridden in Tanner’s vehicle. He had gotten ready an hour before they were supposed to leave and was waiting in his Trailblazer outside her trailer when she emerged. She had protested, but he argued with her, never stepping away from the Trailblazer, standing partway inside, leaning over the top until she gave in. They rode in silence for most of that trip, but on the return Lois seemed to want to talk, and Tanner was happy to oblige. He’d wanted to talk with Lois for some time, but couldn’t bear the thought of sitting in her trailer.

“So what did you think of the service?” Lois asked.

He knew to lie, but wasn’t sure what positive aspect he could highlight. “It seemed nice. I liked how after the pastor said something, he backed it up with a passage from the Bible. Plus, they’re a close group. Everyone seemed really concerned about Chester.”

Lois stared out the window. “Yes. They always are.”

Her words sounded sad, and he felt guilty about bringing it out in her. He preferred to think of her as crazy. It made everything easier. “I was intrigued by what he said about the end-times. It’s something I don’t think much about, something I should probably think about more.”
“Yes. We all have to be ready,” Lois agreed.

He was reluctant to push this further, afraid she would mistake his talk for enthusiasm and start ministering, but he wanted to know more about how much Lois took to heart what Higgins said. As a child, Tanner had learned people listened to the priest when he was around, then dismissed what he said as soon as they were out the door.

“I wasn’t too familiar with the mark of the beast. Pretty frightening stuff, huh?”

“Yes. But as it says in Revelations, these times are necessary for the new kingdom. The faithful will stand ready.”

“When exactly do you think those times are coming?”

“Tanner,” she said, turning her head in surprise, “those times are already here.”

Her answer was enough to make him stop asking questions for a while. Eventually he pressed the question he had asked the day he arrived. “What exactly was Chester’s plan, Lois. What did he want to do with everything out there?” It was unusually direct, but he felt that after going to church with her, Lois probably felt the closest she’d ever been to him. He may not have another opportunity.

“Tanner, I’ve told you. That was Chester’s business.”

“Yeah, but he must have told you something. Where was it all going to go? What was it going to be used for?”

“Once he had enough stuff, he was going to open up a junkyard. Or was it an antique store? I really don’t know.”

“But you’re nearly forty miles from the nearest substantial town. You wouldn’t have any business out there.”
Lois smiled. “Chester always said people would use four dollars worth of gas to save two dollars at the store. It makes people feel thrifty.”

“Ok, but a lot of the stuff he saved didn’t looked like your usual junkyard items. I mean, what good are old coffee cans and newspapers?”

Lois’s smile grew. “Tanner, I’m surprised at you. You should know by now that something’s value isn’t found until years later. Who knows what people are going to need in the future?”

Tanner supposed there was a sort of logic to it, but it still didn’t sit well. According to that line of thinking, Chester could easily have been crapping in jars all these years, leaving it in some building for him to clean out next week.

After he brought up the farm, Lois didn’t speak for the rest of their ride. In this silence, Tanner realized that Lois had been normal the entire trip. She hadn’t stared off into space or said something odd since they left. He didn’t know if this meant she was becoming comfortable with him or if she just had ups and downs.
Chapter 10

He spent the rest of Saturday finishing up in the Locker Room and making his last porcelain drop at the dump. He wondered where to go next but found something interesting after poking his head into the building farthest west. The windows were crusted over, but the thin crack of light that he had let in landed on something that caught his attention immediately. It was a jack-in-the-box. He pushed the door open all the way and crept towards it, memories from childhood resurfacing at the sight. The clown had a red head with black eyes. The face had originally been blue, but had rubbed off to show plain white plastic underneath. It hadn’t been a favorite toy, not one he would readily remember, but finding it here brought back images of his childhood home.

He knelt and plucked the box from its spot, thinking that Chester might have faced it this way to make it look like it was on guard duty. He put it off to the side where it wouldn’t be stepped on in his trips to the truck. The theme of this building was unmistakable. This was Chester’s Toy Box. There were deformed dolls with missing heads and limbs, an oversized electric car, and crusty stuffed animals.

He walked back to the Locker Room to get the truck. On the way, he pondered how he could talk to Chester. Lois only left the farm once a week, as far as he had seen. He could wait another week and then fake illness if she asked him to go to church again. That would leave him over two hours to talk to Chester. Presently he wasn’t thinking about things to sell or hidden money, he just wanted to know why. Lois said a junkyard, but it wasn’t possible. There was a plan here. Tanner had expected it to solidify the further he dug. So far it hadn’t.
Tanner started to mutter to himself. “And if that bastard doesn’t have an explanation, I’ll bring him to town. Get him a shrink. A shrink would know. There has to be a reason. Maybe his mother threw away his baseball cards when he was younger. Nobody does this for nothing. Even subconsciously there has to be something.”

Tanner imagined a therapist hovering over Chester asking questions, only to be answered by the wheezing respirator.

To his surprise, Tanner didn’t find older toys the deeper he dug. After one trip to the dump, he was still finding electronic toys. He picked up a See ‘n Say, which was a deviation from the traditional barnyard animal design. It had birds of all varieties—penguins, ostriches, and the more familiar blue jays. He couldn’t resist pulling the string, but no sound came. Tanner had no idea what a valuable toy would be, but he feared that he was throwing one away. Even with the broken ones, he feared that he was throwing away useable parts. He knew there were toy nuts out there, people who might pay a couple hundred dollars for a piece off of something he was chucking. But the only way to find those people would be to spend hours on the internet looking at toy enthusiast websites. Tanner didn’t think it was worth it.

Tanner made a trip outside to toss a large, stuffed polar bear. Lois approached from the direction of the house, abandoning her usual gait, rushing up in a way he had never seen.

“Have you seen Oscar today?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“When did you last see him?” She was direct and obviously agitated.
“Last night. He mentioned going to the bar. Didn’t get a chance to stop by and see how it went. Lois?”

She stared him down, her usual empty gaze replaced by a focused and thoughtful expression. She didn’t look like she was going to answer, but then she tried to give him a smile. “Nothing. I just...wanted to—I need to talk to him. I waited in his camper, but I don’t know if he’s coming back.”

“Lois, what’s going on?”

“It’s nothing. It’s just that someone was here.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.” She looked down, then quickly back at him. “It could have been the UPS man.”

“Don’t they always leave a yellow tag when they stop? Are you expecting something?”

She slowly backed away from him. “Just tell Oscar to come to the trailer if you see him,” she said before returning.

Tanner went back to the piles of toys and kept digging. It would be time for another trip to the dump soon, but he didn’t want to leave just yet. Lois surprised him with something new every time he spoke with her, but he had never seen her like this, except when she caught him trying to take off Chester’s mask. What did Oscar do?

He wandered over to Oscar’s camper. His truck was gone. He could have just stayed in town, slept one off at a friend’s house, but Tanner didn’t know who that friend would be.

_Maybe the old dog got some,_ Tanner thought, laughing to himself. _Or maybe he found some money and split._
Her questions had stirred up more mystery and Tanner didn’t intend to leave her house until he had some answers. But there was only one way he could think of to stay long enough. He’d have to give in and do what he swore he wouldn’t. He was going to have dinner with Lois and Chester.

Lois handed Tanner pieces of silverware to set out. He was sitting on the far end of her little kitchen table, a small one that didn’t look like it could fit more than two people.

“We can eat in the living room with Chester. I don’t mind.”

“Oh no. Chester doesn’t eat this kind of food without me cutting the meat up really small for him. Too hard for him to chew. I’ll feed him later.”

“Do you usually eat with him?”

“Sure. Just not today.”

It was all he could think of to say. He couldn’t ask her what Chester’s plan was for a third time. And besides Saturday trips to town, it didn’t look like there was much else to Lois’s life. It would have to be the past.

“So how did you and Chester meet?”

“Oh. We married right after I got out of school. My folks lived so far out in the country the buses wouldn’t come and get us, so I lived in Spearfish to go to high school. I worked at the library part time. I met Chester there. Back then you met someone in school and you married them. People were older then of course. I mean—” She paused to stir the Rice-o-Roni in her pot. “I mean people grew up faster back then. You were married with kids before you were twenty. Didn’t expect to live past your fifties. Now, you kids live so
long it’s like you don’t feel like you need to grow up.” She looked at him then, seeming to accuse him of something.

“Yeah. It does allow people to get settled now. Make sure they’re right for each other.”

“Right for each other. Ha. You also need to get past that. Men and women were never made to live in the same house. They’re too...different. That’s the way it is. People your age start to realize that and then they get divorced. Try it again and it’s the same thing. They just don’t learn.”

“But if you wait, you might not get divorced.”

“If you give up when times get rough, you’ll always get divorced. There’re always going to be hard times, hard months. Sometimes hard years. If you have it in your head that you can quit, you will. It should never be an option. Once it is, you’ll always take it.” She turned back to the stove, pouring the pasta into another pot with a strainer over it, then slipping the contents back into the original pot.

He wondered if Lois thought he was divorced. She seemed to be upset, though it could still be about Oscar. He wanted to push her further, but decided to turn the conversation somewhere else.

“I’m trying to salvage as much as I can, but there won’t be much in the building with the toys. Most are pretty busted up. Probably won’t be making a trip to Rapid for a while.”

She didn’t seem bothered and started to carry dishes over to the table. They were having some sort of spiraled pasta with what looked like circular slices of salami fried in their own grease. They ate in silence, Tanner not sure what else he could say that wouldn’t upset Lois’s already shaky mood. He’d hoped she would open up about Oscar on her own.
At least it's better than waffles.

“Chester always likes this meal,” she said, not looking up from her plate.

“Does he?”

“Yes. He always made it when he was camping, so every once in a while he would ask me to cook it for him. I like to remind him of those happier times.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Doesn’t it.”

After dinner he forced her to let him do the dishes, though she protested greatly. He knew she was from an older school of thought and wouldn’t take offense if he left her with a sink full of dishes, but he hadn’t really gotten anything out of this visit other than a free meal. He didn’t plan on making this a nightly tradition, so he wanted to find out as much as possible. He racked his brain to figure out how he could get her to leave him and Chester alone, but he couldn’t come up with anything.

She arose from her spot at the table and excused herself.

He could hear her in the living room while he was drying the last of the dishes and placing them on the counter. He picked up the strainer, but had no idea where to put it. He wrapped the towel under it to catch any water and walked into the living room.

Lois stood above Chester, sweeping his hair around on his head so that it flowed in one direction. It was dark in the room, but the glare from the muted TV gave enough light for him to see the outline of Chester’s body. Its paleness seemed to capture the TV’s light and reflect it back. He had a dark bruise across the side of his left cheek and a few others
around his chest and neck. Chester started and shifted his eyes towards Tanner as soon as he entered the room. Lois noticed and straightened up, turning to look at him.

“Tanner. Done already? The strainer goes above the sink. On a hook.”

He had expected an outburst from her. A frantic defense of Chester. Then he remembered how she had gone into the room as soon as he had first sat down at the table and started turning off lights. “To let Chester rest,” she had said, but Tanner knew now she was hiding him.

*She doesn’t think I saw anything.*

After handing over the strainer, which she promptly hung in its proper place, he excused himself. She invited him back for dinner anytime, but seemed relieved at his departure.

Tanner moved slowly back to his trailer. It had to be Oscar. Immediately his mind went to the money. Oscar was looking for Chester’s money. Maybe Tanner was getting too far in his explorations and Oscar was worried, prompting him to assault Chester. But Tanner had been in the Locker Room for days, and Oscar had no way of knowing which building Tanner would go to next. Oscar had no way of knowing if Tanner was getting close.

Tanner started to turn towards his trailer, which he was depressingly beginning to think of as home, but stopped. Someone was at Oscar’s. He didn’t see the truck anywhere, but the door was partway open and it was just becoming dark enough for him to see a light on inside. He rushed over, not bothering to call out to Oscar, but knocking directly on the door.

A surprised face popped up behind the screen door. Tanner stood his ground but said nothing.
“Tanner. Scared the bejesus out’a me. How’s the clean up?”

“It’s fine. What are you doing?”

“I’m actually going to take off for a couple days. Got some friends to visit in town and they don’t like the idea of camping out here in the boonies with me. I was already gone but I forgot my wallet. Had to come back”

Tanner had danced around enough conversations. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?” Oscar asked, trying to give him best innocent grin.

“You know.”

Oscar straightened at this and slightly puffed out his chest, but said nothing.

“What did you do to Chester?”

Oscar let all of the humor drop from his voice. “We had a bit of an argument. Something about old times. You wouldn’t understand.”

“He’s an old man. Hell he’s an old crippled man. He can barely lift his arms. How could you do that to him? How can you do that to Lois?”

“An old man, huh?” Oscar stepped down out of his camper and let the screen door slam behind him. “So you’ve got this whole thing figured out, have you?”

Tanner just stared at him.

“Well, maybe you need to consider for once that you have no fucking idea about what’s going on out here. Has that ever occurred to you? The fact that you might not understand one bit of this, has that ever even crossed your mind?”

“If you’re trying to explain, you’re doing a pretty lousy job.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation. I might owe Lois an explanation. But you know what they say about those without sin.”
“What?”

“I’m done. With you...her....him...everyone. Get the hell out of my way. I don’t think you’ve got it in you to stop me.”

Tanner had been in several schoolyard scuffles, but none past seventh grade. At that point he had figured out that he was better at talking his way out of situations than punching his way through them. He knew better than to try and pick up fighting halfway through life. He gave Oscar a wide berth, which Oscar used as he walked away from the camper, disappearing past the outer buildings.
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