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## Hit: A Novella

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**Hit: A Novella**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary  
by  
**Hannah McCarthy**

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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**Timothy L. Barnard**

Williamsburg, VA  
April 18, 2012

## INTRODUCTION

When one of America's most elusive fugitives was apprehended after a nearly sixteen-year-long manhunt, the *Boston Globe* quoted a resident of Southie as saying, "He was a mobster, but so what? Everybody's got an occupation." The criminal in question, listed just behind Osama Bin Laden on the FBI's most-wanted list for nearly twelve years, was James "Whitey" Bulger. After a lifetime of crime in the Boston Irish mob, the Dorchester-born mobster was behind bars. By that time, he had inspired a mass fascination with the culture for which he had become an urban legend. Bulger's brother, William "Billy" Bulger, was president of the Massachusetts Senate and the University of Massachusetts, prompting many to ask the question: just what was it that made Billy and Whitey take such different paths? Like many before him, Whitey Bulger had been pulled into a tradition of organized crime that fostered participation from a young age, and rarely let anyone leave once they had been initiated into the "family."

Boston has a well-chronicled history of Irish mob activity, surviving particularly in the heavily Irish-American neighborhoods of Somerville, Charlestown, South Boston ("Southie"), Dorchester, and Roxbury, where the Irish mob arose during Prohibition. Throughout the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, numerous gang wars between rival Irish gangs spread, extending into conflicts with Italian crime families both in and outside of Boston, such as the Patriarca crime family. During the 1960s, Boston was divided by a violent power struggle between two dominant Irish-American organized crime gangs, the Charlestown Mob in Boston, led by brothers Bernard and Edward "Punchy" McLaughlin, and the Winter Hill Gang of Somerville, headed by James "Buddy" McLean. This "Irish Mob War" supposedly began over a girlfriend of a Winter Hill gang member, resulting in the murder of McLean in Charlestown City Square. The conflict

would ultimately take the lives of the Charlestown Mob and its leaders, with any remaining members becoming absorbed into the Winter Hill Gang, which became the dominant non-mafia gang in the New England area.

Growing up in an Irish-Italian family in New Jersey, I heard the mafia widely discussed and observed it as more than theoretically present in my life. My mother grew up in the area that *The Sopranos* is based on, my great uncle drove the car for the DeCavalcante crime family, and I had more male relatives who went by unconventional nicknames like “Lefty” than I can remember. The concept of blood ties and family loyalty always fascinated me, as they were also a part of both my Irish and Italian upbringing. La Cosa Nostra always intrigued me, but it wasn't until I learned of my grandfather's childhood on Deer Island prison outside of Boston, Massachusetts, that I became truly fascinated with mob culture. He described the island's prison as a revolving door for criminals from the Boston mob. During a bout of laughter upon hearing Whitey Bulger was finally in custody, my grandfather told me he had met him when he was on Deer Island. The prison closed in 1991, long before Bulger was caught, and still housed some 1,500 inmates at the time of its closing. Located in Boston Harbor, Deer Island became a place of interest to me, especially because of my grandfather's ties to it, coupled with its connection to the mob.

With Whitey Bulger, the Winter Hill Gang, and Deer Island as my inspiration, I decided to write a novella exploring the ways in which the family unit and “the family” operate in this unique culture. The final figure who influenced this novella was Richard “The Iceman” Kuklinski. I happened upon a documentary chronicling his prolific career as a hitman in New Jersey, working for the DeCavalcante family—the very crime family my own had ties with. The

camera crew recorded candid impressions of a man who claimed to have murdered over 250 men in a thirty-eight year period. Kuklinski served as a major inspiration for this novella's protagonist and gave me key insights into the mind of a contract killer.

I combined my personal research with Michael Cronin's course on Local Cinema in Boston and Osaka, taken in the fall of 2011. This course examined depictions of Boston in both novels and film, paying particular attention to the roles of locale, family, and masculinity in defining the city as a character itself. Studying works like *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* by George V. Higgins and *Mystic River* by Dennis Lehane offered me stirring explorations of Boston both as a city and as a culture unto itself. The course gave me a wealth of information about the ways in which Boston and its citizens have been portrayed, as well as about the violent lifestyle of mob members and the struggles of the Irish community living in South Boston in particular.

My primary intent with this historically-infused creative endeavor was to explore my own Irish-American background as well as the rich history of Boston. Synthesizing an exploration of family loyalty and the brutality of the world of organized crime presented an intriguing and rewarding challenge for me in writing this novella. Attached in the following pages are a few images of key locations and figures who inspired this novella. Ultimately, the contributions of my steadfast adviser, Emily Pease, my massive Irish-Italian family, my professors, and the works of authors and filmmakers before me helped inspire *Hit*, a brief glimpse into the decades of fascinating mob culture in Boston, Massachusetts.



*Deer Island, Boston Harbor, 20th c.*



*Deer Island Prison, Boston Harbor, 20th c.*



Maj. George F. A. Mulcahy

### Major Mulcahy, Decorated Veteran Of World War I

EASTON — Maj. George F. A. Mulcahy, 76, of 1 School St., a decorated combat veteran of World War I, died yesterday in Easton.

Maj. Mulcahy was born in Dorchester, graduated from Boston English High School and Dartmouth College and entered the Army in 1917.

He received the Croix de Guerre from the French government for leading his Second Division supply troop in a rout of the Kaiser's Prussian Guards during an assault on Paris in 1918.

He advanced from second lieutenant to major in field promotions and received the Silver Star while serving with the Army of Occupation of Germany after the war.

After discharge from the Army, he became involved in correctional work in Massachusetts, serving as assistant superintendent at Concord Reformatory from 1921-27 and as master of Deer Island House of Correction until 1942.

Maj. Mulcahy joined the Army Air Corps in 1942 at the age of 53, and served with the provost martial in Europe.

He retired after the war and took up residence in Easton.

He is survived by five daughters, Mrs. Richard McGinn of Weymouth, Mrs. Robert Keating of Easton, Mrs. Robert McNeil, Mrs. Joseph O'Connor and Mrs. Fred Prendible of Winthrop, and two sons, Robert Mulcahy of Verona, N.J., and George Mulcahy of Annandale, Va.

Funeral arrangements are incomplete.

### G. F. Mulcahy, Retired Deer Island Master

A solemn requiem Mass for Maj. George F. A. Mulcahy, 76, retired master of Deer Island House of Correction and former superintendent of Concord Reformatory, will be celebrated at 9 a.m. today (Thursday) in St. Joseph's Church, East Boston.

Maj. Mulcahy, a resident of 1 School St., South Easton, died Monday in that town.

A veteran of both World Wars and native of Dorchester, Maj. Mulcahy served as superintendent of Concord Reformatory from 1921 to 1927 and as master of Deer Island from 1927 until he entered the service for World War II. He retired in 1945 after release from the Air Force.

He leaves two sons, Robert E. of Verona, N. J., and George F. of Annandale, Va.; five daughters, Mrs. Robert Keating of Easton, Mrs. Richard McGinn of East Weymouth, and Mrs. Robert McNeil, Mrs. Joseph O'Connor and Mrs. Frederick Prendible, all of Winthrop, and a brother, Robert C. M. of Watertown.

### Maj Mulcahy Rites Set For Thursday

A solemn requiem Mass for Maj. George F. A. Mulcahy, 76, retired master of Deer Island House of Correction and former superintendent of Concord Reformatory, will be offered at 9 a.m. Thursday in St. Joseph Church, East Boston.

A former Winthrop resident, he died Monday in South Easton where he had been living at 1 School st.

Born in Dorchester, he was educated at Boston English High and Dartmouth. He enlisted in the Army in 1917, received two battlefield promotions and was decorated with the Silver Star, France's Croix de Guerre and the Purple Heart.

Maj. Mulcahy was cited by Gen. Pershing for action in the Battle of Verdun.

He was affiliated with Concord correctional institution from 1921-1927 when he was named master at Deer Island, a post he held until he returned to active duty with the Army Air Force during World War II. At the end of that conflict he retired to the South Shore.

He leaves five daughters, Mrs. Dorothy V. Prendible, Mrs. Elizabeth F. McNeill and Mrs. Barbara C. O'Connor, all of Winthrop, Mrs. Pauline J. McGinn of Weymouth and Mrs. Donna L. Keating of South Easton; a son, George F. of Annandale, Va.; and a brother, Robert C. M. Mulcahy of Watertown.

*Obituary for my great-grandfather, Mjr. George F. A. Mulcahy*

*October 29, 1968, The Boston Globe*

*For my grandparents, who inspired only the best of this work,  
but unfortunately did not get to see it completed.  
To all others who supported me throughout this  
vast, terrifying, wonderful endeavor, thank you;  
To Emily Pease, whose patience is tremendous and her help invaluable,  
And to my brother and parents, who love me in spite of it all.  
Deepest thanks and appreciation for all you have given me.*



*Robert E. Mulcahy*  
*March 2, 1932 - February 14, 2012*



*Angela Theresa McCarthy*  
*(nee Vicendese)*  
*December 16, 1916 - April 11, 2012*

## PROLOGUE

*MCI-Walpole Prison, Boston, MA — 1972*

John picked at a triangular scab on the back of his hand, scratching around the corners, seeing how far he could lift it before it separated from the skin. The door to his cell opened with a small symphony of clicks as the locks released to allow the guards entry. They held up a matching pair of handcuffs and leg-irons, nodding to the wall opposite them. John turned and faced the wall, palms flat on the cement, legs spread enough to allow the men access to his ankles. The guards secured the irons before moving to cuff his wrists.

The letter had arrived only weeks earlier. A woman named Melissa Howard told him that she was making a documentary about his life, and perhaps more importantly, the impact of his career on his life. His future in prison. He'd seen TV specials like that before: death row inmates approaching the end of their sentence, faces plastered all over TV screens pouring their guts out. Nothing left to lose, he supposed. In many cases they traded information in their interviews for reduced sentences, or sometimes they just seemed to enjoy the attention. John wasn't entirely sure why he'd agreed to meet with Melissa. He figured it was because he knew he was going to die, and he might as well give the families of the people he'd murdered some peace. He hadn't killed anyone for the fun of it, hadn't delighted in any of his murders the way the sociopaths did—at least, that's what the prison shrink told him. John spent years desensitizing himself to the reality of murder. To him, slitting someone's throat or stomping on their skull wasn't any different than filing paperwork might be to the average office worker. It was just a job, an occupation that paid the bills. It was as though he'd managed to turn off the part of his brain that

felt guilt or remorse when he was on a job, but as soon as he was off the streets, his morals remained intact. He wasn't depraved, he was just a highly efficient worker.

So John told Melissa Howard that he'd be happy to talk to her, but he couldn't promise how much he'd say. His old job wasn't exactly something he thought about often. He tried to move beyond it, the same way anyone who'd been fired or forced to quit would. Emotion didn't matter. Regret, sadness, guilt—they simply did not register with John. The wardens all found him unnervingly well-behaved; he was quiet, kept mostly to himself. He'd even broken up a few fights, kept a younger inmate from stabbing someone with a whittled-down toothbrush. They said in whispers that if they hadn't known him, if they'd met him in a bar, they'd have liked to have been friends.

The handcuffs dug into his wrists as the guards spun him around to face the doorway. They led him down the dimly-lit block, inmates screaming and groaning from all directions. The smell of piss clung to everything until the hall cut a rounded a corner and connected with sterile white hallways. Wardens and cops spoke over cups of bad coffee in flimsy paper cups. As John passed, their eyes absently drifted over him. John's gait carried a slight limp in one of his legs, and the leg irons further limited his mobility. He was a man of great height and weight, which kept most of the prison's employees wary. He carried upwards of two hundred pounds of what still looked to be mostly muscle despite his age. Most daunting were his baseball-mit-sized hands, giant paws that could easily cover an entire face without much flexing.

They approached a room with a small plaque beside the door reading OBSERVATION. One guard held him fast as the other opened another series of locks to allow them entry. The door swung open, and John squinted into the glare of heavy studio lights. A small, mousy

woman he assumed was Melissa Howard gazed up at him with a shaky smile. Her brown hair had been tugged into a drastically tight knot on the top of her head, the skin around her eyes pulled back by the pressure. She glanced at her cameraman, a lanky twenty-something with thick-rimmed glasses. He trained the camera on John. The dark, splotchy gray walls took on a strange glow in the light of the three cameras set up around the empty chair intended for him.

He was lowered brusquely into the seat, hands thrown down into his lap. John reached up with both hands to massage his stubbly, fresh-shaved scalp. Nothing stood between him and Melissa; both occupied uncomfortable metal chairs only several feet apart, without so much as a table to separate them. Melissa looked unsettled. John sat unblinking. Melissa nodded to her cameraman. He signaled that the camera was on and ready.

“Please state your name and date of birth.” Melissa said.

“John Fitzgerald, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1920.” he said. “But my friends call me Fitzie.” His hand brushed the mic hooked to his collar, a low scratching sound hissing into the playback. “For now, you can call me John,” he said with a smile.

Melissa nodded. “John.”

“So,” he said, clearing phlegm from his throat. “What do you want to know?”

He massaged his wrists, the handcuffs leaving behind impressions. He shifted under the glare of the lights positioned around him. They illuminated his weathered features, giving him a ghostly appearance. Even as a young man, dark circles rimmed his eyes no matter how much he slept. The skin now sagged loosely at the corners as though pulled by a constant weight. When he caught rare glimpses of himself in prison, he looked at least a decade older than his fifty-two years. The only thing untouched by age were his hands and arms. Muscle still clung to him under

taught skin, freckled and tough. He laid his hands face up in his lap. Calluses bubbled the skin. Some had broken open. The skin flaked and peeled in long strips that left sections of his hands raw and red.

“We’d like to talk to you about the crimes you’ve committed,” she said.

“Obviously,” he replied blandly.

“You’ve been in jail for nearly two years now, and the police have still been unable to close at least twenty cases of murder-for-hire, trafficking, and money laundering that they believe are linked to you. You’ve given up on an appeal. We’d like to get some information about these cases, and particularly some closure for the murder victims’ families.”

“Right,” he said.

“Well, it’s been indicated that while you’re...dangerous, you aren’t without feeling. You’re not a psychopath. That since you’ve resolved to remain in jail, if you provide information about the murders you committed that lead to the resolution of those cases, your sentence will remain unaffected. The police’s ultimate goal is to relieve the suffering of the families, of course.”

He cleared his throat again before speaking. “Look, I told all those other reporters who’ve been in here before: I don’t dwell. I don’t think about the stuff I did. I told the cops, I don’t even remember how many people I hit. They asked for a rough estimate, I could barely give them that.”

“What’s your rough estimate? Of the number of people you murdered?” Melissa said.

“Rough estimate? I said around 20, maybe 30. I lost track. It was over a space of 30 years. After that much time, things start to blur together. Two hits become one, one hit seems like five different ones like it. Can’t remember which was which.”

Melissa nodded as though she understood. John laughed. As though the tiny wisp of a woman before him could ever understand that life.

“When was your first?” she asked.

“First hit? Or first murder?” he clarified, scratching his nose with the back of his hand.

Melissa hesitated. She looked up at him. “Which came first? Your first contracted killing, or the first time you killed someone of your own volition?”

He smiled, pleased she could recognize the difference.

“I murdered someone by accident when I was about 19. Just turned 19, if memory serves.”

It came back to him. He had been out at Paddy O’s on Union with some friends. He’d sat at the bar and got tanked on cheap liquor while his friends made bets about the upcoming Sox game.

“I saw some juiced up kid strike his girl, screaming and spitting at her because she spilled a drink on him. I broke his nose and knocked out three teeth before his buddies could get to him.” John spoke with immense pride. “See, back then there wasn’t much I wouldn’t do, but I sure as shit wouldn’t abide some asshole who thought he was tough because he could smack around his girl.”

He chewed the inside of his lip. When he spoke the words tumbled out of the left side of his mouth. A crescent-shaped scar ran over the opposite side, where the nerves were damaged. It created a sort of slow drawl, forcing him to take time with each word.

“So they break us up and throw us outside, right? And this guy’s still talking shit to me, teeth missing, blood in his mouth. So my friends drag me off of him and his do the same. Trying to avoid a bigger conflict, I guess. So I head home,” John stroked his jaw with his thumb, gaze distant, “and the bastard follows me in his car. Tries to follow me into my building, where my grandmother and sister are. I shoved that fucker off our porch and cracked him across the head with a bat, no hesitation.”

John mimed the action, throwing in a loud snap of his tongue for dramatic effect. Melissa stared at him, attention rapt. To him, the events he described were commonplace. The most juvenile of his kills. It was detachment that allowed him to survive over thirty years where most didn’t last twenty minutes.

“So he’s bleeding out on my stoop, and I can hear my grandmother in the kitchen making dinner. Pots and pans clanging like you wouldn’t believe. Probably the only reason they didn’t hear me outside. It all happened so fast. I barely knew what I’d done, you know? So I see the guy’s car, and I drag him into it. God knows anyone could have been watching, but I guess they weren’t. I drive it a couple blocks out to the abandoned lot on Fargo. I get out, I torch the car, I walk away.”

John finished and shrugged. The murder had been in the newspapers the next morning, attributed to gang violence. He nearly choked over his scrambled eggs when he saw the article.

“So you were young. How did...how did that feel? Having murdered someone at nineteen?”

He couldn't tell if she was trying to mask her disgust, or if she genuinely didn't know what to say. Her lips puckered as though struggling to keep words in her mouth.

“I felt guilty about it, actually. I felt awful for a couple of days. I did it because I was angry, and didn't want him near my family. But I didn't set out to kill him. If he'd left me alone that night, nothing would have happened.”

John's voice was somber as he began digging at his scab again.

“But I also realized that it was that easy. It would be over in a second, and you won. Nobody could touch you if you put them down like that. I think that was the scary part. At first you worried about the cops, you know? Didn't want to go to jail. But they really didn't care much about what we were doing those days, most of them were too deep in the mob's pockets to say anything. So sure, I was scared I was gonna get caught, but I think I was more scared of how strong it made me feel. Like I was invincible.”

He remembered the way he studied himself in the mirror in the days following the murder, suddenly paying close attention to the lines in his arms and legs, the strength of his muscle, the quickness of his movements. Everything could be magnified. His own body became a weapon at his disposal.

“Where were your mother and father?” Melissa said.

“I don't like to talk about my mother. I had a bit of a rough childhood, you might say. Grew up in Old Harbor Housing Project, know of it? Poor as shit, no way out. Same old sob story as most around here. Abusive drunk sonofabitch father, beat the living daylights out of me

and my mother until she got cancer when I was something shy of sixteen. She didn't make it very long once she got it, you know. Just sort of withered away, just shrunk up to nothing on our couch.”

The cameraman adjusted something on his lens, pulling in closer to John as he spoke.

“Old man got worse as I got older. Stopped beating me with just his hands, took to using belts and broom sticks. Probably kept our local broom salesman in business with the number of those he broke over my back. So I got mean really young, learned not to trust anyone but my own self. I got a lot of shit in school, cause of my dad. He owed all kinds of people money. I got in fights. Not for him,” he clarified, shaking his head, “but I just wouldn't take shit from anyone anymore. I remember I was fifteen when I started growing, about the time my mother passed, God rest her soul. I got a job at my uncle's auto shop. Got real handy with a wrench. I came home one night and my father tried to hit me, skimmed the side of my face and I was bleeding. I remember thinking, ‘Fuck this.’ You know? Just, fuck no. No more. I'd had enough, God knows why it took me so long. But I swung at my father for the first and last time—that was all it took. He was already drunk off his ass. I laid him out, knocked him out cold. He started coming to and I said, ‘You touch me again and I'll kill you.’ And I meant it. He left after that, hasn't been back since. I think that was the first time I realized that when you hurt somebody, they'll leave you alone. That's what my father'd been doing for years, keeping me in place, keeping me beat down. I didn't so much as bat an eye at him because I didn't want to get hit. But I realized, it works both ways. I just wasn't big enough until then, to give him a taste of it. I just wish my mother'd been alive, that I could have shown her.”

A slight laugh escaped his lips. “Guess that’s why that first kill came easier to me than it would for most. I’d been thinking about murder for a long time before that. Wanted my dad dead for years. That kid I killed was just on the receiving end of years of rage.”

The whirring of the camera with the buzzing lights created a soft hum that soothed John. He wondered if the cops knew about that first murder, if they’d attributed that one to him yet. It was unlikely, given the lack of crime scene data collected at the time.

“Was that the only person you killed that wasn’t a contract kill?” asked Melissa.

John scrunched his face as he catalogued the kills near in his memory.

“Nah, I’d say not. I mean, I didn’t have many accidents, once I turned professional. I didn’t kill for fun, so it was never like I’d go out and just pick off some stranger. But there were hits that I chose to do myself, no one paid me. It was for security. Some guy was too close on my tail, knew too much—”

“Isn’t that how you ended up in prison? How they finally got you, because of Claire Wollam?”

John’s entire demeanor shifted. His body went stiff and his eyes hardened at the mention of that name.

“I never said I’d talk about that.” His voice was frigid, chilling in its intensity.

Melissa flinched. She had to know she would hit a nerve with that one. There was a long, uncomfortable pause.

John couldn’t shake the anger that washed over him.

Melissa was the first to try to venture back into discussion, “How did you become involved with Mickey Flannery?”

John frowned. “After that incident with the guy from the bar, there was talk. People knew we’d fought that night, so I think some people suspected. But you never said it back then. There’s a code. You don’t rat. So I got a reputation. Said I was reckless, tough. I was almost as big as I would ever be at that point, twenty years old and almost six-feet-two. I was rough. I dropped out of school after my mother died, so I didn’t have many options beyond that auto shop. Mickey said he’d pay well, and boy did he.”

When John thought of those first few months with the Flannerys, he thought of blood. Mickey exposed him to more violence and dead bodies than he’d ever imagined. They desensitized him. Mickey was pushing forty and needed more enforcers, people he could trust with his secrets, people he could trust to do anything for him. He ran his own corner of the Irish mob out of an abandoned meat packing warehouse. On the top floor he’d bring in all sorts to be dealt with. Mickey and his enforcers would chop off fingers, tongues, and ears in front of the green John. They would watch him to see if he kept his eyes open or if he’d cringe and look away. They tortured and butchered well over 50 men in the dark spaces of that warehouse, untouched and unseen by prying eyes. Most importantly they taught young men like John not to fear blood or screams of agony, to ignore the cries for mercy, desperate calls to be spared.

“I remember Mickey said to me, ‘If I tell you to whack someone, you whack ‘em. no questions.’ And I thought I was cool, I’d say, ‘I think I could do that.’ Totally calm. He laughed in my face. ‘You *think* you could do that?’ And I said, ‘I know I could do that.’ So he took me out and made me prove it. He drove me down to M Street and pointed out some old guy getting his mail. He looked at me, said, *him*, and handed me a pistol. I got out of the car, walked up

behind that man I didn't know from Adam, and I shot him in the back of the head. Then I turned around and got in the car and we drove away."

John's face remained placid.

"Still don't know if that guy had done anything to Mickey or if he just saw him and used him on a whim, to test me." John sighed, a faint glimmer of something like regret overtaking him for a short second. "I did feel a little bad about that one, only because I wasn't used to it yet. Not knowing if my hit was someone who'd done something, or what. I hadn't learned that it didn't matter yet—that you don't ask questions."

Melissa glanced down to jot notes on a notepad in her lap, as if every word John said had provided vital, invaluable information.

"Who was the first person you killed, for pay, for Mr. Flannery?" Melissa was starting to sound like the lawyers who had circled him in court like vultures, picking apart his every word, trying to catch him in lies he had no interest in telling.

"One of the McGradys. The cokehead one. Dom? Dom. That first extinguishing job, Mickey gave me a partner. Like we had to pass some test or were competing or some shit. This kid couldn't follow through. I had already proven myself, I wasn't scared of getting my hands dirty. Dom fought like a wild animal, scratching and tearing at us. He'd gotten on Mickey's bad side after getting loose with the cops. Say too much and you're done."

John could see Dom McGrady's eyes, even now. Their wild look of desperation. They'd fought. Dom had smashed a lamp and cut John with a shard of glass before he could pin him down.

"I slammed a brick against his head," John said coolly.

Dom had writhed and squirmed beneath him, blood pooling in his eyes, spilling over his lips. His teeth were an unholy red. Swearing low, damning swears, he scratched blindly at John's face. Two more strikes with the brick and he was unconscious.

"My partner's hands were shaking so bad he dropped the pistol. He puked into a wastebasket, so I grabbed his gun. 'Look here,' I remember saying. The stupid kid had left the safety on. I stepped over McGrady, took aim, snapped off the safety. I told him he wouldn't ever pull this shit on me again, or he'd be the one down there." John shook his head with a smile, as though embarrassed by his own show of machismo. He mimicked the gesture of pulling the trigger.

"A single finger motion and the job was done," he said. "The hardest part got to be disposing of the bodies. Once you got over the initial shock of killing somebody, the actual murder was nothing. It was figuring out what to do with the body that really stressed me out. You had to get creative."

Melissa asked him what were his most common methods of disposal.

"I tried new things all the time. The simplest was stuffing the body into a 50 gallon oil drum. That could get messy though. I killed this really tall guy, lanky as fuck, kind of like your boy there," he gestured to the camera man and laughed robustly. The young man swallowed hard at John's laughter. "Well, I couldn't for the life of me get his legs in there. They were poking out at crazy angles. So I had to hack 'em off and stuff 'em in there separately."

"Did you ever use a chainsaw?" Melissa asked, the question driven by what seemed to be morbid curiosity.

"To kill someone? Or to chop up a body?" He laughed.

Melissa drew nervous circles at the edges of her notepad.

“I never killed anybody with a chainsaw. That’d make a huge goddamn mess. But I did use it to chop somebody up. Still really messy though.” He coughed up more phlegm before continuing. “But like I was saying, I stuffed this guy into an oil drum and left it outside of Three Clovers Cafe. Just left the damn thing near the payphone. It sat there for a long time. I looked at it every day, it was there. I walked by Clovers every day until one day, it was missing. Nobody said nothing about it, but it just disappeared. That was that.”

John scratched his throat and motioned to the camera mounted on the wall over Melissa’s head. He knew that guards would be monitoring their entire conversation, so he pointed to his throat, asking for water. Five minutes later the locks clicked open and a guard came in with a tiny plastic cup of water. John downed it in a few gulps and returned the cup to the guard, thanking him before turning back to Melissa.

“I once killed this big guy, something like a 300 pounder. It was really hard to figure out what to do with him. I couldn’t move him anywhere on my own, so I just left him in a car we’d stolen, and drove it to the junk yard. I watched that giant trash compacter crunch that car up like it was a beer can, with that big man in there.”

Melissa shuddered at his words.

The guards reentered the room without warning. With a nod to Melissa, they signaled that their time for the day was at its close. They tugged John harshly to his feet.

Melissa jotted a few last scribbles onto her notepad.

John thought he could make out the words, “extreme detachment” in her illegible scrawl. With a low laugh, he said, “Well, it was good talking I guess. D’you still want to talk more tomorrow?”

Melissa nodded and pointed to her watch.

“Same time as today,” she replied.

John gave a nod, as though he could come meet her at any time that was convenient, if he so chose. In reality he’d be sitting on his cramped cot, waiting like a caged animal for the guards to let him out of his room. Not like he had anything better to do, really.

“Tomorrow then,” he said, and let the guards guide him out of the dark room. Back through the sterile hallways, past the coffee cups, the defensive glances, the piss-lined cells, back to his own dingy crate of a room. They freed him from his restraints and slammed the door. He slumped onto his papery cot, stretching out until he could feel every muscle tense and relax. His eyes fluttered closed. He folded his arms across his chest, drew in a deep breath. The last image to flash before his eyes before his body gave in to sleep was the trusting smile of Claire Wollam.

## CHAPTER ONE

*South Boston, MA — 1965*

John gripped the steering wheel, foot flattening the gas pedal to the floor. His beat up Plymouth groaned, stuttering a moment before shooting down the road. Before him stretched an endless band of black asphalt. He wiped his cheek with the back of his hand. He could taste the salty tang of blood in his mouth.

Beside him a young man no older than twenty shivered in a sweat-drenched shirt, a vacant look in his eyes. After scraping his nails along the inside of the door, he raised his shaking fingers to his lips. Chewing feverishly at the nails, he spit paint chips at the window. He pulled his arms protectively across his chest.

“Shit,” he whispered, voice so low John could barely hear him over the engine.

John cleared the phlegm from his throat and struck his passenger across the arm. The boy flinched into the window, banging his head against the glass.

“Not another word from you, Pockets. This is your fault, you shut your mouth,” he said through clenched teeth, the taste of blood dissipating. He was thinking and Pockets’ fidgeting made him uneasy. The road swerved to the right and put John back in familiar territory. The broad sign of Lou’s Launderette on Whitwell flashed in front of the headlights.

“Where do you live?” he asked, although he knew Pockets had told him once, maybe many times before. Instead his mind drifted over the photographs on the mantelpiece of a strange home. A wife kissing her husband on the cheek as he smiles broadly, his arm around a small girl’s shoulders. Little boys and girls circled around a table for dinner, only some aware of the camera. He blinked several times, focusing on the road. Pockets muttered an answer, but John

didn't listen. He turned onto Adams and slammed the car to a stop. Pockets lurched forward, almost colliding with the windshield.

"Jesus, Fitz!" Pockets sputtered. He glanced outside the window, then turned to John, confused. "Hey, this isn't Fenno."

John shoved his shoulder. "Get out," he said quietly, eyes forward.

"You kidding me?" Pockets gestured out the window. John shoved him into the side of the car door, pressing his face into the window. His fingers tangled into Pockets' hair, locking him against the cold glass.

"I said, get the fuck out," John said, pressing harder. A twist of his wrist sent Pockets wriggling for the door handle, begging him to stop. The door gave way and Pockets toppled out onto the dirt. He stared up with wide eyes, the terrified look of a lost child. Unlit houses lined the quiet street behind him.

"What're you doing?" Pockets said feebly. Without a word, John grabbed the door and tugged it closed. Pockets seized a clump of gravel with his hands and hurled it at the window as the car sped off, abandoning him on the vacant street corner.

John turned the radio on, raising the volume as high as it could go. The speakers buzzed. Barry McGuire's voice soared over the airwaves, wheezy harmonica wailing into the dark. He relaxed into his seat, the lyrics numbing him. It was a song about a far-off war that plucked young men off the streets, marching them to graves in a world where they'd be soon forgotten. McGuire's voice bled through the radio. *You don't believe we're on the eve of destruction.*

He reached across the seat, right hand fumbling through the glove compartment. Tugging out a box of Marlboros, he maneuvered one free and tucked it between his lips. He itched for the

nicotine. The car swerved as he reached for the lighter in his coat pocket. He flicked it on, bringing the flame to the cigarette. Inhaling deeply, he calculated how long it would take for the police to arrive at the couple's house, to find the bodies and sound the alarm. It hadn't been a clean kill. There was a good chance they'd left something behind in their panic. He had been sure that the wife wouldn't be home; he'd watched the house for weeks. Her routine never varied.

The husband couldn't have been more than forty, maybe forty-two years old. About his own age. His hair was gray at the temples, eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. John knew his look. They were always like that, at the end, eyes full with a hopeless resignation. All they could do was wait. Maybe he regretted talking to the police, maybe he knew now what it would cost him. Mickey Flannery didn't take kindly to snitches, didn't tolerate them at all. When he'd heard that Patrick Wollam had gotten his brother thrown in jail for loan sharking, Mickey tapped John for the job. In a way it was an honor, an indication of his trust. This was personal, one of his own, and Mickey wanted the job done right. What John couldn't understand was why he'd sent Pockets with him. The reckless kid had no sense of how the job was done; he was too trigger-happy for his own good.

John cracked the window and let the cold air shock his lungs. At a distance, the dark water of the harbor resembled a black pit, the surface matte in the almost moonless night. The stars drifted behind a curtain of thick clouds, the obscured moon casting a hazy blue hue over everything. Barry McGuire interrupted his thoughts. *You can bury your dead, but don't leave a trace...*

John had been dragging Patrick Wollam out of the house when the wife came home early. Pockets canvassed the house, made sure it was empty. The kids were at their grandparents' for the weekend, the wife was supposed to be at her weekly book club. Yet there she was, frozen in the doorway, eyes wide as dinner plates. John couldn't shake that look, the way her eyes fixed on his hands wrapped around her husband's neck. There was fear there, but the real shock was the anger. She was bright and electric, like she was going to explode. As though she couldn't believe he had the audacity to try to murder her husband, to take him from her, from their home. Patrick screamed for her to run. The bags she carried fell from her arms. Papers and books scattered across their scuffed floor. She barreled into John, her hands scrabbling for her husband's. Pockets was frantic, trying to pull her free by the back of her coat. She lunged for her son's baseball bat. Pockets flung her to the ground. She rose like a woman possessed, tearing at him while her husband screamed himself hoarse. He struggled against John's grip, tears in his eyes. She was crying, wailing like an animal. Pockets' eyes lit up when she struck him hard across the face. Patrick shielded his face with his hands.

John pulled onto Devine Way to a Beatles tune. His watch ticked away the seconds past one in the morning. Lights shone in the house adjacent to his own, the McNairs keeping up until all hours of the night with their constant screaming as usual. He slowed to a stop along the curb and cut the engine. Usually he'd have to start cleaning the car. He'd hose it down, exterior and interior where he'd removed the fabric lining from the trunk. But there was no disposal tonight, no mess. John switched off the radio and finished his cigarette with one last drag before he pushed his way out of the car and crushed the butt under the heel of his shoe.

He took the rickety steps of his stoop two by two and wrenched the door open. Tossing his coat onto a wicker chair, he paused at the base of the staircase. He looked for light beneath his sister's bedroom door at the top of the stairs. It was dark.

“Cara?” he whispered into the still house. Nothing stirred. Even when she was awake, she knew better than to check on her brother at this hour. She feigned ignorance as best she could. He told her he was out on dates, though that idea was becoming more laughable with each passing day. Sometimes John wished it was the truth; that he was out buying drinks for some good-looking girl who didn't care what his job was or how much money he made. Instead he spent most of his time surrounded by men who only wanted to hear themselves talk, or men he was supposed to kill. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten serious with a girl since he was a teenager. He figured it was best that he didn't think about it too much.

John waited a moment more before padding his way to the bathroom off the front hall. Closing the door behind him, he quickly locked it and stripped off his clothes. He tossed the shirt into the tub and turned on the water to soak the fabric and loosen the coppery splotches running down its front before they set. He stood before the rusty mirror mounted to the wall. The wallpaper behind it was a sickly green that gave his skin an unearthly glow in the light of the dim lamp mounted beside the door. He ran his thumb along his jaw. Several fresh scratches had sealed quickly, thin scabs tying the skin back together. Blood coagulated at the base of his neck, along the curve of his collarbone, in the visible crevices left uncovered by his shirt.

It had happened so quickly. One second Mrs. Patrick Wollam was squeezing every last ounce of air from her lungs, begging for her husband; the next second she was flat on the wood floor of her living room with half her skull blown off. All it took was a blink of the eye. There,

gone. Pockets barely moved. Just stood there without saying a word. Patrick went limp in John's arms and for a fleeting second John thought he'd gone comatose, maybe died from the shock. No time, John thought. He dumped the crumpled heap of Patrick Wollam on the ground and kicked him in the stomach. No fight left. Patrick stretched out across the floor, his hand creeping forward along the wood until it connected with his wife's ankle. Their two bodies joined by that touch. Patrick lay there and started to shake. His whole body was wracked by sobs, crying, "Elise, Elise, Elise," endlessly like a death cry, like a prayer.

Pockets stared at John. Without hesitation, John circled Patrick until he was behind him, then unloaded two bullets into the back of his head. His body folded into a heap near his wife. Pockets swore under his breath. He paced, heavy work boots tracking the pooling blood onto a frayed afghan rug. John grabbed him by the collar, set him straight. Told him to collect his things and head to the car. John studied the two bodies as they emptied themselves of blood. Patrick's face had fallen in the opposite direction of his wife's, something that seemed almost tragic, but not enough to keep him in the house more than a moment longer.

John soaked a hand towel in warm water and dabbed at his bloody face. Red-brown flakes dissolved into thin trails down his neck, pooling into an orange watery mixture in the slow draining sink. Sirens sounded in the distance. Perhaps farther still a siren wailed for Mr. and Mrs. Wollam, their purpling bodies separated by body bags. John thought of Pockets and felt a pang of guilt. The kid could have wandered to the liquor store on the corner of Whitwell and Adams and used the phone, though Pockets never really had a great sense of direction. The water made his sore knuckles sting as it cleansed them.

"Dammit," he said, massaging the wounds as they reopened.

Mickey was going to lose his shit. It had been messy. But the wife might throw them off—hits on women were rare. John waited for the drain to clear before filling the basin with clean water. He dunked his face, pushing his bangs away from his forehead. Bloodshot eyes peered back at him in the mirror. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen more than six hours of uninterrupted sleep. In the morning he would have to report to Mickey, help him with a couple grunts on the cocaine front of Mickey's web of associates. John gave himself four hours tops. Reaching into the dingy tub, he retrieved his soaked shirt, wringing it out in two firm twists. The drain emptied the tub's contents, his own blood mixed with the dead couple's. He gathered his shoes and began to clean. Removing the surface layer of dirt and blood was enough, but John worked into the grooves, removing any trace of grime until they shined. Next, he gathered his clothes and scanned his naked body. Fresh cuts and bruises layered over long-healed scars. A work in progress.

He cracked the door slightly, shut off the light. Before rounding the corner to his bedroom he checked the locks on the doors and windows, clothes dripping in his arms. Once secure, he returned to his bedroom. Draping his clothes over the humming radiator, he moved silently around the room for his nightly ritual. With solemnity he brushed his hair, knelt in prayer, climbed into bed, and settled onto his pillow. Within minutes, he fell into the deep, untroubled slumber of a man unburdened by the thoughts of photographs on the mantelpiece of a strange family's silent, bloody home.

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Sean O'Reilly sniffed his brother's greasy t-shirt and grimaced at the stench.

"You smell like something crawled into your clothes and died," he said with an exaggerated gag. Finn O'Reilly jerked his shoulder away, shyly nuzzling his nose against it to inspect it himself. Sean laughed and tried to grab another handful of the fabric, following Finn as he darted across the room.

"Fuck off," Finn snapped. He flung a loose dish towel at Sean and narrowly avoided being struck in the face by the kitchen door as it swung open. His father's broad body moved with surprising speed, the product of years of street fighting. He pushed past Finn and seized Sean by the scruff of his collar.

"Where were you this morning?" he said, fingers tightening around Sean's shirt.

Sean angled his chin away from his father, the warmth drained from his face. Finn shrank away into a corner of the room. He didn't dare speak.

"I was studying," Sean said flatly. "I've got an exam tomorrow. I told you I wasn't going to be your errand boy today."

Donovan O'Reilly shoved him backwards, swearing under his breath. Finn cast his eyes at the floor. He'd learned well, unlike Sean. Over and over his mother warned him to "just stay quiet when he gets like that" and to "let him get it out of his system." Sean told his brothers and sisters to keep their thoughts to themselves when Donovan was angry, or else their father would take it out on them. But Sean didn't lead by example. His tongue moved too quickly for him; he enjoyed seeing the rage rise in his father's eyes at a few well-placed words. He didn't mind the hands on his arms, the shoves and scrapes. Better him than them, he thought.

"Ungrateful bastard," his father growled.

“I told you, I’ve got no interest in making money with you, from you, or by you. Why do you think I’m in school? To learn how to hot-wire a car that isn’t my own?” Sean glanced at his younger brother. The grimy stains on his shirt appeared more pronounced now. “I see you made Finn take over for me.”

“I didn’t mind,” Finn murmured, voice creeping across the room.

Sean’s jaw tightened. “You should mind. You’re sixteen, you should be in school. Not skipping out to dig through people’s trash, and steal cars. And he should be the one telling you that, not me.” Sean’s eyes fixed on his father.

Donovan snorted. “Don’t tell me how to be a father, Sean. I’ve raised six of you pretty damn well considering. Have you wanted for anything? Have I not fed and clothed you?”

Sean laughed. “You think that’s all it is? Survival? Even dogs get food and shelter as family pets.”

Finn was visibly uncomfortable, pressing his back against the wall and glancing at the door in increasingly short intervals. Their mother likely sat on the couch in the room on the other side of the door. The static of the television might drown them out, but not if Sean’s voice kept getting louder.

“We’re not your employees, Dad. Stop using Finn for your dirty work. His grades are shit and it’s because you’ve got him out until all hours doing God knows what for God knows who.”

Before Sean could blink his father had him pressed against the wall. Sean’s lungs seized with a cough as the wind was knocked from him. Reflexively his eyes snapped closed. He waited for the sound of Finn’s footsteps fleeing the kitchen, but there was only silence. That, and the heavy breathing of his father.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, talking to me like that? Telling me how to raise my kids? You think ‘cause you go to some college you’re better than me?” Donovan pressed his forearm harder against Sean’s neck.

Instinctively Sean’s hand flew to his father’s arm. He writhed under the pressure, trying to clear an airway as his breathing became more labored.

“Dad,” he gasped, tugging at his arm frantically. “Stop.” It was all Sean could manage. The difficulty between breaths made him panic. He wasn’t thinking clearly. His eyes scanned the room for something, but fixed on Finn, planted in the same corner, eyes pressed shut. Sean couldn’t tell if he was crying. The edges of Sean’s vision started to blur, darken. Much longer and he’d be unconscious.

Donovan’s arm fell away. Sean gasped for air. As his vision slowly returned to him, Sean saw his father’s lips curl into a smile. Sean’s hand flew to his inflamed neck, the imprints of his father’s fingers slowly fading in the purplish-red flush. His blood pumped through his throat, veins swelling. Color returned to his face and the burning in his lungs subsided. Donovan spit into the sink. He pushed his oil-stained sleeves up over his elbows, revealing thick calluses at the joints. Finn’s eyes followed Donovan as he moved toward the door, glancing over his shoulder back at Sean.

“Go talk to your mother. She said something about the girls and school. You,” Donovan said, jerking a thumb at Finn. “Go with him,” he said with a glance back at Sean before silently pushing his way out the back door.

Sean coughed into the sink, leaning over the streaky white basin and bracing himself against the wave of dizziness that washed over him. His stomach churned, anger bubbling up

into an acidic taste at the back of his throat. He didn't realize he was shaking until Finn placed a hand on his shoulder. Shrugging it away, Sean turned on the faucet and submerged his hands in the clear, cool water. Finn shuffled beside him, peeling away bits of the exposed wood from their counter top. It splintered off into sharp fragments.

“Well, what'd you think was going to happen?” Finn said quietly.

Sean laughed. He pushed his bangs from his eyes, water streaking along his face, trailing down his cheek like tears.

“Hell if I know,” he replied. Flicking the water from his hands, Sean shut off the sink and retrieved the dish towel Finn had flung at him. His father moved through their home like a gust through curtains. Strong and sudden, disturbing without destroying, but leaving everything slightly off-kilter for a time. Sean tugged at his collar, trying to set himself back to normal.

“Stop staring at me like that, I'm fine.” Sean reassured him with a punch to his shoulder.

Finn frowned, unconvinced.

“We've gotta go walk the girls home, c'mon,” Sean seized Finn by the sleeve and pulled him into the living room.

Their mother crouched over the carpet, inspecting some invisible stain with an incisive eye. A sponge in hand, she dabbed cautiously at the offending mark, the care of each touch belying her violent determination to remove whatever it was that troubled her. Seeing their shoes approaching across the floor, she straightened out and stood to inspect the two young men. Her eyes fixed first on the grime-stained Finn. She clucked her tongue and wiped a particularly large smear of grease from his cheek. Finn immediately flinched away, wiping at his skin as though afflicted. A questioning glance at Sean's wet hair and general dampness went unanswered, as he

simply kissed her cheek and reminded her they were going to go walk the girls home from school. After rumors sprang up that the Corrigan girl in Finn's grade had been grabbed on her way home from school, Molly O'Reilly insisted that her three daughters had at least one brother to escort them home. Southie's streets weren't known for their safety, but having the twenty-two year old Sean supervising the younger siblings calmed his mother, so he obliged.

"Won't be long. Need anything while we're out?" Sean called as he shepherded Finn outside. His mother darted into the kitchen to check the pantry to see if any reserves were running low. From afar Sean could hear her shout, "Eggs, flour, and butter please!" He rapped several times on the door frame with his knuckles and replied, "Got it! Back soon."

Jamming his fists into his pockets, Sean descended the stairs in twos until his sneakers hit the pavement with a satisfying thud. Finn trailed behind him, shouting at their neighbor's stumpy one-eyed pit-bull that seemed to care to bark only when Finn went near it. The neighborhood came alive around this time of day, kids trickling home from school, mothers starting preparations for dinner so that the aromas of meat frying drifted out into the gradually darkening streets. Overgrown grass lined the sidewalk, creeping ever closer, encroaching until it drifted too far from its roots and the soil that kept it nourished. It yellowed in strange patches that gave the neighborhood a splotchy, unkempt appearance. Not that anyone bothered to water what little lawn they had anyway.

"Say, Sean," Finn said suddenly, jogging to catch up with his long-legged brother. "D'you think you could maybe help me with this book report I got due tomorrow?" Sean knew Finn hated asking for help, so he had to be desperate. Finn nudged pebbles out of his way as they walked, clearing a path on the cracked sidewalk. Sean clapped him on the back, promising he'd

help. They were running late, so by the time they reached Dorchester Street their sisters were already rounding the corner. The youngest, Patricia, sprinted towards Sean and launched herself into his arms. With ease he scooped her up and swung her around, her giggles rising in a stream through the air. Finn's twin sister Fiona greeted him in their usual way, with some nonsense word the two had invented in their youth. They insisted they had crafted an entire language, but simply forgot it. She usually walked over to the middle school from high school directly, to keep an eye on her younger siblings until Sean could get there.

"Where's Owen?" Eileen, the fiery-haired middle sister asked, searching for their absent youngest brother.

"I think he was napping when we left," Sean said, planting a kiss on the top of Patricia's head.

Across the street a group of gangly teenagers with faded jeans and ugly sneers stared at Sean and his siblings. He recognized his cousin Aidan among the pasty boys, squinting and avoiding their eyes. The tallest boy loping along at the front grinned and pressed his fingers into his acne-rimmed mouth, whistling a high, shrill pitch at the girls. The others laughed, a few joining in the catcalls.

Finn spun around immediately. "Who do you think you're whistling at? It better not be me, and it sure as hell better not be my sisters, asshole!" He moved across the street, unfazed by the cars speeding from either direction.

"Idiot," Sean said, lunging after him. He dragged Finn backwards by his hood.

"Finn!" Fiona yelped, her face reddening with a mix of anger and embarrassment.

“That’s your cousin,” Finn said, trying to pry Sean’s hands off of him. Fiona ushered her sisters along, Patricia still clinging to the hem of Sean’s shirt and Eileen trailing behind Finn.

“*Cousin!*” Finn repeated emphatically, flipping the group of boys his middle finger as they disappeared down the street. A swift tug from Sean sent him back on course, grumbling about the shit kids got away with these days.

Outside Shaw’s, Sean gave the girls the assignment of locating the eggs while he and Finn sought out flour and butter. Sean nodded to Patrick Kennedy behind the counter as they entered. They made small talk, asking about each other’s mothers and swapping stories about their weekends. In a matter of minutes the girls had retrieved the eggs, Patricia beaming up at Sean while delicately cradling the carton in her small arms.

“Great work kiddo,” Sean said. Fiona gathered up Patricia and led her toward the counter to pay. Finn returned with the butter, staring at Sean expectantly.

“I haven’t had a chance to look yet,” Sean said with a chuckle, offering an apologetic shrug. “Watch them, I’ll be right back.”

Finn saluted obediently and Sean quickly retrieved the flour. Patrick Kennedy had already gathered their items and rung them up, adding in the flour last. He placed them all into a bag as Sean handed him the necessary bills. Patrick told Sean to give his father his best. Sean nodded, though he wasn’t sure when he would see his father next or whether he’d be willing to talk to him about anything at all.

The streets grew dim as they made their way home, a small company of O’Reillys. Everywhere they went someone nodded politely or stopped them to give passing words of thanks to their father for some kindness he had done them. Sean always clenched his teeth and smiled,

promising he would pass their words along. His sisters stood silently until Sean tugged lightly on their hands and ushered them forward again. Ahead of them the front lights of their house glowed through the rising dark. Sean could see his youngest brother crossing the living room as they approached. They climbed the stairs together, a sibling at each side. He shifted the Shaw's bag to one hand and unlocked the door, everyone pouring into their warm home in a wave of chatter.

Their mother sat primly on the couch, hands folded neatly in her lap. Patricia climbed up beside her, tugging joyfully at her hands to get her to rake her fingers through her hair. But Molly's eyes were transfixed on the stress-strained face of Lyndon B. Johnson on the television set. He gazed outward from under his heavily furrowed brows at unseen cameras. Constantly his eyes flickered from side to side, as though seeking a new audience. He spoke in a halting voice, taking careful breaths between thoughts.

“And so tonight, now, in 1965, we begin a new quest for union. We seek the unity of man with the world that he has built—with the knowledge that can save or destroy him—with the cities which can stimulate or stifle him—with the wealth and the machines which can enrich or menace his spirit.”

Sean felt Johnson's words strike him hard in the gut, sinking low into some untouchable place beyond access. Without realizing, he touched the cross around his neck and thought of his father. Crossing into the kitchen to put away the groceries, Sean strained to hear LBJ's continuing speech.

“We seek to establish a harmony between man and society which will allow each of us to enlarge the meaning of his life and all of us to elevate the quality of our civilization.”

In the living room his siblings gathered around the ancient sofa worn down with age and use. His mother stroked Patricia's hair, sighing deeply as though suffering under a deep burden. The house was filled by a rare quiet, all voices silenced by the somber address, as though each individual was being spoken to directly. There was a short pause, and Sean didn't realize he was holding his breath until he exhaled when Johnson concluded, "This is the search that we begin tonight."

## CHAPTER TWO

John hated the way Mickey Flannery ate sandwiches. He stuffed them into the side of his mouth, chewing and tearing with his teeth until food ran down the side of his face. At intervals he'd wipe with his sleeve, staining the cuffs of his shirts with grease and crumbs. You could always tell when he'd just eaten based on the state of those sleeves.

Today Mickey was gorging himself on roast beef and rye. Staring over the top of his sandwich, he motioned John over. The other men in the room looked anxious. John took the seat across from Mickey and cleared his throat. Mickey set the sandwich down and smoothed out his shirt. His tongue ran over his front teeth, pausing over his gold canine where a piece of lettuce had wedged itself.

"They got Pockets," Mickey said.

"What? Who did?" John said, leaning forward. His eyes narrowed.

"Cops. Somebody ratted on him about the Wollams. They're pinning that job on him. You're safe, made sure of that, but that kid was a mess after. Started talking as soon as they got him into custody. Not much I could do for him. Dug his own grave and buried himself." Mickey belched.

"D'you think it was someone on our end? Who talked to the cops?" John asked, massaging his knuckles. He knew it was stupid to leave Pockets that night. He considered the various men affiliated with Mickey and the Flannery family. It had only been two weeks. This was fast, even for a rat.

“No,” Mickey said through a mouthful of roast beef. “I think it was one of those O’Reilly boys. You know they’re all chummy with the cops, and Donovan has been trying to take my stake with the coke dealers for years.”

John was silent. It seemed improbable. Getting rid of Pockets would do little to impact Mickey. Pockets knew next to nothing about the way Mickey worked; he never worked on the business side. The coke, the gambling, counterfeiting, loan sharking—Pockets never saw any of it. He’d been on Mickey’s dime for less than three months. He was John’s tag-along. What did the O’Reillys see in him that could help them?

“What do you want me to do?” John said. His head tilted to the side, eyes skimming over his boss’s face. Mickey grinned. He once told him that he always appreciated how well John knew him, how he didn’t mince words. Got right to the point. Did his work without question.

“Rough up the O’Reilly boys. One of Donovan’s kids. Finn, he might do. Stole a car off me last week, little shit.” Mickey finished his sandwich. He licked his fingers and shrugged. “Nothing too bad, maybe a broken hand, just something to send his old man a message. Got it?”

John nodded. As he stood, Mickey stood with him, seizing his forearm. John turned to face him.

“No mistakes,” Mickey said. His eyes were like two dark marbles as his lips curled into a warning smile.

“No mistakes,” John repeated, plucking his arm free. Mickey gave him a pat on the back before gesturing for one of his men to open the door for him. He left quietly, hand absently drifting to the gun nestled against his chest inside his coat. Holding his hand over it for a long moment, he said a silent prayer. Out of the building and into his car, John made his way home.

He had promised his sister he'd be home for dinner; his stomach was already growling at the prospect of warm, buttery mashed potatoes.

Once inside his house he tossed the keys into a bowl near the door. His shoes dragged along a small welcome mat smattered with mud and leaves. He could smell his sister's cooking in the kitchen. A light was out in the front hallway. He stepped carefully to avoid slipping over a clunky toy that one of his nieces or nephews left lying on the floor.

"Uncle John?" a small voice said from the other room.

"Yeah, it's me Bobby," John said. He entered the living room and scooped the small boy into his arms. "I swear you get bigger every time I leave the house."

Bobby giggled. "Made that for you!" he said, pointing at a drawing on the low coffee table. Stray crayon marks dragged over the worn surface of the wood. The image Bobby had drawn was of a large, green tree, under which a lump John assumed was a dog slept. His niece, Rachel, waved her own sheet of paper through the air, leaping to her feet to show him.

"Me too, me too!" She shoved the drawing into his hands, the vague shapes depicting a burly man with a beard lifting a boulder impossibly high above his head.

John chuckled. His fingers traced over the mess of colors.

"That's me?" John said, setting Bobby down. "I can see the resemblance."

Rachel laughed, pleased. The sounds of pots clanging and the faucet creaking on sounded from the kitchen.

His grandmother appeared in the doorway. "You came in late last night," she said, her sagging eyes studying him.

“I do most nights,” he said, eyes fluttering to the two kids. “Work is work.” He cleared his throat. “You two go wash up for dinner. Won’t be long now.” He patted Rachel lightly on the back.

The kids dashed off, a trail of laughter following behind them. John shook his head at his grandmother, but placed a kiss on the top of her head before heading for the kitchen.

“Hey sis, smells good,” he said as he tugged open the fridge. Pulling out a beer, he downed two gulps, the liquid cooling in his agitated stomach. Crumbs dusted the gray linoleum counter top. His sister worked two jobs; he certainly didn’t expect her to keep house in her spare time. There was no free time for any of them, really. Whenever Cara had to cover an extra shift at the diner, he would pick the kids up from school, try to make them a poor excuse for dinner. Rachel and Bobby loved him like a father, though he wasn’t around as much as he’d like. He tried his best, but the more work he did for Mickey, the harder it was to make time for them.

His own father had died not long after his eighteenth birthday, thank God. The abusive lowlife did little else for him before he did him that one great favor. Before he died, the old man spent his days drinking and skipping out on work at the factory, leaving John to work odd jobs as soon as he could. When John’s mother died, his maternal grandmother moved in to fill the “womanly void” and care for his sister. Cara was quiet and kept to herself. She clung closely to their grandmother at all times.

He saw himself in Bobby, Cara in Rachel. The babies’ father, Cara’s husband, died when they were one and two, respectively. Heart attack. Cara locked herself in a closet and cried for hours. When she came out, eyes puffy and red, her chin tilted up, she took to looking after her fatherless children and said there’d be time for more grief later. John never saw her shed another

tear over him. Even now, whenever someone mentioned her husband's name, Cara would cross her chest and distract herself with some little something to keep the tears at bay.

"How was your day?" she said, scooping potatoes into a dingy white bowl and pointing to a drawer under the sink.

John collected the silverware and five place mats. "Fine," he muttered, testing a knife on the left side of the plate before moving it over to the right. "Just business as usual."

Cara clucked her tongue but said nothing.

Footsteps rushed towards the kitchen. Bobby and Rachel hurtled into the room, each taking hold of one of their mother's legs. She shook them off gently and handed them dishes to take to the table. Cara nudged the bowl of potatoes into John's arms as their grandmother entered the kitchen and slowly slid into her favorite seat by the window. With the steaming food on the table, three generations of Fitzgeralds gathered with bowed heads and clasped hands. Bobby peeked up at John from under a row of bangs. John smiled and cleared his throat.

"Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty. Through Christ our Lord, Amen."

His family muttered a hearty amen in agreement and began scooping food onto their plates as though it was the first they'd seen in months.

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John rose wordless and early. He wandered aimlessly around the house until his sister left

for work at two in the afternoon. He told his grandmother he had errands to run and would be back for dinner. Don't worry about him if he was late, he said, but don't forget to set his place.

He drove out of the neighborhood, his car halting at the corner of West 7th and Dorchester Street. Closely-packed houses lined both sides of the street, a light dusting of snow on the ground. Dead trees lined the sidewalk. John fixed his gaze on a large building across the street from his car, a heavy lead pipe in his hands. Setting it down in the passenger's seat, he stepped out of the car and into the cold. His watch read just shy of three in the afternoon. Mickey said the kid would go pick up his sisters from school around then. John could grab the kid, take him somewhere quiet, and deliver Mickey's message. Quick and easy, no fuss.

The middle school was still. Class wouldn't be out for another ten minutes if he was right. Frank McCabe said his little sister went to school with Finn O'Reilly, the days he bothered to show up, anyway. John pulled his ratty suede jacket closer to his chest, the January air biting at his exposed neck. He leaned against his car and swore bitterly, eyes scanning the rows of houses and stores nearby. An old woman stood on her stoop, squinting against the glare of the sun before returning indoors. Cars sped by. He could hear crows in the bare trees. The windows of the school were blotted out by curtains and window paintings, the children inside hidden from sight. Trash tumbled by, catching on the leg of his jeans. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a kid coming his way. He brushed past.

John stared at the backpack as the kid went past. In rough stitches was a carefully embroidered "F. A. O'Reilly." He suppressed a laugh. It was like a target painted on his back. Donovan O'Reilly should really warn his kids about broadcasting their names for anyone to see. Finn wandered over to a weathered bench near the base of the steps leading to the front doors.

John stared at the back of his head, the snug black hat pulled low over his ears. If he waited much longer school would be out, and separating Finn from his brothers and sisters would be impossible. The houses across the street were motionless, the windows firmly shut. The street was quiet. People hovered in stores to avoid the cold. John pocketed his keys, pushed away from his car, and headed toward the bench.

With a single motion he wrapped his arms around Finn's waist and mouth. He lifted him up, dragging him backwards. Finn began to fight. He was much lighter than John had expected. His small hands scratched at John's arms, his legs kicking wildly. John tightened his grip around his waist, squeezing the air from his lungs. Once at the car, John loosened his hold over Finn's mouth, flinging open the car door and shoving him inside. Finn released a shrill yell. John's eyes swept the area. No one in sight. He climbed into the back seat, pressing his full weight on top of the teen. He covered the kid's mouth with his hand. Finn's hat slipped low over his eyes as he struggled to break free.

"Stop fighting," John said, hand pushing harder on Finn's windpipe. "It'll make it worse."

His voice only sent more panic into the O'Reilly pinned beneath him, legs kicking wildly, fingers scratching at the dark tinted windows. Tears stained Finn's face. The bell rang outside, signaling the end of classes. John grit his teeth, trying to stop Finn's struggling and keep him out of sight. Kids would be pouring outside, and even his dark windows wouldn't keep prying eyes from glancing inside. Nails connected with John's face, tearing a wide bloody stripe along his cheek and mouth.

"Shit!" John said, clutching his stinging face.

With his mouth uncovered, Finn began screaming, pulling his hat from his head so he could see. John wiped his bloody hand on his coat. He clamped down on the kid's mouth again. And then he saw it. His breath caught in his throat. The realization hit him square in the stomach.

It wasn't the right O'Reilly.

The blonde hair that fell from under the hat was long and glossy, tumbling from a knotted braid. Now that John really looked, he saw the wide, terrified eyes of a young girl. John wasn't breathing; neither was she. The panic in her eyes had turned to desperation, both hands clasping his wrist, tugging feebly.

"Shit," John whispered, staring down at her. "Oh shit, fuck."

The terror in his own voice startled him. His hands shook as he took her throat. He started to strangle her. He couldn't stop.

Footsteps of children stirred from outside. Their chatter swarmed into a loud hum. Panic gripped him. John, calm and precise, had become reckless. He'd grabbed the wrong O'Reilly. What had Frank said? Something about a sister around Finn's age? It had been another F name—he hadn't paid attention. Fiona? His stomach turned. The girl's eyes rolled and her grip on his arm loosened. John bent over her. She wasn't breathing. His mind was buzzing. He couldn't think. His hands flew from her neck. He snapped upright, and felt wildly for his keys. The jingle in his pockets sent him toppling into the front seat. A group of children gathered by the bench where the girl had been sitting earlier. The siblings.

He jammed the keys into the ignition. The engine came alive, the limp body of Fiona O'Reilly slumped in the back seat.

### CHAPTER THREE

Sean covered the hall mirror with a thick black cloth. He tucked in the sides and moved to the window. Frost collected in spider webs on the glass.

“Have to let the spirit out,” a wrinkled woman muttered over his shoulder. He recognized the voice of his Aunt June, a bespectacled old crone with veiny hands and gray eyes. She pushed the window open with a heavy shove. Night air swooped over them. In the haze of clouded moonlight Sean could make out the snowy pines dotting the back edge of their property. He inhaled deeply. Traces of factory smoke layered over the smell of fresh snow. Snow had fallen over the last three days with no sign of ceasing. It didn’t matter how many fires Sean lit, the cold numbed him to his bones.

“She was a good girl, Sean,” his great aunt said, shutting the window. She pressed her rosary to her withered lips. “It’s a terrible business.” She clutched the ivory, concentrating.

Sean watched snow collect on the shallow ledge of the windowsill.

“She’ll be missed, of course. So beautiful, your mother’s blond hair and your father’s fair eyes. Such a bright future ahead of her.” Aunt June clucked her tongue.

“The brightest,” he agreed. He took the glass he had set down on a stumpy end table, swirling its whiskey over clinking ice. Sean thanked her for coming and excused himself.

The sheer number of people gathered in their small living room overwhelmed him. Sean could barely locate the casket, hidden as it was by a sea of people. Bobbing heads obscured his view. Dark green and black streamers curled vine-like from the ceiling. Candles cast a hazy glow on the deep maroon wallpaper. A spray of white carnations crowned the center of the casket. He approached it, grinding his teeth. The hands of his sister's body were folded elegantly to clasp a

pale rosary. She was all white, head to toe—lace cloth and waxy skin. He knelt and swallowed, fighting nausea. Hard as the mortician tried, he hadn't been able to hide the dark bruises on her neck. Sean's hand hovered over her head and withdrew. A line formed behind him, but people kept their distance. Sean bowed his head in prayer, peeking at her through one squinting eye. He prayed for forgiveness, for not being with her that day, for letting her go alone. The stabbing pain of his own guilt kept him on his knees. He asked God to grant her peace while marveling at the slackness of her face, already fixed in an expression of serenity. He crossed himself. He didn't want to remember her like this.

Pots rattled in the kitchen. He pushed through to find his mother sweating over a tray of sandwiches. She glanced up, seeming relieved to find him in the doorway. She waved him over and tucked a poppy in the front pocket of his shirt. He placed a kiss on top of her mussed hair. He wanted to remember the sweet soapy smell of his mother instead of the old perfume used on Fiona's body. Women trickled in and out, arguing over what food to serve first until Sean ushered them out of the kitchen. Once alone, Sean maneuvered the knife from his mother's trembling hands. She crumbled into a heap at the counter, wrinkles straining the corners of her red-rimmed eyes. Her shoulders caved and she pulled her body inward. All the while, laughter rolled from the living room. Buoyant music filled the home. This was the celebration of Fiona's life. He cradled his mother until the tears subsided. The kitchen's warmth insulated them from the crowd. Only the pots' bubbling interrupted her breaths. He offered his handkerchief. She dabbed her eyes. The door swung open. Donovan strode into the room with his familiar limp.

“What've you done now?”

“Nothing,” Sean said. He stepped away from his mother, plucking a whistling kettle off the stove.

“I just needed a moment,” his mother said. “Sean was only trying to help. I can’t keep it together like you or the rest of them.” She brushed stray wisps of hair behind her ears. “She was my daughter, I can’t go around singing, laughing and carrying on...you won’t even tell me. What really happened to her? I know you’ve got your business—”

Sean’s jaw clenched.

“Molly, I told you to stop. Jesus.” His father’s rough voice filled the overheated room. She shuddered, clutching the collar of her black dress.

Sean cleared his throat. He touched his mother’s arm. “Mom, these sandwiches are done. Maybe you can take them into the living room? I think I heard Aunt Mae shouting about the food. You know how she gets,” he held the tray out to her with a smile. She took it, brushing past her husband.

“Why would you go filling your mother’s head with these kinds of ideas?” Donovan said.

“I haven’t said a word, and you know it. It’s not really a secret. Everyone knows.”

Donovan massaged his temples. Sean refused to meet his father's eyes despite the pressure of his occasional glances.

“Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I’d let my own daughter die—”

Sean cut him off. “I don’t really care to think about your motivations anymore. I thought we were done with this. I thought you were done with this. You knew this would happen. They’d come after us. And now Fiona paid for it, all of it. Because you couldn’t stop.”

His father lunged forward and shook him by the collar. Whiskey breath spewed into Sean's face.

“Shut up! Shut your damn mouth. I'm your father, I'm the head of this house, I'm in charge. You don't get to tell me what to do, you don't get to judge me! Everything I've done has been for this family.”

Sean shoved him back. He towered over his father, his callused hands clenched tightly.

“We didn't ask for this. You can say the under the table deals and the middle-of-the-night business ventures were for us, but you know they weren't. I saw the blood on your clothes. I know what you are.” He shook his head. “That wasn't for us.”

Sean couldn't stand to look at him. Fiona's body was ice-cold in a steel box surrounded by family rejoicing over a life she never had. They chattered while gorging themselves on food his mother made while sobbing alone in her kitchen. Sean had tried to cover the mirrors and open the windows, to let Fiona's soul out of the house, to go somewhere safer into the cold night. His father had wandered like a ghost, touching and saying nothing until now.

Three knocks rapped at the back door. Sean whipped around to face his father. Panic spread across his guilty face.

“No,” Sean whispered. “Not tonight. Not now.”

His father didn't move, didn't blink. Sean yanked the door open. Frank Murphy stood before him, lopsided smile beaming out from the dark.

“Jesus Christ, Frank!” Sean said. He glanced over his shoulder to ensure only his father remained in the kitchen. Blood was splashed across Frank's white undershirt, the only thing he

wore in spite of the cold. Red stripes trickled along his bare neck, flowing out in ribbons down his arms.

“Who’dve thought old Tony Bordello’d have that much blood in him?” Frank said with a feeble laugh, eyes glossy and wild. Sean tugged him inside.

“Get Finn and Donny,” he said to his father, pulling Frank onto a nearby stool. Donovan ducked out of the kitchen in search of Sean’s brother and cousin. Frank scratched his neck, blood coating the underside of his fingernails. He stared at them as Sean dabbed his skin with an old rag.

“Quit that,” Sean said calmly, wiping the drying blood from his arms. “Hey, you hear me? Focus.” He gave him a light tap on the cheek. “Where is it?”

“What?” Frank said. He stared blankly.

“The body. Where’d you leave the body?”

Frank chuckled. The kitchen door swung open. Sean leapt in front of Frank, only relaxing when his father entered. Donny was three years Sean’s junior. He and Finn gaped at Frank. Despite the scrubbing, Bordello’s blood still stained him. A thin layer of the bloody water dripped from Sean’s hands.

“Finn, go upstairs and get some of my old clothes,” Sean said, nodding to his brother. “Donny, get me some kerosene. I think it’s in the basement. Check the top shelf at the bottom of the stairs.”

He had helped his father before, when he was younger, had seen him do this countless times. But tonight was different. The singing crescendoed in the living room. A choir of voices crooned, “Nearer My God to Thee.”

Sean repeated, “The body, Frank.”

Frank jerked a thumb at the back door.

“Outside? Christ, Frank.” Sean bolted out the door. He peered through the dim snowy light. The body of Tony Bordello lay slumped against the brick side of the house, his half-lidded eyes observing the dark. Sean gagged. Bracing himself against the house, he fought to suppress his rising panic. Tire tracks left impressions on the snow. His father probably wanted proof—Frank’s brothers must have helped him drop off the body. Sean ground his teeth, sucking in the sharp smells of smoke and bloody flesh. He hugged himself against the cold, darting back inside.

“I suppose you did this for Fiona?” Sean said, glaring at his father.

“She was my daughter! You think I’d let them take her from me and I wouldn’t do anything about it?” Donovan’s voice rose with each word, but never loud enough to be heard over the singing peeling through the doors.

Sean threw the bloody rag at the sink.

“And now we’ve got a body outside and Fiona in a casket in our living room.”

“I didn’t tell Frank to bring the body here,” his father spat, fumbling with his shirt sleeves. He was rolling them up, preparing. “Just wanted to know it was done.”

“You don’t even know if the Bordellos are responsible! I thought you said the Flannerys had been giving you shit, and McGuire was gonna take over for you. I thought we were done.”

“He wouldn’t have to if my own son—”

“I don’t want this, I don’t even want to be your son!” Sean said, jabbing a bloody finger in his father’s face. The door creaked.

“Sean?” His mother’s fearful voice froze him. Her eyes settled on the damp spots on his clothing. Sean wiped his hands on his slacks.

“Mom,” he said, “It’s fine, everything’s fine.”

The lines straining her careworn face deepened. She shook her head, pressing a hand over her eyes.

“No,” she croaked. “Sean, no.”

He stepped towards her but she pulled away. Aunt Mae’s piercing voice sailed through the house. Sean grimaced.

“It’s nothing, Mom. Just a little mess. Just...can you get Aunt Mae to be quiet?”

His mother's bloodshot eyes exposed her loss; he could see she thought he was someone else to her now, someone foreign. He could only try to distance her from the knowledge of what sat outside, freezing in the snow.

“Mom? Please, Aunt Mae?” he said.

She wiped her eyes, refusing to look at him.

After the door swung closed, Sean buried his face in his hands.

“We need to get rid of that body,” Donny muttered.

“What if we use Fiona’s casket—” Frank mused until Sean clapped his hands together, silencing him with a deadly look.

“You don’t get to make suggestions. You’re not putting that body anywhere near my sister.”

He needed sleep, to close the blinds and shut out the world. A deep black cavern where no one could reach him might fix his head. Bodies in boxes and buried in the deep dead earth.

Strange men in his house in the dark of night. His father donning brass knuckles, shotgun in hand. Everything for the family. Sean couldn't breathe.

“We take him into the woods,” he said. “You stay here, Dad. God knows you’re not fit to deal with this.”

His father yanked his arm, trying to pull him back. “It's my daughter. What, you're in charge now? You're getting rid of him? I thought you wanted no part in this.”

Sean pulled his arm free. “You made me a part of this,” he said. “You couldn't lift that body if your life depended on it.”

Rolling his sleeves, Sean motioned for Donny to bring him the kerosene. He directed Frank to take off the bloodstained clothes. They would burn it all.

He retrieved a shovel and tarp from the basement, careful to avoid any sidelong glances from his relatives nearby. Back in the kitchen he pointed at the door, and they slinked outside. Before joining his brother and cousin, Sean turned to his father.

“This isn't my mess, but I'll take care of it, because you can't. This is the last time. If you ever bring another body to this house...” Sean's voice carried a deep warning like the lowest note of a piano. He placed a heavy hand on his father's shoulder. “So help me God, the blood on my hands will be yours.”

His father stared a long moment before shoving Sean's hand away.

“Now go entertain your guests and say the rosary for your daughter,” Sean said, unflinching.

Without a word Donovan pushed through the doors and joined his family in the living room.

Alone in the kitchen, Sean savored the calm. In a different time he wouldn't have to bury a stranger in his backyard in the midst of his sister's wake. He would sit by her casket and cry for her. He would hold his mother close to console her. Sean imagined he could be the son his mother wanted, instead of the son his father needed.

Frank whispered his name through an open window. Sean nodded in acknowledgment. He gently patted the flower at his chest. Stepping outside, he watched clouds of fog form with each of his heavy breaths. His cousins juggled the corpse, swaying forward along the path. Slinging the heavy shovel over his shoulder, Sean set off into the night.

## CHAPTER FOUR

John's fingernails traced across the fading cuts running along his jaw. Purplish bags sagged beneath his eyes. He rarely slept; when he did it was fitful. Visions plagued him, recurring dreams that woke him in the middle of the night, his sweaty skin sticking to his sheets. The young face of Fiona O'Reilly followed him endlessly. It contorted grotesquely, skin falling away until she was nothing but a skeleton. It was as though she rested inside his eyelids. Even in closing them, her face remained. Bright, holy, terrified.

With the news of Fiona's death, life changed drastically in Mickey's ranks. Everything was monitored. Mickey told him he planted evidence to indict the Bordello family, to throw the O'Reillys off their scent. Besides, he would say, pressing a thick cigar to his lips, maybe the two families would do them all a favor and kill each other off. It would sure as hell save Mickey a lot of trouble. Yet there was a tinge of distrust in his voice—a flicker of some greater, quiet uncertainty when he looked at John. As if he didn't know him. As if they were strangers. Two men who had once been friends, until one broke some important promise, causing damage beyond repair.

A man now tailed John most nights, checking his activities, reporting back to the Flannerys. It was annoying, intrusive; John didn't like mixing his work with his home. He didn't want them near his street, near Bobby and Rachel. He could hear men whispering about him as he passed them on the street, or when he paid his weekly visits to Mickey. He'd gotten a nickname around the neighborhood. "John" wasn't dark enough. The name didn't fit him, he'd heard people say over glasses of whiskey and games of pool. They called him Fitzie. There was a note of danger to the word. Like he was someone else. His loyalty was suspect; his recklessness

at a supposed new high. He couldn't be trusted to carry out a simple job without causing collateral damage. He was a liability.

Some nights he slept with his pistol under his pillow. He adjusted to the discomfort beneath his ear, the feel of it pressed against his neck. Soon he could only sleep once he was certain it was safely tucked into the pillowcase. Ready for him. When he woke up he would feel for the grip of the gun and relax when his fingertips connected with the cool, flat surface. His sister said that when he thought she wasn't looking, his face would give in to worry. He told her he was fine; work had gotten busy, more demands coming in. And his boss was being exceptionally tough on him.

He didn't tell her about the threats. About the unfamiliar men he saw speaking with Mickey in low voices, watching him with hooded eyes. It didn't matter. He could protect himself—always had. If they came for him, if Mickey decided he was no longer worth having around, John wouldn't leave quietly. He'd find a way out, no matter what. He had decided that much. Everywhere he went, John felt as though he was being observed. Felt eyes on him at all times. The weather had begun to warm. March crept quietly forward. Ice melted weeks before, exposing dead grass and long hidden toys in people's yards. Winter had been long and unforgiving.

When his sister came home with two black eyes and a broken nose, there was no question what John's next step was. She told him she had been mugged at the grocery store—two men stopped her outside, dragged her into the alley and threatened her with guns. They said they wanted money, but she didn't have any. They didn't seem too concerned with it anyway, she said quietly, pulling a bag of peas from the fridge and gingerly pressing them over her eyes. Cara said

she saw an elbow fly at her face. She heard the crack of her nose before her vision left her. They were gone by the time she could see again, blood pouring down her face.

It was clear who the men were, why they had chosen Cara. John felt the anger building with his need for revenge. He had to talk to Mickey, to settle things. Either Mickey would leave his family out of this, or he'd regret it.

"Where are you going?" Cara said as he reached for the front door.

"Out." He plucked his coat from the hook and smiled. "Don't answer for anyone but me. Lock the door behind me."

He heard the locks snap into place after the door closed.

"Good girl," he said, and patted the gun at his side.

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Mickey made no attempt to mask his surprise in seeing John arrive at his office unannounced. He balanced a cigarette between his lips, nodding to one of his lackeys to stand in the hallway while "the big men have their talk."

They were sealed into the office. The windows were shut, covered by thick moss-green drapes. The entire room was shadowed in a deep haze of dust.

"You shouldn't have gone after Cara," John said.

Mickey gestured to the chair opposite his desk. He gave a slight shrug and said, with a hint of amusement, "I didn't do anything. Sounds like she was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

“Don’t give me that shit, Mick. You sent Kiernan and Mulligan out to smack her around because I messed up and you wanted me to know. I know, okay?”

Mickey grinned. He patted the left side of his broad, sagging chest.

“On my honor, I never asked them to lay a hand on her. You know how I feel about hurting women,” Mickey said, the last words uttered with extra malice.

The image of Fiona O’Reilly rose in John’s mind. He tried to ignore it. She scratched desperately at his face. He could hear her muffled screams. The feel of the air leaving her compressed chest.

“You leave my family out of this,” John said quietly.

“Or?” Mickey laughed. “You don’t threaten me, boy. You don’t come in here and tell me what to do, after you fucked up the way you did.” There was no illusion of warmth between them anymore. Mickey snarled as he spoke. “You almost cost me everything. Cops were sniffing around here like dogs, digging for anything that might pin it on us. They put Malcolm in jail, you know that? Last brother I had out. That’s on you. Do you have any idea how much money I lost because of you?”

“I said, leave my family out of this,” John repeated, hand drifting inside his coat.

Mickey snorted, adding, “I really ought to get rid of you. Pain in my ass. It’s not like you do anything for me anymore. One word to the boys outside and I make you disappear, get it?”

John’s arm flew up, gun in hand. The alarm in Mickey’s eyes said he thought the gesture as stupid as John knew it to be. *Too late to turn back.* He took aim at Mickey.

“No, actually. I don’t,” John said, clicking off the safety. “You don’t own me.” He was surprised by the tenacity of his own voice. “Now, are you gonna shut the fuck up and do as I say?”

Mickey reached into the desk drawer where John knew he kept his own Colt.

John didn’t hesitate. He shot Mickey in the shoulder, watching as he crumpled to the floor and released an excruciating scream. John flung himself over the desk separating them and pinned Mickey’s arm to the floor with the heel of his boot. Mickey’s eyes rolled back in his head, teeth clenched. Small, choked noises slipped between his lips. He writhed under John’s heel, screaming louder every time his shoulder moved. The door to the office opened. John shot the man entering without hesitation. He collapsed into a lifeless heap in the doorway.

“You’re fucking insane,” Mickey said, speech slurred between coughs. “They’re all...gonna kill you.” The pain was shortening his breaths. It took more concentration to speak. His legs twitched wildly. Spit collected at the corners of his mouth.

John pressed down harder with his boot, watching Mickey’s hand spasm underneath him.

“You shouldn’t have involved my sister,” he said, voice heavy. He didn’t have time. The rest of Mickey’s men would be upstairs within the minute.

“Fuck your sister,” Mickey said, spitting in John’s face.

It only took a second. John released a second bullet into Mickey’s head. Blood sprayed upwards, stinging John’s eyes and mouth. He heard footsteps at the stairs. He pointed his pistol at the door and readied himself. Everything was a blur. He had three, maybe four bullets left. He wasn’t sure how many rounds he had fired before he unloaded on Mickey and the guy at the door. He wouldn’t make it past more than three men. That was a given.

A kid he recognized as Pocket's younger brother was the first to enter. They'd sent him in because they didn't care if John shot him. There was terror in his eyes. He couldn't be more than nineteen. His whole body flinched backward as John took a step toward him.

"Look—Mickey's dead. You need to get his body out of here. I called the cops before I even got here. Unless you do as I say, none of you are going home." The words sprang from John without him realizing. The bluff sounded authoritative, and his fearsome, brutal appearance certainly didn't diminish its effect. Blood and brain matter clung to his clothes, streaked his face. He looked as though he had just undergone some hellish baptism.

The kid glanced at the men in the hallway, looking for confirmation. Silently they filed into the room, six angry, broad shouldered men with swarthy hair and firmly set jaws. They wordlessly removed Mickey's body. He would be disposed of in the same way he'd disposed of his enemies over the years. Dismembered, stuffed in an oil drum, and vanished without so much as a whisper. The cops never cared when one of the mob's own went missing. One less person to deal with.

"You're John Fitzgerald, aren't ya?" the kid said, avoiding the body as they hauled it out, blood leaving a dark red trail behind on the white carpet and wood.

John smiled. He had to move quickly. He had to make it his—the whole thing.

"It's Fitzie," he said with a fatherly pat on the boy's back. "Call me Fitzie."

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Sean's father slid the newspaper across the table as he left for work. At the top of the

page were the words, “Crime at New High” in stark black ink. He had heard the rumors. They were hard to miss. Mickey Flannery was gone; what that entailed was irrelevant. Whether he was six feet under or floating down the harbor, his unquestioned reign over South Boston had come to an end. Sean knew the name of the man who replaced Mickey. Fitzie. No other name but Fitzie. People said he killed some girl, then killed Mickey to cover it up. Finn’s classmates said they thought they saw a black car like the one Fitzie drove lingering around the day Fiona went missing. Sean wasn’t an idiot. He understood.

It didn’t take long for them to run into one another. Fitzie sat at a dimly lit back booth of O’Hara’s, his faded newsboy hat pulled low over his eyes. Sean didn’t recognize him at first. Someone pointed him out in a low tone, amazed to see him so close to O’Reilly turf. Sean was numbed by bitterness, and the indifferent words of the police hung over him like a fog. *There’s nothing we could do, anyway.*

So as he watched Fitzie smoking a cigar, laughing low and heartily, Sean felt something inside him break. His cousins tried to keep him at the bar, their hands tangling in his coat, searching for some way to hold him back. But he shook them off without hesitation. He felt weightless as he approached the table of men. At the center, Fitzie glanced up at him with curiosity. A slight gesture of his hand told the men at either of his sides to remain where they were.

“Fiona O’Reilly. That name sound familiar?” Saying her name out loud sent a jolt of anger through Sean. The entire table seemed poised for action. That question alone would have been enough for a lesser man to shoot Sean on sight.

Fitzie smiled darkly. He shook his head. “Can’t say it rings any bells,” he said, his voice smooth and unaffected.

Sean began to shake. “You murdered her,” he said flatly. He was barely aware of anything except for the smiling lines around Fitzie’s eyes, the way his fingers danced carelessly over the wood tabletop. Every finger except the right ring finger. It was a round stub that ended with what would have been his first knuckle. Sean had heard stories that in the Flannery clan, one would cut off his own finger as a sign of fealty. Yet here Fitzie was—and all of the Flannerys were either in jail or in the ground. Fitzie wore no rings on his remaining fingers. Just bare flesh and calluses.

Upon the clearing of Fitzie’s throat, two broad men stepped out of the shadows of a nearby doorway. Sean didn’t flinch when they took him by both arms. As they dragged him upstairs by his collar, he knew he was stupid, knew it was a mistake. Yet he didn’t care. They led him up a creaky, narrow flight of stairs. He stumbled into a chair with uneven legs. They strapped him down and it wobbled each time he moved. One of the men slapped a strip of duct tape across his mouth. An exposed light bulb hung from the ceiling, providing the only light save for a dusty window in an alcove behind him. The room was barren except for a desk, a couple of ancient file cabinets, and several cheap paintings of countryside cottages.

Fitzie appeared in the doorway. His expression had aged in the few minutes that had passed. The mirth was gone. He rolled his shoulders like an athlete stretching before their next heat.

“You see, I’ve got no problem with you. Fact is, I owe you O’Reillys a great debt of sorts,” Fitzie said, approaching Sean and striking him across the jaw. His fist drove straight into the bone, knocking Sean’s head back.

Sean grunted, tasting blood on his teeth. A tooth was knocked loose. It rattled around in his mouth.

“But I can’t have you going around running your fucking mouth off like that. You think I don’t know you’ve been talking to cops?” Another blow to the face. This time Fitzie caught him under the left eye, smashing his cheek.

Sean’s vision went dark and spotty.

“Look, I’m real sorry about your little sister. I am. But I need you to stop talking about her. You put her to rest, now forget about it.” Fitzie massaged his knuckles. The two men who had accompanied Sean seemed eager to take over for their boss, but Fitzie made no motion to pass off the responsibility for his beating.

“So,” Fitzie said, untying Sean’s right hand and inspecting it carefully. He turned it over in his own. The expression that crept over his features was almost apologetic. “I’m gonna have to give you a reminder.” He signaled to his men and they dragged Sean’s chair over to the desk.

“Because I don’t want to kill you, or your family, Sean,” Fitzie said, a vague smile settling on his lips. “If I kill you now, you’re a martyr. But if I let you live, you’re a messenger.”

Fitzie patted him lightly on the cheek and pulled open a drawer in the desk.

Panic hit Sean in an instant, sending him thrashing and fighting for the first time since approaching Fitzie’s table downstairs. He tried to jerk his hand away, but Fitzie held it like a

vice. Fitzie removed the duct tape, but before Sean could scream, he stuffed a thick cloth in his mouth.

“Bite down. It’s for the pain,” he said, positioning Sean’s hand halfway inside the drawer. Before he signaled one of the men to kick the drawer in, Fitzie said quietly, “It’s nothing personal, kid.”

As he heard the bones in his fingers snapping and his mind went black, Sean was struck by the weight of the realization that Fitzie was altogether untouchable.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*South Boston, MA — 1970*

It had been five years since Fiona O'Reilly, and yet some nights Fitzie still woke up in cold sweats thinking of that monogrammed backpack. He would lurch forward in bed, heart pounding. He would see Fiona's face, ghostly white. Beside her, Patrick Wollam's wife. He'd forgotten her name years ago. All he could remember was her blood seeping into the carpet, her husband unable to reach her before he died. In his dreams the nameless woman would hold Fiona's hand. They'd watch him in his sleep. Waiting for him, silent.

Fitzie woke up to the telephone ringing near his ear. The sheets tangled around his legs. Sweat clung to his neck. Everything in his room had a soft morning light to it. He reached for the phone, eyes bleary with anger and sleep.

"The fuck do you want?" Fitzie mumbled.

"You gonna let me in?" A soft feminine voice was on the other line.

"Claire?" Fitzie sat upright, rubbing his eyes.

"Who else would it be? You got some other appointment today?" She laughed.

"How's that your business?" Fitzie said, propping himself up on one elbow. The sun broke through the flimsy moth-eaten fabric of the curtains. It cast splotchy bits of light over the room. He was still drowsy.

"You know the kids are looking forward to seeing you, is all. You know how they get...Fitzie?" she repeated.

"Yeah, yeah, I heard you," he said, pulling his pants on haphazardly. Stumbling across the room, his knee knocked into a dresser and a string of slurs raced from his lips.

“Everything okay over there?” Claire said, almost bored.

“Fine. Christ, that hurt. Listen, just gimme a couple minutes, alright?” He heard her murmur in agreement and the phone clicked off. In his half-empty drawers were only a couple of clean shirts. He studied himself in the mirror. Before him was a haggard looking man he barely recognized. Wisps of gray peppered his black, messy hair. Dark bags tugged at already drooping eyelids where wrinkles carved out crow’s feet. He massaged his temples, eyes fixing on the fresh scabs on his knuckles. He bandaged his hands quickly and trudged downstairs.

The door was barely open when he felt hands tugging at his sleeves. Claire stood silent in the doorway, her eyes bright. Fitzie led her and her kids inside, kicking dirty clothes and trash out of their path. In Fitzie’s kitchen Claire cleared off the table and set about making coffee. She moved with the ease of someone entirely familiar with her surroundings. Every cupboard and drawer seemed to belong to her. The kids trailed at Fitzie’s heels as he walked over to her and placed a kiss on her cheek.

Fitzie ducked into the hall closet and retrieved a large cardboard box. The kids gathered around, tugging at it with the hopes of getting to the prizes within. He placed it on the ground and they plucked out t-shirts and socks, matchbox cars, sneakers. Small brawls broke out over bars of chocolate. Claire corralled the kids out of the room, each complaining and yelping. They were all just wisps of blond hair and energy. The youngest, a wiry seven-year-old looked startlingly like Claire. Every time they visited, Fitzie tried to have new gifts for them.

Claire smiled. The two could hear the kids playing with the new toys in the living room. Every few seconds the quiet would be punctuated by screeches and laughter.

“Thanks,” she said simply, nodding to the box. “You know it helps.”

He shrugged. He wasn't big on thank yous. "It's just mostly the old stuff that doesn't get used, you know. It'd get thrown out or donated anyway," he said, pouring himself a bowl of cereal.

Dishes towered in the sink, day-old food caked to their dingy surfaces. Claire rolled her eyes at the mess. The coffee started to gurgle. After a soft click she pulled the pot away. She retrieved two mugs from a cabinet over the sink, hinges loose. She filled the two cups, offered him sugar.

"You really need a womanly touch in here," she said, sweeping crumbs from the counter with the back of her hand.

Fitzie looked up at her. She really was beautiful, even in the ratty blue sweatshirt she always wore when she was low on laundry. Fitzie's first meeting with Claire happened to coincide with his sister moving out. After their grandmother died, Cara met a man—a quiet, short lawyer with a square jaw and close-set eyes. They decided Rachel and Bobby needed a more "stable" home. What Cara really meant was a home away from him and the increasingly active influence of Fitzie's work life in their house. Then he met Claire by coincidence. She bumped into him in a bar and swore at him when he spilled his drink down her dress. There was a fire to Claire that he took an immediate liking to, even if she was nearly twenty years younger than him. She never made a point of it, never commented on his age.

"What happened to your hands?" she said, offering him a cup of coffee.

"Nothing, it's fine," he muttered, taking the mug and savoring the warmth against the bandages covering his skin. He sipped from the chipped rim of the mug. The black coffee seared his tongue. The bitter taste filled his mouth, made him instantly more alert.

“C’mon, what’d you do now?” she said, taking a gulp from her mug.

“Same old,” he said with a shrug.

She looked at him with those knowing eyes, so old in a face so young.

“I know this is already a lot to ask,” she said as she set her mug down and approached the table where the half-emptied box rested. Her slender fingers skimmed over the edges.

“You bringing this stuff, not asking for anything in return.” A vague smile played over her lips. “I have a favor, a request,” she said, staring up at him with her big eyes. There was a false innocence to her beauty. She leaned in close, her breath soft. The smell of her perfume mixed with the aroma of the coffee. It was a rich, intoxicating smell. He felt warring impulses—to draw away, to draw near. He could barely see her lips moving in his weary focus.

“I want you to meet someone,” she said, beaming. “My father.”

The kids’ laughter peeled through the rooms surrounding them, like ghosts circling unseen.

“S’cuse me?” Fitzie said through his own laughter. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Claire frowned. “I’m serious. I want you to meet him. I think you’d like him.”

He glanced around the room, as though expecting the old man to jump out of a closet. But there was no one, except for him and Claire. The earnestness coloring her face alarmed him.

“You’re serious? Why in God’s name would I do that? What is this, we gonna have a big party and we’re gonna swap stories about the old days or some shit? He’s probably my age, Jesus.”

Claire calmly sipped her coffee. “Two years younger, actually, but who’s counting?”

He felt something flutter inside him—an unfamiliar excitement.

“Look, I just want you to meet him. It’s important to me. You’ve met the kids. I know you and I haven’t exactly talked about what this—is, but I think you should meet him because it’d mean a lot to me.”

He finished his bowl of cereal and passed her to dump it into the mess of the sink. She said his name again. Another rush of some strange thrill struck him at the thought of her inviting him deeper into her world while he kept her so far from his own. With a wave and a hidden smile he said, “We’ll talk about this later.”

After making several phone calls, Fitzie joined the kids in the living room. The oldest, a girl about ten years old with Claire’s eyes, was laughing at her younger brother. Small car sounds passed through his lips as he dragged a matchbox car across the carpet. The younger sister straightened out the dress on a blond-haired doll. Despite Claire’s working several jobs to support them, they always seemed well-fed and happy. They loved her dearly. He often wondered who their father was. They all looked so much like Claire, it was hard to imagine anyone else’s influence there. Claire never spoke about their father other than to say he had died and it pained her to discuss it. Fitzie left it alone. He knew about secrets and the necessity for keeping them. He would be the last person to pry into others’ business.

The kids played quietly on the floor. It occurred to him that he didn’t know where Claire had gone. Perhaps she was in the bathroom. Or—there was a sound down the hall, coming from his office. Since giving up his duties as a hitman, Fitzie had to learn the inner-workings of Mickey’s old business. Seldom did Fitzie allow people into his office. The room held several cabinets and safes filled with his most precious information. He couldn’t leave anything of value

in the work office—if someone wanted to get to his most valuable assets, they would have to directly confront him. They would have to take it from his home. A fearsome prospect. He got up from the couch and went down the hall. The office door was open. He had to stop himself from yelling when he saw Claire hunched over his desk. The sight of her there was too much. Fingers drifting over papers, drawers askew. He took her elbow and pulled her away from the desk. Claire started, looking up at him. He thought he saw her stuff something into her pocket, but was too distracted by the look in her eyes.

“What are you doing?” he said, squeezing her hand.

“I was just looking around,” Claire said, lightly testing his hold on her. It didn’t give.

“Do you just go through other people’s things whenever you feel like it?” He pulled her toward the door. A sudden fear coursed through him. “Find anything you like?”

“I was just curious,” she said, trying to wriggle her hand free. She smiled. “Not like I found anything interesting anyway.”

Fitzie watched her retreat into the den with the kids. After a moment’s pause he scrambled to the desk, rifling through his stacks of paper and drawers to see if anything was missing.

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“I worry about you, you know,” Cara said with her typical distressed, motherly tone.

They sat together on a bench in Hemenway park. Warm April sunlight baked Fitzie's arms. Cara placed a hand over his wrist. She sighed deeply, that long-suffering look she always wore around him in full effect.

"Quit it," he said. He gave her hand a light push. Bobby's little league team was in the middle of a game against some team from Pennsylvania. Fitzie was unimpressed. Their flashy red uniforms told him they came from money, unlike the hand-me-down and raggedy blue ones sported by Bobby and his teammates. Bobby played well, but not outstanding. It didn't matter to Cara, though. Each time he stepped up to the plate she screamed like he had won the World Series.

"It's just that you're reckless. I know you pretend you're not, but you don't think about yourself. It's always your job, or your friends, or your family. Which is admirable," she amended, nodding slightly. "But it's gonna get you in trouble one of these days."

"There you go with the threats," he said.

"Not threatening!" Cara scrunched her nose, an expression he knew too well. She clapped for Bobby's team and said, "I just mean, be careful. You know I make mountains out of molehills, but you're my only family."

He was startled by her sincerity. Placing his hands over hers, Fitzie offered his sister a reassuring smile.

"I'm not going anywhere. You couldn't get rid of me if you tried. Half of Boston's been out to get me for years, and here I am." He patted his aging bicep and they both laughed. While he spoke of it lightly, Fitzie knew that he was anything but safe. The older he got, the longer he was in charge, the more enemies he made. It would be foolish to think he had been good at his

job, that he had somehow outdone Mickey. Fitzie knew he had made a great many mistakes, and each year that passed made him weaker. An easier target. At least now he had the luxury of greater distance from the people he loved. People knew better than to push Fitzie, and they certainly knew to leave his family out of business matters.

A loud honk sounded from the road behind them. He turned slightly, enough to make out the familiar rust colored paint. Claire beamed at him from the front seat. She motioned him toward her. Her dark blonde hair was tied into a loose ponytail. She looked young, even for her.

Fitzie sighed and patted his sister on the shoulder. She was visibly irritated.

“Her again,” Cara said, rolling her eyes. “What are you doing, babysitting? Honestly, John.”

“I’ll call you later, yeah?” He placed a quick kiss on the top of Cara’s head and walked over to Claire’s car. A quick survey of the backseat revealed her to be alone. He quirked a brow.

“What’re you doing here?” he said, nodding back toward the field. “Don’t have another kid around Bobby’s age, do you? Baseball fan?”

Claire chuckled and jerked a thumb at the passenger’s seat.

“Get in will you?” she said. “It’s time you meet my dad. Don’t panic,” she added as his eyes widened. “It won’t take long, promise.”

“You’re serious?” he said, hesitant.

Claire reached out of the car towards him, trying to drag him closer to her. He took a step backward, half laughing, half sighing. He had no desire to meet Claire’s father. He had no desire to meet anyone’s father, let alone the father of the girl he was contemplating sleeping with on a regular basis.

“Please,” she whined.

He groaned. After kicking the dirt in exasperation, Fitzie walked around to the passenger’s side and plucked the door open. Claire cheered and clapped him on the shoulder as he sat beside her.

“But I don’t make any promises about what I’ll say or not say.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest and leaned back into the seat, closing his eyes.

“Yeah well, he’s not much of a talker,” Claire said with a laugh. She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

The soft rumbling of the car’s engine mixed with Claire humming some quiet melody sent Fitzie drifting to sleep. He hadn’t slept a full night in weeks. When the car rolled to a stop he stirred. Claire lightly shook his shoulder and pointed out the window to Cedar Grove Cemetery.

“We’re here,” she said nonchalantly.

Fitzie rubbed his eyes. Sitting upright, he spun around in his seat, checking the road and his surroundings.

“The cemetery,” he said in disbelief. “You brought me to the cemetery?”

Claire was already out of the car and at the passenger door, tugging it open and trying to physically remove him. There was a hesitation to her smile.

“C’mon, I told you I wanted you to meet my dad.” She tugged at his arm.

“Hell no,” he said, digging his heels into the floor of the car.

“Don’t be like that,” Claire said. Her big, glossy blue eyes stared down at him. They pleaded with him, a strange desperation coloring them. His chest tightened.

“Chrissakes,” he said, burying his head in his hands. “You’re serious.”

Claire nodded vigorously. “Isn’t this better? You don’t actually have to talk to him. It’s just a grave, Fitzie.” She pointed over her shoulder. “It’s not far, promise.”

Fitzie begrudgingly exited the car. Claire looped her arm through his. She dragged him forward like a child, pointing out tombstones that held particular interest for her. Fitzie disliked cemeteries. They were strange and nonsensical. Funerals were a lot of business for someone who’d never get to see any of it. People wailing and giving great speeches. It was all really just a show for the living, anyway. But even Fitzie could admit Cedar Grove looked nice today, all things considered. Despite the lack of funds for this part of town, they managed to keep it pretty clean. The grass was short and green. The only small yellowy patches grew where no trees stood nearby to cast shade. The place carried a general quiet that escaped the rest of Southie. He figured a cemetery was one of the few places you could go where people wouldn’t talk your ear off about some shit they’d done the night before. He appreciated the silence.

“You said it wasn’t far,” he said, eyes skimming over the small stone markers surrounding them on all sides. He took her hand.

“It’s right over here,” Claire said, voice quiet. Her arm felt tense against his. She pulled him around a bend in the grass. Beneath a massive oak were two graves. The pale gray marble of the headstones reflected the light of the fading sun. Claire scanned the area around them.

“You okay?” he asked, eyes following hers. They were alone, though he couldn’t shake the feeling she expected someone to appear before them at any moment.

“Fine,” she said quickly, pulling him closer to the grave markers.

From several feet away he could make out the names. They knocked the wind out of him, the harsh block lettering unmistakably clear.

Patrick and Elise Wollam.

Fitzie froze. His legs locked in place, pulling Claire backward.

“What?” she said, releasing his arm.

He coughed and pressed a hand over his chest, shaking his head.

Claire glanced over at the graves, then back at him. She rubbed her arm nervously.

“It’s just my parents’ graves,” she murmured. “So maybe I didn’t mention it was my mom too. But that seemed like it would have really scared you off—”

“That’s not your last name. You told me your last name was O’Brien. You think this is funny?” Fitzie said, nudging her away from him. He could feel his pulse in his throat. His head was pounding. The bold letters of ELISE kept cycling through his brain.

Claire stood, frozen. Her eyes were wide, an inscrutable mix of emotions playing over her pretty face.

“Jesus, Fitzie! I go by my mom’s maiden name, so what? People kept asking me about my dead parents because of the newspapers, so I stopped going by Wollam. What’s wrong with you?” Claire stepped towards the graves.

“Who told you to do this? Who fucking told you?” Images of the Wollam’s blood-spattered carpet flooded him. The memory of that night came rushing back. Pockets forgetting the rope. The front door opening unexpectedly. A quiet home full of photographs of five beautiful children. The oldest was a pretty girl with dusty blonde hair and bright eyes. Her face leapt from the frame. She looked so familiar now. The children too. He thought of the boy with the matchbox car in his living room. The blood on the walls, speckling the photo frames. Pockets

hyperventilating. He could hear Elise Wollam screaming her husband's name. He could see her eyes in Claire's eyes now. He yearned to take Claire's hand again, but realized he never could.

"I don't know what's wrong with you," Claire said. She kissed her fingers and pressed them to the marble headstones.

When she faced him, the eyes he trusted now taunted him, as though Elise Wollam peered out of Claire and straight into him. What struck him most was that he hadn't seen it before, never anticipated Claire. Not in the slightest. All this time, he thought he knew her, thought he was helping her—but who was she really? Developing any feelings for her meant a loss of control, a loss he felt in full as she stood beneath the tree, her dead parents behind her. For one who prided himself in his foresight, Fitzie had been blind. Claire was Elise Wollam's daughter. The thought repeated in his mind. He couldn't keep himself from wondering if he'd known all along, but wouldn't allow himself to realize that deep down, the photos that lined the mantel in the Wollams' home had never left him. That when he'd seen Claire in the bar, he'd recognized her immediately, without knowing. And if not? What a sick twist of fate. To place her so close in his arms, only to deliver Elise Wollam with her.

Claire reached for him, but he pulled away. Casting one last wretched glance at the graves of her parents, he wished he'd never known Claire at all.

## CHAPTER SIX

In the days following his visit to Cedar Grove, Fitzie saw nothing of Claire. When his thoughts settled, they fell upon new questions. What had originally struck him as shock turned to suspicion. If the children in the photographs were the same children Claire claimed as her own, why had she lied to him? Were they her children, or her siblings? The photographs were too aged and distant in his memory to be clear. He remembered the idea of them, not the images. Five smiling children with their parents' hair and eyes. The oldest a tall girl, who he now knew to be Claire. They had to be her siblings—they'd always looked too similar to her to share the blood of anyone else. So she had lied. The significance of such a deception unsettled him. He questioned every other claim she had made of her life before he met her. Was their meeting months ago incidental? Did she know of his connection to her parents? His reaction in the cemetery should have been enough to raise questions of her own.

He had one of his men tail Claire. The man followed her to work. Followed her home. Every move, every breath he reported back to Fitzie. Claire couldn't so much as sneeze without his knowing of it. The initial reports calmed him, made him sure that it was simply a coincidence of the most morbid but ultimately circumstantial variety. He found himself actually chuckling at the absurdity of her parentage. He caught himself wondering when she'd visit again. He wanted her, but he dreaded seeing her. Everything about Claire bound him up in bitterness and pleasure. To see her was to see his past, yet he yearned for that closeness she had given him, and the reminder of who he used to be. While killing Elise and Patrick Wollam once seemed a painful, self-destructive act, murder had since become commonplace. A staple of his life, a policy for his

own security. That deed no longer frightened him, until the moment he thought Claire might know of his part in the act.

So when he heard the report that Claire spent her nights meeting with a strange man in private, it crushed the illusion. He felt himself sinking into the same distrust, the unfading paranoia. What was he to her anyway—Fitzie felt his face burn at the thought. He was an old man. To be made foolish by a girl, a child by comparison to his own years. He didn't know who he was to Claire, or what she was to him. In the months they had become close, it remained indefinable. Though the warmth of her presence appealed to him, Fitzie couldn't bring himself to think of anything more. Claire made him laugh, entertained him. She was beautiful, but in a dangerous, intractable way. Everything around her always appeared diminished by comparison. It exhausted him. All that brightness, a goodness that radiated from within; it only reminded him of his own failings, his own rottenness.

He saw her with those kids. He'd made orphans out of her family. Her, too. Even if they really were her siblings, he supposed in a way they were as much her children as her brothers and sisters. She'd raised them alone, fed and loved them with startling earnestness for one so young. Kept them out of foster care. A real miracle. Without a doubt she would sacrifice anything for those kids. That alone made her more of a mother than many women in Southie could boast. Fitzie often wondered if he ever loved anything as much as Claire loved those children.

He knew things could never be the same with Claire as they were before the cemetery. Their time together fell away to nothing. He tried to distance himself from Claire, but he found for the first time in his life an immense difficulty in letting go. But he tried. It happened in

stages, beginning with his ending the surveillance on Claire. Her movements fell out of his routine of daily checks. He refused to call, and she seemed to do the same. Weeks passed, but the memories of the touch of her hand or her stopping by his home for late night coffee persisted. So, as irrational and unjustified as he knew it to be, he felt compelled to formally abandon her, to say to her face that he knew it would be hard for her, but she could never see him again, and like it or not she'd have to live with it. Still, she had not come looking for him. Clearly she didn't care. He felt the full foolishness of his own delusions. A silly man worrying over the company of a girl half his age. He caught himself in such thoughts and a wave of shame overcame him. He buried himself in his work. The money and blood and politics kept thoughts of her at bay.

When he tore April from his desk calendar, Fitzie saw the words "Tommy's birthday" scrawled over the second of May in Claire's fine, neat print. The painful absence of her kids struck him square in the gut. He surveyed his home and gathered up the toys they used to cherish, long-since abandoned in his messy rooms. This, he reasoned, was the last and greatest opportunity to remove Claire completely. He gathered the last of the Wollam children's belongings into a large box. It barely fit in the back seat of his Plymouth. He drove towards Claire's rundown little place on D Street. He could find his way there with his eyes closed. Funny how memory worked that way. There were days when he couldn't remember his own father's birthday, but when he drove to Claire's, every detail of her street clung to his memory.

He knew her neighbors' names from the surveillance. On the Byrne's lawn was a collection of paint-chipped gnomes, limbs missing here and there so they looked menacing and clownish. The Sheehans always had some kind of auto parts greasing up the little path to their

door. Dark oil ran in streams into the grass. Claire tried planting small flowers along their walkway. They died after a few weeks, but she kept watering them.

Fitzie pulled up to the curb opposite her house and killed the engine. A car parked out front blocked her mailbox, and cut off the path to her front door. He juggled the box out of the back seat and fumbled his way up the splotchy path. The lights were on in her living room. He could see Claire through the window. A tall man stood before her, his back facing the window at the front of the house. The man gestured broadly at Claire, then pulled her into a hug. Fitzie strained to make out his face. He felt a wave of jealousy course through him until a single defining feature caught his eye. The man holding Claire was no stranger after all. The smashed digits of his right hand marked him. He was someone decidedly familiar. Someone who had eluded Fitzie for years. Sean O' Reilly.

Fitzie braced himself against the side of the house. His heart raced. What had been jealousy burned into something stronger, darker—a seething anger that made his skin crawl. The last time he saw Sean, he was a boy. Twenty-something, hand bound up from his injuries. He had bowed his head as he passed Fitzie. It felt like a victory. With the young O'Reilly stallion broken, nothing had stood in Fitzie's way. Then Donovan O'Reilly died, only a year after Mickey. The path cleared. Sean O'Reilly disappeared from sight. They said he'd moved to New York. Not everyone could survive Boston. Yet even if you left, Boston rarely let you go. The sight of Sean in Claire's living room reminded Fitzie of that inescapable truth. Those who left would always return, one way or another.

Voices traveled through the open window. Claire's words reached him in a jumble. The deep tone of Sean's voice carried through the loudest; a resonant, confident sound. He reassured Claire of something, maybe promised her.

"I should have been there that day, but you did a good job. It'll all work out, you'll see. Trust me," Sean said, his voice suddenly at the door. Fitzie ducked around the side of the house, clutching the box to his chest. He could hear footsteps. The doorknob turned. Sean made his way down the front steps and got in his car. He never looked back. Fitzie couldn't shake the question: how much did Claire know? Sean's words rang through him. He thought of Claire snooping through his office. The feeling he couldn't shake, that she had taken something from him. Sean's car sped away, leaving Fitzie outside Claire's house, body shaking with anger and what he could only suppose was a sense of betrayal. His nails dug into the box. Everything contained within, spoiled. Stepping back into the open, he climbed the stairs and knocked on Claire's door, bracing the box against his knee.

"Did you forget some—" Claire began, but stopped short at the sight of him.

"Expecting someone else?" he said, voice low. Without waiting for her, Fitzie shoved the box into her arms. He pushed past her into the home. His boots tracked mud on the light tan carpet. Everything about her home intensified his rage. The quiet, the warmth.

Claire padded into the room. She set the box down at the base of the stairs.

"What're you doing here?" her voice shaking.

Fitzie massaged his arthritic knuckles.

“What was *he* doing here? Didn’t know you knew Sean O’Reilly,” he said, his movements around her living room predatory. Never lingering over any one object long enough to really pay it attention, Fitzie spun to face her. “What were you talking about? Me?”

Her body tensed. She gradually stepped away from the doorway.

“I don’t really think it’s any of your business what I talk about. Or who I talk to. Look, I don’t think you should be here.” She stood on her toes, entire body seemingly poised for flight. Her fingers twitched, her neck was rigid. Every visible muscle pulled taut. The smooth surface of her face was creased with worried wrinkles. She looked older. Worn down. Her skin lacked its usual bright pinkness. She looked sun-starved. Hungry. As though every soft edge of her body had been rubbed away to nothing; until she was a pale image of her former self.

A small noise came from down the hall. Claire’s youngest sibling poked his head out from around the corner.

“Fitzie?” he said, hopeful. Claire ran to him and held his face in her hands.

“Go to your room,” she said urgently. The boy turned obediently and disappeared.

Fitzie observed her silently. Claire pressed a hand over her chest.

“I want you to get out. Now,” she commanded. When she saw Fitzie reaching for her arm, she flinched away but was too slow. He yanked her close to him, clutching her wrist so hard he thought it might snap. She mumbled, “Please,” and shook her head. He dragged her into the nearest room. The walls were a soft, dull pink, what years ago must have been a child’s room but she had never bothered to redecorate. A small bed with a handmade quilt protruded into the tiny space. Photographs lined the walls in neat rows, the smiling faces of the Wollam children beaming from each tidy paper square. They unnerved him.

Fitzie pressed Claire against the wall. “How do you know Sean O’Reilly?” he said, pinning her arms back and leaning in so close to her face he wondered what it would be like to kiss her now, if he could loathe her and love her all at once. His body was in a riot. He didn't know what he wanted from her anymore. She squirmed beneath his touch. Her face angled away from him. It struck him that he barely knew her anymore—that maybe he never knew her at all.

“He found me,” she said softly, as though he had physically ripped the words from her. “He said you killed my parents.”

Terror gripped him. Not because she knew; this he could overcome, were it only him who would hear of her knowledge. He could forget her, he could imagine her away. But she would tell others. She already had. For years Fitzie had dealt with men who threatened him in every imaginable way, but usually and most dangerously, with the truth. The solution was simple: kill them. Quickly and without remorse. To threaten Fitzie’s life meant losing your own. But this woman had an advantage those dead men lacked—Fitzie cared for her, or at least he had. He didn’t want to kill her. And that alone meant he had to.

“I’m sorry!” she said through a breathless gasp. Tears welled in her eyes. “He just wanted information, wanted me to testify. Said I would get money for it, for the kids—”

Wrenching her from the wall, Fitzie flung her across the bed. The sight of her tearful, contorted face made him nauseous. He buried his face in his hands. It was almost more than he could ask himself to do. After Fiona he had sworn no harm against women, but this—it was life or death. Maybe if he’d known her more, maybe if they’d had more time, he could have loved her enough to choose her. But as he had been doing since the instant he put a bullet in Mickey

Flannery's skull, Fitzie chose himself. He chose his life, his family, his rules. But it came at a price.

"Please don't. Oh God, please, please!" Claire wept, shuffling backwards. As she scrambled the quilt knotted up beneath her. She knocked a Bible off of the night stand.

She screamed her last words, "Sean! Sean," as he closed his shaking hands around her neck.

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On days when rain hung thick in the sky, Sean O'Reilly's right hand ached to the bone. As he reached for the doorbell of 45 Devine Way, pain raced through the joints in his remaining fingers. He glanced to the sky. Thunder sounded in the distance. Behind him cops and FBI agents stood with guns at the ready. They stood stiffly, poised to strike the instant the door swung open. Sean knocked three times with his mangled hand. Everything stood in a hush, unmoving, waiting for the door to open and for Fitzie to show himself. How many hours he had spent awaiting this very moment, how many days he thought it would never arrive. He'd taken a job as a private investigator years after Fitzie destroyed his hand. He had even chased a few cases of dead girls like his sister. Nightmares plagued him. Over and over, Fitzie ceaselessly slammed his hand in a drawer while Fiona screamed from somewhere unseen. But the dreams always ended with Fitzie's hands locked into thick cuffs, tears in his soulless eyes. After years of collaborating with the cops, Sean convinced them to let him serve on the team set to bring Fitzie into custody. The impatience of the cops was almost palpable. Their feet shifted restlessly. With

a nod of confirmation from the officer at his right, Sean knocked a final time before stepping aside.

The door collapsed into the front hall. Sean expected to see Fitzie standing at the base of the stairs, shooting wildly at the first group of cops who set foot in his house. Yet as they entered, they were met with nothing but the distant sound of a record playing a muted Bobby Darin somewhere unseen. *When that shark bites, with his teeth, babe, scarlet billows start to spread.* Sean stuck close to the wall, out of the way. Every window was covered with blinds and thick curtains of a dark red hue, giving everything a faint red glow from sunlight breaking through. Though not clean, there seemed to be a careless order to things. Amidst the dust and clutter, the home smelled of stale air and cinnamon.

The cops methodically searched the first floor, shouting to one another as they cleared each room. Small features of the house made it unsettlingly homey. Sean found himself pausing to stare at Fitzie's things instead of searching for the man he had waited six years to capture. Every flat surface was covered by frames of faded photos, most of which featured Fitzie with a woman and two children, or with people from around the neighborhood. At a baseball game, on stoops, perched on a rooftop with a beer in hand and his arm around one of the local barbers. He looked perfectly natural, strangely wholesome—a good old boy who everyone loved as long as he kept paying their bills and shutting their mouths. How strange to think they had grown up only blocks away. In another time they could have been friends, things could have been different. It was a matter of chance; who they met, to whom they were born. Where they were now, Sean with the cops and Fitzie with the criminals, it all seemed unfair. Was it their choices, or a trick of chance?

To see Fitzie as a man was dangerous, though; to imagine him as human being meant vastly underestimating his capacity for inhumanity. Sean had done that once before. Never again. His aching fingers traced over the edge of a framed image of Fitzie with a young boy sitting on his shoulders. The Fitzie that Sean knew seemed nothing like the man in the photographs filling the walls of his house.

“First floor clear,” a stout man with a thick mustache and an even thicker Irish accent said from beside Sean. His badge read MJR. O’HARA in sharp print. It was brightly polished, treated with care. With a nod, O’Hara motioned for a group of armed men to take to the staircase. They climbed the stairs, fanning out to search each of the rooms at the top. After several moments of their searching, Sean was startled by the lack of any noise beyond the officers calling out to one another. The silence discomforted him. Precedent said that Fitzie struck first when threatened. He didn’t need to be hit to take action. A terrifying thought struck Sean; perhaps Fitzie was dead, perhaps he’d killed himself in the night, put a bullet through his own skull. His pride wouldn’t let anyone have the pleasure of seeing him in jail, wouldn’t let them feel like they’d won. Though an act of cowardice, it also would demand great courage—that much he knew Fitzie possessed in spades. He couldn’t wrap his mind around such an outcome. What about Fiona, and Claire? No justice for two girls and countless others dead at Fitzie’s hands, and Fitzie the final victim of his own violence.

Sean bolted for the stairs, ignoring the concerned looks of cops as he darted past them. As he peered into the nearest room, he heard O’Hara’s booming voice across the hall shout his name.

“O’Reilly, get in here,” he commanded, nodding at Sean from down the dim hallway.

Sean's chest tightened. Threading his way through a sea of guns trained on the doorway, Sean slipped into the room to find Fitzie seated in a stiff green armchair. Stacks of yellowing copies of the *Tribune* littered the floor. The old, vicious man looked very much alive. A bright smile exposed two rows of sharp white teeth.

"You look surprised to see me," Fitzie laughed and raised his hands in mock surrender.

"He asked for you specifically," O'Hara said to Sean, eyes trained on Fitzie. It seemed as though every man in the room wanted to unload a bullet into him. The list of grievances against John Fitzgerald ran long with South Boston police. Even the corrupt ones wanted to put him away, or at least get rid of him somehow. Whether that was by one of his own, or by one of them, was irrelevant.

A wave of relief washed over Sean as he stepped further into the room. Fitzie's weathered face was unreadable.

"You're going to jail," Sean said abruptly. As though he needed to say it aloud, to confirm it more for himself than the man sitting placidly across from him.

"It was gonna happen eventually," Fitzie said placidly, cracking his neck from side to side.

"You don't care at all, do you?" Sean balled his hands into fists. "About any of them. Any of the people you killed, the lives you ruined."

Fitzie laughed. He stood. The guns behind Sean tilted in unison to adjust to his height. Even in his advanced age, Fitzie still towered over them. He had always been a broad man, shoulders wide, trunk anchored by thick thighs. It was as though every part had been built two

sizes too large. After sighing deeply, he took a step toward Sean and extended both arms, as though asking for the handcuffs that would end his freedom.

“Doesn’t really matter, does it kid? Whether I feel one way or another? Don’t matter one bit, because I killed who I killed, and that can’t be undone.” Fitzie spoke wearily, his eyes closing as thought resting for a faint moment.

Each cop hovered with his weapon at the ready. Unblinking, they waited for Fitzie to make another move.

“What about Claire?” Sean said, emboldened by Fitzie’s resignation.

In an instant Fitzie lunged for Sean and three cops to his right tackled him to the ground, bludgeoning him with their fists and guns. Sean leapt backward. Fitzie buckled, clutching his face and writhing on the floor as they kicked him. Somewhere down the hallway Sean could hear a riotous yell. *Got him!* Without hesitation the cops surrounded Fitzie, cuffed him, and dragged him to his feet.

The cops carried Fitzie out of the room. Sean followed the trail of his blood behind them. Out of the front door Fitzie hobbled like a ruddy king, his chin tilted skyward. Even in surrender he looked triumphant. His neighbors had gathered at their windows, peering out curiously at the cop cars and FBI vehicles lining their street. Sean watched as the cops lowered the limping, blood-soaked Fitzie into the car.

As Sean moved toward the vehicle, O’Hara tried to stop him. “Let it go,” he called, but too late. Sean was already beside the car, leaning into the window.

“What about Claire?” Sean asked again.

“Christ, what about her?” Fitzie said.

“Without Claire, we would never have gotten the info on your financials we needed. What she found for us will finally get you,” Sean said desperately, wanting to see it hurt Fitzie, wanting to see him shamed. Sean needed him to know that one of his victims had finally won. “Claire’s the reason you’re going to jail.”

Fitzie laughed, leaning in closer to Sean. “Yeah? Well you’re the reason she’s dead,” he said flatly into his ear, the hint of a smile on his stinking breath. “And you’ll be happy to know she died screaming your name.”

“Liar,” Sean screamed, and as if on cue, the cops dashed to restrain him. Sean violently tried to shove them away. Fitzie’s words wormed their way deep into him. He felt sick. The cops held him until the car drove off with their prisoner. Over and over, Sean told himself Fitzie was lying. It was a cheap shot, but lie or not, it struck something in him. Deep in his gut, he knew it was true. He had involved Claire, had asked her to risk her life to help him. And not for her sake, but for revenge, for himself. Sean dry-heaved onto the pavement, his whole body shaking. He could hear the police buzzing with relief, pleased to have brought John Fitzgerald into custody.

After a steady breath, Sean smoothed out the fabric of his shirt and went over the final details of the arrest with O’Hara, who clapped a hand on Sean’s back. He reassured him he had done a good job, that they couldn’t have done it without him, that he was welcome to come get a drink with them later. Sean managed a weak smile and promised he would come by after he took care of some outstanding business. O’Hara nodded knowingly and waved goodbye.

The ignition groaned as Sean pushed his car out of park. Casting a final glance back at Fitzie’s house, he wondered at the mob life and all its violence. The crosses on the walls of homes like Fitzie’s told endless lies, repeated them every day—repent and your sins will be

forgiven. *Repent and your sins will be forgiven.* Sean knew better. It was a crock of shit. No number of apologies or affirmations of faith could undo the crimes of such men. With the windows down he breathed deeply, inhaling the smoky spring air churned out by the dying factories on the Old Harbor.

He drove until the gates of Cedar Grove appeared before him. On a hill shadowed by an ancient oak he saw the fresh grave, the dark earth still heaped over the grass. He remembered the small faces of Claire's siblings days earlier. A stern-looking woman introduced herself as their social worker. Her face was set in a blank frown as she explained what would happen to them without a legal guardian.

Sean got out of his car and climbed the low-sloping hill. A warm breeze cast soft yellow leaves down upon his head. Nothing felt right. Even as the police carried Fitzie to jail, a vast emptiness settled in Sean's gut. He thought of Fiona, and how he never told her goodbye the day she went missing. He forgot to say he loved her as she left the house because he was too busy arguing with their father. Not a day went by that he didn't think of her and wish he had made it to school on time. He would have taken her place, would have let Fitzie kill him if it meant sparing her. But it was too late. And now he thought of Claire Wollam and her three motherless siblings, their bright eyes and the new emptiness of their home. Twice-orphaned, the remaining Wollam children faced an uncertain fate. He wondered how much he was to blame.

Under the shade of a tree far older than the cemetery itself, the graves of Patrick, Elise, and Claire Wollam nestled in a tight row of three. Taped to Claire's headstone were hand-drawn cards. Sean stood in silence, unable to find words of thanks or remembrance. Tears stung his eyes. Instead of feeling release, he could only feel a swelling hatred for Fitzie, and he suspected,

for himself. Sean knelt to touch Claire's grave. As he spoke a soft apology, the birds around him ceased their calling, as though pausing to listen.

## EPILOGUE

*Deer Island, MA — 1991*

The young girl turned the pack of Camels over in her hands, staring into the dim six-by-nine room. A moth-eaten blanket covered the cot. A shrunken figure hovered at the bars, hands extended. In the light, his skin resembled tissue paper, delicately translucent from years without the sun.

“It’s two bucks this week, Fitzie,” she said, shaking the box.

“C’mon kid, last week it was only a buck fifty. You’re turning into a little extortionist,” he said with a ragged laugh, running his fingers through his thin, oily hair.

She shot a sidelong glance down the corridor.

“If you can snag some smokes from the guards for cheaper, be my guest. Until then,” she wagged the box before his nose, “I’m sticking my neck out to nick these from the warden’s storage. You’ve got to make it worth my while.”

He threw up his hands in exasperation. Fumbling with a small box tucked beneath his cot, he retrieved her payment. She didn’t need the money, she just needed the company. After a week of selling cigarettes to most of the other prisoners, only Fitzie held her attention. The others frightened her. He spoke to her as an equal, though he far surpassed her in age. She’d heard her father say that Fitzie was almost 71, that he’d been a prisoner longer than she’d been alive.

His smile exposed two rows of yellowed teeth. They exchanged the goods quickly. She stepped away to look disinterestedly at the sign over his cell. Etched into the rusted plaque was the number 22813.

“Those kids still picking on you?” His fingers fumbled with the papery packaging.

She shrugged, avoiding his eyes.

“That bad?”

She mimed crushing a bug under her shoe, grinding her toe into the cement.

“You should just pop ‘em in the mouth, that’d shut ‘em right up,” he said, demonstrating a swift left hook. “I’m sure your mother’d love that.” Fitzie laughed and pressed a cigarette to his lips.

She twirled the unraveling hem of her shirt while he searched for matches. Night would soon overtake the island, and the light would diminish severely on the block. Her eyes adjusted. She promised her mother she would return home on time.

“Nah, don’t hit ‘em. You’re too smart for that. If I was half as smart as you when I was fifteen, I might have never ended up in here,” he muttered through a puff of smoke, clouds of it billowing through the air.

She nodded complacently.

“Do you at least like the school on the mainland better than the old one here?” he said, tossing the match into the trash.

“Yeah,” she said and wrinkled her nose. “I guess. The kids are awful, but it gives me an excuse to get off the island. I’d go crazy if I had to stay here all the time.”

Her words slipped through the bars separating them before she could will them back.

“You’re telling *me*,” Fitzie said with a gravelly laugh, cigarette dancing between his lips. She stared down at her muddy boots. The rain had poured steadily for weeks, soaking the island until it was nothing but a mere soggy mass swelling from the surrounding harbor. Everything radiated a saturated green color. The boat they took to the city returned in the afternoon winds

amidst whitecaps. Fitzie never knew if it rained unless she told him, never knew if she would visit until she arrived.

“Dad says if it keeps raining the way it is, the whole island will flood.” She laughed, adding, “Good thing they’re moving you all out of here, right?”

Her father had been talking about the prison’s impending shut down for months. They were in the process of transferring out the 1,500 or so inmates to other prisons. Fitzie had already been in and out of Deer Island several times, he said; they kept bringing him back because the other prisons were too dangerous for him. “Too many young punks,” he’d say between labored breaths, “always trying to stab me all the damn time.” They’d settled him on Deer Island with other petty criminals, but now he’d have to move again. She wondered what would happen to him, and if she’d see him again.

Embers glowed at the end of the cigarette when he inhaled.

“Your father, he’s a good man. Treats us with respect. You should know that. He at least doesn’t extort us for cigarette money, like you,” he pursed his lips, squinting at a guard as he walked past. “And it’s a good thing they’re moving us out of here. If the island floods, we’d all escape. Concrete, rebar, and sea spray don’t mix. This old prison is probably falling apart as we speak. I could build myself a raft out of cafeteria tables.”

“Sometimes I think you’re the only person on this island who gets me, Fitzie,” she said abruptly. The kids from the mainland called her names, made fun of her old clothes. She didn’t fit in with the island kids either. Fitzie told her not to pay attention to anyone, to keep her thoughts on herself. “It’s too bad tomorrow’s your last day,” she went on. “I think you’re the only person like me here. I really hate to see you go.”

“Well that’s a bad sign. I don’t want you to be like me.”

Footsteps approached. She seized the bars with her small hands and pulled her face up close.

“Fitzie, what’d you do to get put in here?”

“You ever gonna get sick of asking that?” He tossed the box of Camels on his bed, turning from her with a grin.

“I’ll keep asking until you tell me. You’ve dodged me every day for three months, but I’d say that at least shows I’ve got the persistence.”

“I’d rather you not know,” Fitzie said. He buried his face in his hands.

Her father came up to the cell and placed a firm hand on her shoulder. “Time to go home,” he said sternly, giving Fitzie a nod of acknowledgment.

She squinted into the cave-like cell. Puffs of smoke drifted to the stooped ceiling. Her father tugged on her sleeve, ushering her down the hall.

“Tomorrow, Fitzie. You’ll tell me the truth tomorrow,” she said assuredly. She had waited long enough. She ran from the steel bars, dried mud shaking free from her shoes.

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“Password?” said Fitzie, perched on his cot.

The girl stood at the bars again. It was morning, the day the remaining inmates would all be taken away.

“Ted Williams,” she responded, reaching into her bag.

He stepped forward in his dirt-laden uniform. His toes peeked through the tips of his too-small slippers.

She extended a small package through the bars.

“Go on, take it,” she said, wagging the package in front of him until he took it with a small smile. He tore away the brown packaging, holding the pack of Camels into the light.

“No charge,” she clarified.

“What’s all this about?”

“Nothing, just a going away present. And...I’d really like to know what got you in here, before you go.” She spoke with the sweetest voice she could muster. At dinner her father told her to leave Fitzie alone, to stop asking him questions with answers she wasn’t prepared to hear.

“Honey,” he said between bites of chicken, “Some things you don’t need to know.”

Fitzie traced cracks in the cement enclosing him. “Can’t tell you.”

“That’s it? That’s all you’re going to tell me?”

He shifted his back to her.

At a distance her father called to her, shouting for her to come to his office.

“Fitzie, come on, please!” she said, then threw her arms up with a groan. “Fine, enjoy the smokes.” She stalked down the hall to her father’s office.

As she flung the door open, she bustled inside and slumped into a small chair near the door. Her father looked sternly at her as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“What?” she snapped.

“I’ve got to stop by the mess hall. Can you help pack up my desk? Just stack all that stuff over there into a box, please.” He kissed her forehead as he left.

She waved him away. The dark blue wallpaper soothed her. She looked around the office. In the corner, a towering file cabinet jutted into the room. She felt a surge of delight. Checking the hall for her father, she seized his set of spare keys and unlocked the drawers. She skimmed the titles, and sighed with satisfaction when she landed on “inmate records.” The name “John Fitzgerald” stood out in thick black ink. She plucked the folder from the case, but just as she read the words, “Transferred to Deer Island for remainder of life-sentence, no parole,” the folder was snatched from her hands.

Her father snapped the folder closed and jammed it back in place.

“Dad,” she whined, “seriously, I just wanted to know what he did! It’s been bugging me for months. Nobody here will tell me, and it’s not a big deal. I have got to get a library card,” she murmured, glaring at her shoes.

Her father sighed deeply. “You don’t need to know,” he said. “You don’t. You’re only twelve. You think you know best, you think you want to know, but it’s not something you need to hear. And it’s certainly not something you should read about in my classified files.”

Her father packed up the last of his things. She watched him, silent. It had always been a joke to her, what Fitzie had done, but now that he was leaving, she felt a burning need to know at least on some level who he was, what had brought him to Deer Island. Fitzie seemed different somehow. Sweeter than the rest. Quieter, and lonelier too.

“They’re going to be moving him out soon, honey,” her father said suddenly, snapping a bag closed.

“Well,” she stood up, resigned. “I better say bye.”

On the block, most cells were empty. A strange sight for the once-bustling prison. She padded up to Fitzie's cell. Most of his personal items had been removed. Everything looked barren, except for Fitzie sitting quietly on his cot, immersed in thought. She cleared her throat.

"You again," he said, grinning slightly. "I thought you'd given up on me."

She shook her head. "I didn't want you to leave being mad at me."

He smiled appreciatively. "I could never be mad at you." Brushing his thumb over the scar on his chin, Fitzie added with a laugh, "I knew a girl like you once. Whip-smart, always putting me in my place."

"Was she your daughter?" She asked, unable to help herself.

"No, I knew her dad a little though. He was a nice man."

"Was she your girlfriend?"

Fitzie hesitated, but finally shook his head. "I don't think so. But I cared about her, very much."

"Is she... why you're here?" Every question she asked felt heavier, approaching the truth he kept so far from her. He looked so small in that empty room. It made her heart ache.

"Sort of," he murmured, massaging his temples. "But not really. There's a lot of things that got me to where I am now. She's not the only one." He had a distant look in his eyes, a sadness in his face. "But I think about her all the time. Let's say she's always with me, and I wouldn't be here without her. Does that make sense?"

She nodded yes, though she felt she somehow understood him even less. He looked weary, unusually tired. As he smiled at her through the bars, she thought that she would have liked to have a grandfather just like him.

Down the hall the guards were ushering inmates out of their cells. A few made their way towards Fitzie.

“Well, thanks,” she said to him, struggling to imagine her life on the island without him, without their daily visits and jokes. “I hope wherever they take you is nicer than here.”

Fitzie laughed warmly and agreed. The guards approached and told her to stay back, explaining that they were transferring him to a secure holding cell before removing him from the island. Fitzie gave her a wink and waved goodbye. As he disappeared from sight, she wandered down the empty cell block and hummed to herself. She imagined the girl Fitzie had loved, and thought she must've been very lucky.