

PROMISE

a novel by

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(First Three Chapters)

BILLY'S BODY

The body of Billy Babitzke lay in a twisted heap at the bottom of Watchstep Cavern. He looked like a discarded ragdoll, his limbs pointing this way and that, curled in positions they'd never seen before. His eyes were wide open, seemingly fixed on the pines, maples, and oaks high above the crack in the forest floor—the only entry to the cavern—but they saw nothing.

Billy Babitzke was dead.

CHAPTER ONE

Ryan Shiflett didn't know a thing about Gertie Lundquist, but looking at the casket where her body lay, he gathered two things about the woman: she must have loved fishing and riding motorcycles. Gertie was laid to rest in no ordinary casket, her common-law husband of thirty-two years, Brian Lee (known as "Grizz" to friends), made sure of that. Grizz made the bulk of his money with a tattoo gun, but pulled in side cash with an airbrush. Using the side of a van, the back of a leather jacket, or the gas tank on a '69 Sportster as his canvas, he would paint just about anything. His wife's casket was his masterpiece.

The side facing the crowd was an homage to her love of Wisconsin's state fish, *esox masquinongy*, better known as the muskie. Grizz kidded Gertie that she liked muskies because they had more teeth than her. Whenever he teased her, she'd wrestle him to the ground, pull out his dentures, and they'd have a big laugh. The two lived for laughter—they felt it was the foundation of a strong relationship—and everyone who knew them saw firsthand that they lived by this belief. As long as they had laughter, life was good and their love strong.

The image on the casket was a huge muskellunge breaking the water's surface as it fought a lure and line. In the background—if one looked closely—they'd see Grizz fishing with a ghost-like image of Gertie reeling in the big fish from the comfort of her beat up Lund fishing boat. Below the scene, written on an airbrushed banner, was "GONE FISHIN'!"

The top of the casket was a tribute to her other love: classic motorcycles. Everyone around her rode Harleys, but Gertie had a love for another American classic, as well as a soft spot for British bikes. Her garage was packed with Indians, Nortons, and Triumphs. She wasn't the kind of woman to sit back and let her husband be the breadwinner. While she appreciated custom bikes with the best of them, she made a living restoring old bikes to their original glory. Her garage was like a time machine with old, battered bikes going in, and rolling out looking like they came straight off the factory floor sometime in the past.

The image on the casket was Grizz's rendition of the couple's last run to Sturgis, South Dakota. If one were looking down from above, the two were riding along a winding road in the background. In the foreground, inside a carved heart in the bark of an old pine tree were the words:

“GRIZZ + GERT
FOREVER”

The two met in Badlands National Park, and each year on their way to the Sturgis Rally, they stopped and renewed their love for each other beside the tree.

It was a closed casket funeral because a tree took Gertie's life. The remains of someone who lost a bike at seventy miles an hour and went head-first into a clump of pine trees and sugar maples is not the kind of remains you want to look at—not that even a clean corpse is much fun. Ryan was overwhelmed: most people are invited to a getting-to-know-you party when they first arrive in a new town, but instead, he was invited to a funeral for a woman he never met, by a man he barely knew.

It was a very uncomfortable introduction to the tiny town; all eyes were on him. Ryan was the closest thing to a celebrity Promise had ever seen. Coming off the heels of a successful show on the Food Network, he could afford the luxury of packing up and moving far from the daily grind of busy life. The show he hosted, “A Marriage of Flavors, with Francesca and Ryan,” was a surprise success. While other cooking shows on the network featuring married couples failed, “Marriage” pulled great ratings. Ryan spent a lot of time thinking about the phenomenon and—aside from Francesca's beauty and featured cleavage—he couldn't come up with a single reason they did so well. Producers told Ryan that he and his wife had chemistry. Perhaps they were right, he thought, but it was a chemical experiment ending in an explosive divorce. By the time the fire in the lab was extinguished, Ryan found the motivation to sell his restaurant in Chicago and retreat into the backwoods of Northern Wisconsin.

When he was young, he visited Wisconsin every summer with his parents. While most families from the Chicago area stopped at the Dells for tourist traps like Tommy Bartlett's Thrill Show, the Shifletts didn't stop until reaching the forests up north. Ryan loved the area so much, he told his mother and father he would someday live there. Now, thirty years later, he was.

The town of Promise, Wisconsin was so small, you wouldn't find it on any map. In 1980, the U.S. Census Bureau accidentally skipped it. Several people in town became so incensed, they wrote the Bureau demanding to be counted, but were told there was no time. They were assured in 1990, they'd be included. When 1990 rolled around—again—they were overlooked. The fifty-six inhabitants just accepted it was their lot in life to be forgotten and left alone. That was exactly what Ryan was looking for.

Just because Promise was small, didn't mean it was without its charms. Digging past the surface, one would find the most interesting small town in America. Promise was not the original name; it was previously known simply as The Area, a small expanse in the Northwoods with scattered inhabitants bound together by a zip code.. As tourism

increased near the National Forests up north, there was word a highway would be constructed through The Area, and most of the residents pulled together and created a tiny town center with dreams of becoming the “Dells of the Northwoods.” They decided to change The Area’s name. With the promise of tourism and all that came with it, they decided “Promise” would be as good a name as any, and in 1992 it became official.

Most small towns like it that way, but Promise aspired to something greater. With the highway coming through, everyone rushed to find their tiny pot of gold on the side of the road. Every Christmas, people couldn’t wait for Nell Peterson to stop by their door with a fruitcake, or cookies. Nell planned to stake her claim by opening a bakery and year-round Christmas shop. Mike Lundy, owner of Lundy’s Body Shop, had no talents he could cash in on, but he did have Harvey Beacham.

Harvey kept the garage clean—it was about all that could be expected from him. Mike told anyone who listened, “The man’s dumber than lugnuts, but he’s not without talents.” One day Mike found Harvey at the oxy-acetylene rig welding little animals out of nuts, bolts, and scrap metal. With Mike’s encouragement, Harvey began creating incredible works out of steel and brass. Mike described them as “divine.” From the prodigious skill Harvey used in sculpting things, to the speed at which he cranked them out, everyone who saw a Harvey Beacham piece believed greater forces were guiding his hands.

“That log-dumb idgit never held a welding torch ‘til that day I found him back there,” Mike said, “and now he does this? Tell me that’s not a gift from above!” Mike planned to act as Harvey’s agent, using his garage as a showroom and letting Harvey do as he pleased, just as long as he split things 70/30 in Mike’s favor.

It seemed everyone in town was out to try something to make a fast buck, but the greatest pie in the sky dream belonged to Terry “Gorilla” Zilligan.

Gorilla was a retired wrestler and had the battle scars to prove just how “fake” wrestling was. He was missing an ear, compliments of Lonnie “The Shredder” Lonnigan, who ripped it off in Milwaukee, in ‘62. He was quick to remind wrestling connoisseurs that Yukon Eric only lost *part* of his ear from Killer Kowalski, but he lost the “whole gosh-durn thing!” To accent his point, he’d point to the tiny hole in the side of his head, nestled in a bed of twisted skin.

His forehead was a criss-crossed mess of scars, some self-inflicted to bring some much-anticipated gore to a match, but most times they were caused by those on the opposite side of the evening’s card. The tip of his left pinky was chewed off by The Montreal Mauler and spit to the floor of the Forum, in ‘64. He sustained broken ribs, broken fingers, and a broken wrist; a bruised spleen, a separated right shoulder, and a shattered ankle. He was also missing an eye. Rumor had it Knuckles Murphy plucked it out in Chicago’s International Amphitheatre not long after Gorilla lost the tip of his pinky, but in reality, his ex-wife gouged it from his head with a broken beer bottle during

a heated argument. The next day, Gorilla gave up drinking, cussing, and started living for the Lord.

These weren't his only problems.

Gorilla had rickets as a child. His parents were poor, food was scarce, and his father was too proud to take handouts. People often asked him how a child growing up in the Dairy State could be afflicted with such a disease, but Gorilla was quick to remind people the milk he drank back then was pure—not that “store-bought stuff fortified with vitamins.” His mother lost three children before Gorilla to accidents outside when they were young, so she vowed to keep Gorilla inside, where it was safe. He hardly saw sunlight in his early years and his vitamin deficiency got worse. He was six years old when he first visited a doctor, and by that time the damage was done: Gorilla's legs bowed out at the pelvis and he preferred dragging himself along with his arms, rather than using his legs. Even when he was finally eating and exercising properly, he still resorted to using his arms to get around. The muscles in his upper body swelled to an almost abnormal bulk. With arms seemingly twice as long as his legs (and just about as thick!), he was built like a sack of cement. What else could one call him, but Gorilla? For a short time in the late fifties, he even wrestled in a gorilla suit.

Gorilla had something going for him, though: he was smart with money. He vowed at a young age he'd never be poor, like his parents. After his divorce, he found solace in a wrestling ring. While other wrestlers of his time drank away their winnings the same night they earned them, Gorilla saved and invested wisely. He said there were only two people he trusted during that time: the people he faced in the squared circle, and his broker. Word around the promotions was he retired a millionaire in 1976, at the age of forty-four. With a modest home in a small town, there was no reason to blow money, and his nest egg grew even bigger. He was a goose sitting on a golden egg, so when he heard of the promise for tourism, he decided to open a themed restaurant in his own honor. He called it Gorilla's Grill, and he made sure there was no questioning his purpose by placing a huge fiberglass sculpture on the roof. A twelve-foot gorilla in a wrestling mask, boots, and tights invited tourists in with an animatronic arm wielding a giant spatula. It wore a greasy apron that read: GORILLA'S GRILL: SUPLEXES AND STEAKS! and inside one could dine on entrees with catchy names like Toe-Hold Tacos, the Choke-Hold Chicken Platter, Suplex Salads, and Hammerlock Hamburgers. For dessert, there was always the DDT Delight and Piledriver Pie. If that wasn't enough, every meal was prepared by short-order cooks in Mexican wrestling masks, and situated in the center of the restaurant was a wrestling ring full of wild wrestling action. Gorilla definitely believed in doing things his own way.

In that very same ring, Gertie Lundquist's body rested inside what some would say was the tackiest thing they would ever lay their eyes on, while others appreciated its beauty. The center of a wrestling ring may not seem a fitting place for a funeral, but there weren't many choices in town. The only real church in Promise was run by a tiny handful of Baptists, and Gertie never saw eye to eye with them. It was either the laundromat, or Gorilla's, and Gertie liked wrestling far more than doing laundry.

For many in Promise, Gorilla's was the closest thing they had to a church. The establishment served as more than just a place to eat greasy food while looking at Gorilla's missing body parts in jars of formaldehyde behind the bar; it served as a makeshift city hall (fitting, since Gorilla was mayor), church (fitting, since Gorilla served as pastor), and firehouse (fitting, since Gorilla was the head of the Promise Volunteer Fire Department). The wrestling ring not only saw some of the finest midget wrestling in the region—it also saw marriages, baptisms, and for the first time, a funeral.

0004 Grizz climbed into the ring, towering over the podium. At six foot nine, it didn't take much to figure out why he was called Grizz. Even the tallest student in Gorilla's wrestling school looked up to him; he outweighed most of the heavyweights who worked hard to tip the scales. He was like an oak tree with a thick, red beard and long hair. He was stocky enough to appear fat, but anyone dumb enough to sucker-punch him in a barroom brawl quickly found out that under enough fat to keep him warm during winter, was a grizzled mass of muscle tougher than a side of beef. His kindness knew no boundaries, but piss him off and he had it in him to put down even the toughest guy with one bear-like swat of his hand.

He tapped the microphone. "Is this thing on?" he said, then paused for a moment. "I always wanted to do that..."

He was stalling for time. He hadn't prepared, or even thought about what he would say about Gertie. The crowd, knowing how hard it was for their friend, was more than patient. He finally summoned the courage to begin.

"Ol' Gert loved to laugh. And damn, what an annoying laugh it was."

In the front row, ten-year-old Sammy Bozenko began laughing. Grizz caught sight of his mother, Betty, pinching his leg in an effort to get him to stop.

"That's okay, Betty—I think she'd want us all to laugh. And you gotta admit, her laugh was the most annoying thing any of us will hear in our whole lives!"

This was true. The laugh started out somewhere between the sound of a Canadian goose being choked and an antique car horn, until degenerating into the sound of a rusty nail being pulled from a board. When Gertie lost herself in uncontrollable laughter, it usually resulted in a several minute long coughing fit, causing her face to turn bright red, and her eyes to tear up. It was a laugh more annoying than yapping Chihuahuas.

"I sure miss hearing it, but ya know, it's always right here." Grizz placed his hand over his heart and smiled. "And if it wasn't so damned annoying, it would be easy to forget, so I'm glad it drove us all nuts 'cause that means none of us will ever forget Ol' Gert at her best. And that's the way she'd want it."

He looked at the casket, admiring his work, then looked up and smiled. "Guess I ain't got much more to say other than I love her and miss the hell out of her."

“Anyone else wants to say something, go ahead,” he said. Then the tears came.

Few things are harder to watch to weather-hardened men of the Northwoods than one of their own breaking down in tears, and harder still is it for them to show emotion, so when Harvey Beacham walked to the podium, hugged Grizz, and said, “It’s okay, Grizz,” there wasn’t a dry eye in the house. Even Ryan, who knew none of the people in the restaurant, was swept up in the sentiment and found himself searching for something with which he could use to wipe his eyes.

After Harvey helped Grizz to his seat, all was silent. In his soft-spoken, straight-to-the-point kind of way, Grizz said all there was to say about Gertie; nobody could say things any better. Still, there was a feeling in the crowd that somebody had to say something, or else Grizz might take the silence as nobody caring about his departed wife. In tense times, the town knew Sheriff Ed Littleton could be counted on, and the room shared in a soft sigh of relief as he got up and made his way to the podium to speak.

Sheriff Littleton was born and raised in The Area. All he ever wanted to do was keep the town the same great place he remembered while growing up. At forty-five, he looked ten years younger. He was single and handsome, with rugged features tamed by kind eyes. He was revered in town, and even rough and tumble men were known to become giddy in his presence. With the exception of time away in college pursuing dual degrees (criminal justice and psychology), he never left town. He was Promise’s Prodigal Son.

“Brian said it best,” Sheriff Littleton started. He addressed everyone by their first name—nickname or not. Everybody in Promise seemed to have a nickname.

“I think if we all talked about our good memories of Gertie, we’d be here for weeks, and if we talked about our bad memories, this service would have ended before it began.” He looked at the casket, half-laughing. Then he looked at Ryan.

“We have a new person in town, and I wish he had the chance to have met Gertie and known just what type of person we’re honoring here today. I think—to me—it can best be summed up in a little story.”

Motioning to the muskie painted on the casket, he continued. “I had the honor of being with Gertie and Brian the day she finally caught Big Ralph, there.”

Big Ralph was a local muskie legend, every lake in the Northwoods has one—a muskie so huge, it defies nature. In most cases, they don’t exist, but Gertie Lundquist proved the legend of Mirror Lake was anything but a fish story.

“The instant Big Ralph hit her line,” said the sheriff, “she knew what was on the other end. ‘Holy— Brain! Eddie! It’s him! It’s Big Ralph!’”

Sheriff Littleton followed his impersonation up with the best rendition of Gertie's laugh anyone ever heard. Everyone, including Ryan—who now understood just how dreadful the laugh was—broke into laughter. The sheriff stood at the podium, pantomiming the whole incident.

““Oh, crap—spilled my beer!”” he said in falsetto, drawing more laughter. He fought with an invisible fishing pole, running back and forth, doing the laugh the entire time. People were doubled over, holding their bellies and gasping for air.

Then Littleton's face went calm; he acted like he was Gertie looking down into the water, staring into the eyes of an angel. He reached into the imaginary lake and struggled to pick up the huge invisible fish. As he rocked back to get its tail in the boat, people saw just how big Big Ralph must have been. He pretended to cry.

““He's beautiful! Just beautiful!”” said Littleton. He slipped out of character and went back to his roll as narrator. “That's when Brian asked her if she'd have Big Ralph stuffed and mounted.”

““Oh, no,”” he said, back in Gertie's voice. ““I've waited my whole life for this moment, and I don't want to remember it by looking above my fireplace and knowing I killed something so perfect. I'm done fishing, honey. Now I'll just come out here and relax, knowing he's down there for real. That's good enough for me...””

There was a tear in Littleton's eye as he finished. “She took the lure from Big Ralph's mouth and kissed him. I know it sounds funny, but it really seemed like that fish understood what was happening. She put him back in the lake and watched him slowly swim away. That's the kind of person Gertie was, and I'm a better person having known her. She'll be missed”

The crowd smiled and nodded in agreement. Everything that could be said about her was best said by the sheriff and her husband. Gorilla honored Grizz's request to allow everyone to reflect on Gertie's life in their own way, and not make it a religious service. After a couple quiet minutes, Gorilla clapped his hands and said, “All right, then. Let's eat!”

Somewhere up above an airbrushed casket in the middle of a wrestling ring, and just below a twelve foot fiberglass Gorilla in a greasy apron, Gertie Lundquist had to be looking down and loving every minute of her funeral.

That's just the kind of person she was...

CHAPTER TWO

As everyone took their seat, Ryan felt like the new kid in a new school, entering the lunchroom for the very first time. Even in such a small town, it was clear everyone had their own circle of friends. Ryan wasn't sure which circle to approach, so when Grizz slapped him on the back and said, "You can sit with us if you want," he was relieved he didn't have to decide for himself.

"Us" consisted of Grizz; Sheriff Littleton; Gorilla and his son, Michael; Harvey Beacham; and the town matriarch, ninety-nine-year-old Beatrice Lingren. Ryan was already sitting at the "cool" table. He took his seat and noticed all eyes in the restaurant were on him.

"They've all seen your show," Gorilla said. "You're the biggest celebrity we've seen up here."

"I'm hardly a celebrity, but thank you," Ryan said.

Beatrice squinted and looked Ryan's way. "Is this the cook?"

Grizz answered loudly, so she could hear. "Yep, that's him, Bea!"

"Tell him I've seen his show and I'm glad to know him."

"Thank you!" Ryan said, trying to match the level of intensity Grizz used when speaking with Beatrice.

"Your wife is pretty," Harvey said. The statement sat on Ryan's chest like a cruel big brother—it was a one-two punch. First, it came out of nowhere, Harvey was talking about Francesca as though Ryan were still married to her. Second, it was the first time Ryan really had a chance to talk with Harvey; up until the moment, he thought maybe Harvey was just a little slow. Ryan was left wondering just how slow Harvey really was.

"We're divorced," Ryan said. The blank look on Harvey's face told Ryan his answer didn't quite register. It was like talking to a vacuum. "We're no longer together."

"Oh, well I like knowing a big TV star," Harvey said. "And I still think your wife is pretty."

Ryan nodded and said "thank you," again.

"What did he say?" Beatrice said.

"Thank you!" Grizz replied.

Beatrice laughed. "He sure says 'thank you' a lot." It was like she was talking about a person not even there. Had she not been talking about him, Ryan would have thought he was being ignored by Beatrice. "Not a lot of people stop and thank people anymore. Everyone's in such a hurry these days, they forget that manners can get you places."

Ryan thought about how well mannered he was and how those manners got in the way. He was anything but assertive; how he made it in the restaurant industry was beyond him. The show's success he attributed to Francesca, but before he ever met her, he'd made a name for himself by heading two Chicago restaurants that may not have been the talk of the Tribune and the Times, but he was the talk among the trades. His restaurants didn't have the gimmick factor to be the buzz of the town, but those in the know knew few people did traditional French and Italian like Ryan.

Except Francesca Barsanti.

Francesca was the talk of the town *and* the talk of the trades. She had the hip edge Ryan daydreamed about if only he were a little more driven. His manners prevented him from stepping out beyond the comfort zone of traditional; he felt most gimmicks had been done, and to mimic others would be stepping on somebody else's fingers. Francesca didn't mind stepping on fingers, toes—even kicking people in the ass to get what she wanted. Hearing about Ryan's traditional cuisine, she wanted to see what made two modest locations with no gimmicks rise above other restaurants in a city full of flair.

A waitress told Ryan there was a woman in the dining room asking for a recommendation from the chef. It was late enough in the evening that Ryan's restaurant, Piazza di Spagna, was coming to life, but still early enough that Ryan could find the time to make a recommendation to an interested customer. He knew Francesca the moment he saw her, and as he walked to her table, he thought about the best dish he could place before her.

"Good evening, Ms. Barsanti," he said. "It's a pleasure to have you in my restaurant."

Francesca looked up at him with eyes so dark, they seemed to absorb any sparkle. She said nothing, and Ryan found himself feeling self-conscious.

“I was told you wanted a recommendation. Is there any particular dish you had in mind?”

She smiled and said, “Surprise me.”

While most chefs would have rushed to the kitchen to throw together their best gimmick—something nobody else in a city serving a million things had on the menu—Ryan indeed surprised Francesca when he brought her a salad and warm bread, making sure to tell her the olive oil in the dressing came from Sicily, the balsamic vinegar Tuscany, and the bread made on site, baked in a brick oven. The main course was spaghetti and sauce, served with a glass of Fonterutoli Chianti.

“I must admit, Mr. Shiflitt,” Francesca said when he presented the dish, “I was expecting more than spaghetti.”

“But you’re surprised,” he said. It was a statement, not a question; he surprised himself with his confidence.

Francesca smiled and said, “Yes, I am.”

She didn’t use a spoon, she simply twirled the pasta on the fork as Ryan told her the pasta, like the bread and most everything else in his restaurant, was homemade. She took a bite and paused, savoring the flavors like a sommelier. She swallowed and paused, then took a forkful of just the sauce. Ryan waited. Finally, she broke off a piece of bread and sopped up some sauce. She looked lost in a memory as she chewed.

“Still surprised?” Ryan said.

“That’s incredible!”

“If you think that’s something, you need to stop by Chez Vous sometime and try the rack of lamb.

It seemed like such a great start. Ryan spent a lot of time trying to figure out where it all went wrong.

“So what brings you up here, Ryan?” Grizz said. The bluntness of the statement surprised Ryan.

“It just seemed to be the right time for a change.”

“I don’t see someone who hosted a successful TV show moving out to the middle of nowhere,” Grizz said. It didn’t seem as blunt as his previous statement to Ryan; in fact, there seemed to be genuine concern in Grizz’s voice. “People move up here to hide from someone, to get away from something bugging them, or to lose themselves in their thoughts.”

Ryan was amazed that a complete stranger could be so dead-on. He always dreamed about moving to the Northwoods, but he knew he was running from something and looking for an answer to a hidden question he pushed somewhere deep down inside himself.

“I guess I’m guilty of those last two things.”

“Most of us are,” Grizz continued. He smiled and said, “You’ll fit in well.”

It was nice hearing that. Ryan was concerned he’d be viewed as an outsider, a yuppie moving to the middle of nowhere and expecting all his dreams to come true. Of course, that’s why Ryan moved so far north—all he wanted to do was take it easy, fix up an old house, and enjoy life. He was through worrying about a kitchen and keeping a TV show and marriage to somebody who didn’t really love him going. He was happy when food was finally brought to the table and everyone’s attention turned to The Top Rope Special, instead of him.

The Top Rope Special was Gertie’s favorite meal, primarily consisting of The Sleeper, a cheeseburger so gigantic, all you wanted to do after finishing the thing was sleep all day. It took hold of your gut like an Iron Claw and wouldn’t let go. When it finally did break free, you wondered why you ate the thing in the first place and promised yourself you’d never eat another. But a week later—there you were—doing it all over again.

You needed a knife and fork to cleanly eat it, but it was served without the benefit of utensils. There wasn’t much room for anything else on the plate, but Gorilla always squeezed a large helping of Figure-Four French Fries alongside the burger, and to wash it down, he included a bottle of Bodyslam Brew (or Ropeburn Root Beer for the kiddies), both brewed by hand in the back.

Serving the meal were wrestlers dressed in full gear. Many came to train at Gorilla Zilligan’s Wrestling Academy, held in the restaurant each afternoon. When the highway fell through, many stayed, waiting tables, cooking meals, and washing dishes in exchange for lessons with Gorilla during the day. There were even matches every Friday evening, just to a much smaller crowd than originally anticipated before the highway was rerouted.

Ryan watched how everyone else at the table approached the huge cheeseburger and quickly realized no one cared how big a mess you made. He admired the raw power of the meal—no gimmicks, just juicy meat and crisp fries the way intended. Ryan had seen cheeseburgers served so many ways; it was a treat seeing a piece of toxic orange American cheese melting atop almost a whole pound of succulent cow instead of blue cheese on buffalo meat. A white bread bun topped with sesame seeds soaking up all the juices and ooze like a sponge instead of an artisan bread roll topped with poppy seeds. A burger the way they were meant to be served and savored.

He looked around at other tables and watched as mustard, catsup, and pickle juice rolled off people's chins, then wiped clean with the back of a hand, or a handful of napkins. It seemed like the perfect little community; everyone appeared to be in the company of the best friends they ever had. Even with a casket in the middle of a wrestling ring in a restaurant, Ryan thought "Perfection" would have been a better name for the town than "Promise." The same strange kind of thing he'd write about, if only given the opportunity.

After washing down a bite of the Sleeper with a swig of beer and wiping his chin clean with his hand, he took a better look around. The social order of the town lay before him—everyone clustered in their own little groups.

"Is this everyone in town?" he said.

"Pretty much," Sheriff Littleton said. "There are a few people who refused to come because they didn't approve of the location for the funeral, but otherwise, this is pretty much Promise in all its glory."

0008 Gorilla looked around and nodded as though he were taking a headcount. "Well, I don't see Barb over at the PWBBC table. And Allison is still out of town."

"What's that?" Ryan asked.

"What's what," Gorilla said.

"The PW-whatever thing?"

"That's just what we jokingly call them." He pointed to a table full of women, most of them pregnant, or coddling newborns. "Stands for Promise Wisconsin Baby Birthing Club. They make babies faster than I make burgers!"

The PWBBC accounted for roughly forty-five percent of the town's population. While they produced offspring at such an alarming rate (there was a time for their "leader," Barb Babitzke, when childbirth was an annual event for six years), taking care of their babies after they grew out of the cute phase was another story. It seemed—in their perfect little world—that once a child was able to walk on its own, they were left to their own devices. If it cooed, gurgled, or writhed around in their arms, they loved it, but once a child was big enough to get into the poisons beneath the sink, or wander out the back door unattended, all parental responsibility seemed null and void. By that time, they were hard at work figuring out how to convince their husbands and boyfriends that they needed another little miracle to care for and give their lives meaning.

The six members ranged in age from sixteen to fifty-seven. Their oldest member, Vicky Barefoot—the only black person living in Promise—was unable to conceive. Still, it was the thought that counted with the PWBBC; Vicky wanted a child more than anything, only she was barren, and her husband—the local garbage man, Hibe Hanuk—

was shooting blanks. That didn't stop her, however, from keeping on top of the latest methods in fertility, "just in case..."

Even in the midst of a funeral, the women were hard at work passing snapshots of their children and grandchildren around. The only picture youngest member Anika Kivari had was a sonogram, but she passed it around with a sense of pride as swollen as her belly where the baby grew. Her boyfriend, Scotty Craddock, didn't like her hanging out with the group, due to that "cross-breeding nigger," but Anika felt sorry for Vicky and didn't care what color she was. She wanted to be a mother just like everybody else seated at the table—that's all that mattered.

"Would you believe four women at that table are responsible for twenty-five kids in this town?" Grizz said. "One of them never had a kid and never will, and the youngest is just warming up. If she takes after her heroes, there, she'll have more than she can handle by the time she hits twenty."

Ryan didn't know what to say, other than, "That's sad."

"You betcha it's sad. The saddest thing is they don't take care of what they leave behind." Gorilla pointed to the "Kid's Table."

The Kid's Table consisted of the PWBBC's mistakes. Anyone who believes troubled teens only exist in inner cities would be smacked in the face with a hearty helping of reality upon their first visit to Promise. For most adults, Promise was the perfect Norman Rockwell town, a place where time stood still and the "good old days" never vanished into the shadows. For young children, it was a wonderful place to play and grow, full of marshes, fields, and trees just waiting to be climbed. But for a teenager, Promise, Wisconsin was a trap.

There wasn't much for a sixteen-year-old to do in town but drink, do drugs, and fuck. By the time most of the boys graduated high school (*if* they graduated high school), they were responsible for at least one child they didn't want, and figured the best way to deal with it was leave town and never look back. The only graduation for most of the girls was membership into the PWBBC.

Ryan was uncomfortable talking about unwanted children, their mothers, and lack of fathers who brought them into the world. He noticed a man wearing a long-sleeved shirt in the back corner, sitting by himself and eating something different.

"Who's that guy sitting alone?"

"That's Earl...he's the bug guy," Harvey said, as if that clarified it. .

"The Bug Guy" was a fitting description of Earl Lankford. The top of Earl's head was completely bald, but two tufts of blonde hair stuck out just above his ears. He

groomed the locks religiously; when slicked back and sculpted to the side of his head, the color matched his skin tone, so it was hard to tell where flesh ended and hair began. The ensuing result was a head that looked abnormally wide, like a praying mantis. His face was covered in scar tissue, pocked and raised like it had melted and been refrozen, like stale ice cream. His skin hugged his skull tightly, making his mouth and chin look absurdly small, like mandibles. Factor in large, thick glasses even Elton John would envy, and it only made him look more creepy and buglike.

His appearance was just one of the reasons he was called “The Bug Guy” by Promise’s inhabitants. Earl was an entomologist—he spent his college years at the University of Kentucky with a blood alcohol content higher than his GPA. Long out of college, he was now able to devote all his spare time to drinking and studying insects.

“Creepy son of a cuss, eh?” Gorilla said.

Earl was working on a piece of Piledriver Pie, the biggest, goopiest, sugary pecan pie known to man. It was Gorilla’s pride and joy. He tried trademarking it, but with a wrestling move and alcoholic drink sharing the same name, he had to settle for its reputation as its claim to fame. Many of Gorilla’s customers suggested mass producing the things, but Gorilla refused, seeing it as potential for restaurant visitors. “They want one, I don’t care where in the world they live, they’ll have to come to my restaurant to get one!” he’d say. To make the trek more appealing, he had a stock of T-shirts reading, “I Survived the Piledriver!” that would be free to anyone who could eat a whole pie in a sitting.

Earl owned every shirt.

On a daily basis, Earl ate an entire pie in a sitting and washed it down with several beers, although one would never guess it by examining his rail-thin body. He only took a break when lighting another Lucky Strike, or to scrawl a quick note in a journal he carried everywhere he went.

“All he eats is sugar and beer,” Grizz said. “He’s like a walking cockroach!”

For some strange reason, Ryan felt the need to defend Earl. “That’s hardly a reason to ignore someone.”

Gorilla laughed and said, “I don’t ignore him. He’s one of my best customers and a child of God. But the rest of town can’t stand the guy.”

“Why’s that?”

“He’s the reason this town never reached its full potential,” Grizz said.

That was a heavy burden to place on someone, Ryan thought. He wondered what Earl had done to stir up such animosity in such seemingly friendly folks.

Sheriff Littleton told the story.

“They were going to build a road through town that would bring tourists in. People like Gorilla, here, were banking on it. When they started clearing timber, a crew found a cave—“

“Tell him how!” Harvey interrupted.

“I’m getting there,” Littleton said. He continued. “A bulldozer broke through the ground and fell into a cave—no one around here knew about the thing. We called in a rescue team to retrieve the bulldozer operator’s body—“

“Tell him who one of the rescuers was!” Ryan could tell interrupting people was one of Harvey Beacham’s talents.

Grizz looked at him. “Would you like to tell the story, Harv?”

“Oh, no...Eddie tells it better than me. I’m no good at telling stories, ya know...”

“Then maybe you should let him finish, buddy,” Grizz said.

Sheriff Littleton continued. “One of the rescuers was Earl’s brother, Jimmy. They were able to retrieve the body, and when they did the autopsy on the guy, it was clear he died from head trauma—“

“That’s cause his head was all bashed in and his brains were everywhere!” Harvey said, drawing a table full of stares. He looked around and said, “Go ahead, Eddie, I’ll be good.”

“Anyway, I was present for the examination and we noticed his body was covered with tiny welts, like something stung it repeatedly. I asked Jimmy if they saw anything in the cave—“

Harvey interrupted Littleton again, unable to contain himself. “And they did, too! Tell him what he said, Eddie. And do the funny accent.”

“I plan to, Harvey.” In his best Kentucky accent, Sheriff Littleton impersonated Jimmy. “We done saw a whole mess of these white-ass beetles. They was everywhere! Covering the floor—covering the walls. My brother knows everything there is to know about bugs, but I ain’t never heard him talk about nothing like that. They was creepy!”

Littleton looked directly into Ryan’s eyes. “Two days later, Jimmy and the other rescuers were dead.”

“What happened?”

“The beetles,” said Littleton. “All three fellas cramped up like they had appendicitis, or something—then they got fevers. We got them to a hospital, and they pumped them full of antivenin and calcium gluconate, but it was no help. The next day they could hardly breathe or talk. Before we knew it, they all got the shakes and died. There was no stopping it.”

“When Earl got the news, he came up from Kentucky for the funeral. He and his brother did a lot of caving together, and he volunteered to go down and get a specimen...sort of a way to avenge his brother’s death. He came out with one of the beetles and studied it. Turns out it was a new species. Earl named them *Lacteus Crustaearli*—“

“We call them Earl Bugs!” Harvey said.

“That doesn’t explain how he ruined the town, though.” Ryan was almost feeling sorry for Earl, when Grizz cut to the chase.

“He got the government to protect the damn things under the Endangered Species Act. They only exist here—and with them being protected—work on the highway stopped and was rerouted. We used to have a couple thousand people living here, but once those things started coming around, most people moved.

“Earl’s been put in charge of studying the beetles and working with some people at the university, developing an antidote,” Gorilla said. “He gets grant money, but all I’ve ever seen him spend it on is pie and beer.”

Harvey, who previously seemed harmless said, “Hopefully one day an Earl-Bug will bite him and he’ll die...then we can just burn the cave and kill them all.”

Ryan didn’t know what to say. The realtor obviously left any mention of poisonous bugs out when she showed Ryan the town. He didn’t give it much thought as he drove around the main part of Promise—he just assumed the quiet streets meant most people worked in other towns offering better opportunities. He didn’t think there was a need to say, “Is the town empty because it’s infested by poisonous, cave-dwelling beetles?” He just wanted a nice two-story Victorian in a quiet little corner of the Northwoods.

“Where’s the cave? Is it near my house?”

“Out that way, yeah,” Sheriff Littleton said. “But there’s nothing to worry about. The bugs don’t stray very far from the cave. Nobody’s died since the cave was discovered. The town’s safe, but a lot of people panicked and moved on.”

Ryan wasn’t sure if it was another line, like the realtor, or if the sheriff was telling him the truth.

“Look on the bright side,” Gorilla said. “You got a grand old house for a steal.”

How could he have been so stupid, Ryan thought. All the warning signs were there, but he strolled into town and bought the biggest house on the hill overlooking Promise. The thought of a cave full of poisonous bugs was almost too much to take in; he sympathized with the people of Promise and quickly found himself hating Earl without even hearing his side of things.

Ryan was thinking about Earl Lankford studying the bugs when Harvey said, “Maybe one day an Earl Bug will bite Earl and he’ll die...then we can just burn the cave and kill them all.” Maybe it was a delayed reaction, but it almost seemed like Harvey was reading Ryan’s mind. Ryan suddenly found Harvey’s presence unsettling. Ryan was thinking about the best way to excuse himself from the funeral and go home when Barb Babitzke entered Gorilla’s, looking like a ghost. The PWBBC waved her over, but she rushed straight to Sheriff Littleton’s side.

“Eddie, something bad has happened,” she said. “Something really bad happened to Billy!”

“Whoa! Slow down, Barb,” Littleton said. “Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and tell me what’s wrong.”

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. When she opened them, she said, “Eddie, I think someone killed Billy!”

CHAPTER THREE

Billy was Bonnie and Bobby Babitzke's oldest son (they had ten living children—all boys—all with names beginning with "B": Billy, Bradley, Brian, Bert, Bernie, Barry, Brandon, Brett, Brent, and Bobby Junior). There were five years between Billy and Bradley, but after that, children flowed from Barb's womb like water. With a five year head start, Billy had more time than his younger siblings to grow mean and figure out ways in and out of trouble. Billy Babitke was the scourge of Promise, Wisconsin. People hated him even more than for Earl the Bug Guy.

It first became evident Billy was a problem when he was seven, although in hindsight, there were plenty of hints that chilled Barb when she reflected on them. For no apparent reason, he beat up his eleven-year-old neighbor, Peter Melofsky, leaving him hospitalized and comatose for over a month. While it's no surprise to anyone when young boys get in a scuffle, the method and ferocity of the attack left even Larry Soucek—a medic in Vietnam who thought he'd seen it all—sick to his stomach.

Peter, on his way home from a friend's house one night, was attacked by Billy. Billy set up an ambush. When Peter passed by, Billy hit him in the back of the head with a large, metal flashlight. The initial blow was enough to knock Peter off his bike and to the pavement, where Billy quickly went to work.

The first two swings to Peter's face were enough to silence him, knocking him out so he at least didn't feel the vicious beating that followed. The third hit turned the light on, so with each subsequent blow, light flashed across Peter's face, revealing the scene in a gruesome, strobe-like glow. Each time the light met with Peter's face, more blood flashed before Billy's eyes, sending him deeper into his frenzy. It's not known how many times Billy hit Peter, but he worked Peter's face, neck, and head into an unidentifiable pulp, the like surgeons in the area said they'd never seen.

By the time Larry Soucek topped the hill in his '72 Chevy C10 pickup and saw Billy beating Peter in the glow of his headlights, Peter was near death. It still turns Larry's stomach to tell the tale of what he saw that night.

"I came over the hill in my truck, just in time to see the Babitzke kid standing over Peter. He was crouched over him with that flashlight in both hands, high above his

head, getting ready to come down with all his might. My headlights scared him, though, and the little fucker threw the flashlight at my windshield and took off running into the woods. I woulda chased him down, but Peter needed my help more than Billy needed catching. I saw some sick things in 'Nam, but looking down at that kid's face and not even knowing who it was, or if he was even alive...I just don't wanna talk about it no more..."

Larry saved Peter's life, but some think he would have been better off dying. In the years that followed, Peter never did regain basic functions, like speech, sight, hearing, and walking. Since Billy was only seven, there was really nothing authorities could do to him; he was forced to see a psychologist, but that was it. When asked why he attacked Peter, he simply said, "I felt like it." As he grew older, there were many more wicked things Billy did, just because he felt like it. The most notable event was on the Fourth of July, 1998, when Billy came close to burning Promise down. It wasn't his intent to start a raging fire, but he viewed the turn of events as a pleasant surprise and claimed he planned an attack on town all along.

Billy had prior run-ins with the law; most of them, tied to attacks against the Melofskys. As Billy got older and continued his reign of terror on the family, Sheriff Littleton finally had the power to do something. Though Billy never did anything remotely as brutal as the initial attack on Peter, he didn't let up hassling the Melofskys. Littleton was not about to have people in his town living in fear, and when Billy was caught spray painting "DIE, FUCKERS!" on the Melofsky's garage door, Billy was finally old enough to see some time behind locked doors. Littleton had no problem convincing a court that juvenile detention might give Billy a glimpse into his bleak future and scare him straight. Billy vowed to "get even" with Littleton and the Melofskys as he was taken away in a county cruiser.

For awhile after his release on his sixteenth birthday, it appeared Billy was going to become a productive member of the Promise family. He appeared to be a new person, but on that Fourth of July, the old Billy Babitzke came calling...

His plan was simple: kill the Melofsky's cat and leave pieces of it on their porch, along with note scrawled in its blood reading, "YOU'RE NEXT!" When given the chance to get in touch with his primal side, Billy liked going over the top. In this case, "over the top" involved a Pepsi can, aluminum tape, black gun powder, and Chunko, the Melofsky's beloved pet cat.

The Fourth of July meant fireworks, and Billy's preferred explosive was the M-80. He loved reminding his younger brothers "That's a quarter stick of dynamite, bitches!" as he hurled them at his fleeing, terrified siblings. He was never good at math, but he knew if the M-80 rumor were actually true, if he could get four of them to blow at the same time, it would have the same result as a full stick of dynamite. That was precisely the result needed to blow the Melofsky's cat to bits.

To test his theory, he wrapped four M-80s together with tape and tied the fuses together. He dug a small hole in the ground, buried his project, lit the fuse, and ran like hell.

BOOM!!!

It sounded good, but when he rushed back to the blast-zone, there was only a small, smoldering hole—definitely not enough to scatter Chunko all over Miller’s Grove, where he planned to do the deed.

He tried other things, including more than four M-80s, before realizing he’d been lied to for years. Four M-80s did not equal a stick of dynamite—at least the way Billy envisioned a stick of dynamite blowing. On the evening of the third of July, he broke into a fireworks stand and made off with their entire stock: M-80s: bricks of Black Cats, bottle rockets, Roman Candles, and artillery shells. The good stuff!

That night, with the aid of the X-Acto knife he carried around with him at all times, he carefully cut open a seemingly endless supply of fireworks and emptied the contents into the Pepsi can. It took all night, but by early morning, he succeeded in filling the can with powder. To make sure it would have the result he wanted, he threw in some nails for good measure. He slid several feet of fuse through the top, and went to work with the tape. He wrapped the whole thing in several rolls of aluminum tape, until it was round and roughly the size of a sixteen-inch softball. With a black marker, he proudly wrote “M-8000” on the side, and went to sleep with his creation.

Billy awoke on the afternoon of the Fourth, put the M-8000 and a roll of tape in a gym bag, and went off to find the Melofsky’s cat. Chunko was in his favorite place, catching some sun between the Melofsky’s garage and their neighbor’s house. Billy put the bag down, knowing he would have to rush Chunko; the sight of any of the Babitzke boys (especially Billy), made the cat run for cover. Anyone else, and the cat would initiate contact in the hope of a good head scratch, or at the very least, a leg to rub against, but the only contact in the past with Billy’s leg involved cruelty.

Time spent stalking around people’s houses at night taught Billy how to move silently, but sneaking up on a cat was a far cry from sneaking up to Jodie Zuelig’s window to watch her change into a nightshirt. Billy let his feral instincts take over; by the time Chunko opened his eyes, Billy was leaping forward, and the cat had no chance of escape. He grabbed Chunko by the tail, put the cat in his gym bag, and made his way to Miller’s Grove.

He trudged through the high weeds, until reaching a clearing near some trees. He set the bag down and watched it move for a moment—then he put his plan to action. Zipping the bag open just enough to reach inside, he fought with Chunko’s claws until getting a hold at the nape of his neck; the scratches received only fueled Billy’s anger.

Billy planned ahead, folding a corner of the tape over so he could start the roll in the bag with no problem. Within moments, he had the M-8000 taped to Chunko. He finished opening the bag, emptying the cat and improvised bomb to the ground. With a smile, he touched the end of his cigarette to the fuse and ran like hell.

“Happy Fourth of July!” he shouted.

KA-BOOM!!!

Billy planned well, but failed to give himself full credit for the skill in which he could manufacture explosives on the fly. He thought he'd be clear of the blast, but when he regained consciousness he realized just how wrong he was. He was face down near some trees. The taste of blood filled his mouth and dripped down his throat—the ringing in his ears would drive him mad for weeks. His tongue felt the size of a softball.

Billy stood up, rubbed the back of his head to get his bearings, and almost passed out again when he realized two nails were lodged in the back of his neck. About the only sense not momentarily knocked out by the blast was his sense of smell. Billy smelled smoke, and when he turned around, he saw Miller's Grove burning.

He shoved the front of his shirt into his mouth and pressed his bloody tongue against it, hoping to stop the bleeding. He looked for a piece of Chunko's remains to put on the Melofsky's front porch, but there were none to be found. The cat was gone, but later found safe at home; the only damage was some missing fur where the Chunko had pulled free from the tape and ran like hell!

Billy started back home, but walking was not an easy task. His jeans were shredded and charred—nails peppered his legs. Some nails went in deep, point first, while others hit hard enough sideways to still find a home in the top layers of his skin. He pressed on, but tripped in the small crater left by the blast.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Goddamn, fuckin' cat!” he shouted. *“FUUUUUUCK!”*

In Billy's mind, it was all Chunko's fault. He ran up to the side of the crater and kicked it, hoping to vent his anger and release some pain, but it resulted in a broken toe instead. He staggered home in time to hear fire engines from neighboring towns coming to Promise's aid.

When it was all over, two houses on the outskirts of town were burned to the ground, and three others suffered heavy water damage from extinguishing the blaze. Metzler's Dairy Farm was reduced to scorched milk pumps and charred cows. Miller's Grove, and a good part of the forest beyond, was razed. It didn't take anyone more than an instant to realize it had to be the work of Billy Babitzke. This time, he served in juvenile detention until his eighteenth birthday.

Now, at the age of twenty-one, it was feared (by Barb, at least), that Billy Babitzke was dead. Many of those trying to eavesdrop on the conversation hoped they were

hearing the truth. Whether he was dead, or missing, it didn't matter; either scenario would do, just as long as Promise was finally free from Billy's torment.

Sheriff Littleton, though, was genuinely concerned about Billy's well-being. Littleton believed in the system. People served time behind bars to think about what they did wrong, and whether it took one visit to the bighouse, or several, most people realized where they faltered and changed for the better. It was not the Sheriff's duty to judge and hold one to previous actions.

After his release from juvenile detention, Billy wasn't as much a problem. He got into random trouble, but Littleton was always able to make peace. The sheriff believed in giving people the benefit of the doubt; he believed in always trying to see the silver lining behind the cloud—even a cloud as dark and thick as Promise's least-favorite son.

“Now what makes you think Billy's been killed, Barb? You didn't find a body, did you now?”

“Oh, no! No, Eddie—no body.”

Littleton put his hand on her shoulder. “Good, then there's hope things won't be so bad. Let's go to my office and talk.” Ryan saw the two walk behind the bar and disappear through a door in the back.

* * *

Everyone wondered if it was true—could Billy really have been murdered? Through the years, Promise definitely saw more than its fair share of felons and troublemakers, but no one ever played even a distant role in murder. It was clear to those standing around that if Billy really were dead, it had to be the work of outside forces.

Harvey was the first to say something. “You really think Billy coulda been killed, Grizz?”

“If anyone in town was gonna be on the receiving end of a murder, it would definitely be Billy,” said Lonnie Frealo, Dave Melofsky's best friend, “but anyone in this town who would have killed Billy would have done it already. Maybe it was someone outside town—Billy got around.”

Already, people were speaking of Billy in the past tense. Kelly Novak was overheard saying, “I sure hope it's not true. Billy was a good kid.” Never mind she usually led the charge when the opportunity to bad-mouth Billy came around.

Gorilla put things back on track. “I don't think this is the time and place to talk like this, folks.” He cocked his head back toward the wrestling ring.

Everyone remembered why they were gathered in Gorilla's; most looked back at the casket with a pang of guilt, while others looked down, ashamed that the sick hope Billy was dead got the best of them. One of the nicest people they'd ever met was no longer with them, and there they were, speculating about the possible death of someone none of them cared for. Harvey looked at Grizz and apologized for the entire group.

"I think this party's just about over, ya know?" Grizz said. "Thank you all for coming, and I'll seeya when I seeya."

Most had not even finished their meal, but they knew it was time to clear out of Gorilla's. Some paid one last respect to Gert. Ryan fought back a smirk each time he saw someone genuflect before the wrestling ring. Others just bowed their head in a quick goodbye, or silent prayer.

Grizz met each person at the door as they left, thanking them for attending. He did his best to send them away smiling, the way Gertie would have wanted. It was hard not to smile when looking the big guy in the face, seeing it crinkle up in a warm grin. He was strength personified.

On her way out, instead of offering her condolences to Grizz, Kelly Novak looked back at Sheriff Littleton's office and said, "Wonder what's going on back there?" She didn't get a smile from Grizz. She made a bee-line for her car so she could rush home, get on the phone, and gossip.

Ryan was one of the last to leave, mainly because he was stalling in the hope Grizz would be pulled aside, or end up chatting with someone long enough for him to sneak by. He was out of luck, though, and to stick around any longer would be more awkward than telling someone he didn't know, "Sorry your wife died..."

Ryan got as far as "Sorry—" before Grizz shook his hand and nodded, letting him know words were not expected.

"Glad you made it," Grizz said. "I appreciate it."

"Thank you..."

He heard Beatrice behind him, chuckling as he left.

"That boy and his thank you's..."

* * *

Back in his office, Sheriff Littleton handed a cup of tea to Barb.

"That'll help calm your nerves."

"This is all my fault," she said, beginning to cry.

"Now don't go beating yourself up."

"I could have stopped it. I always knew he was bad, but I didn't stop it, even when I could have."

Sheriff Littleton pulled a Kleenex from a box on his desk and handed it to Barb. "Here ya go. Wipe your eyes and tell me what you mean?"

She blew her nose, sniffled, and went on. "Eddie, I never told this to anyone, but I know I can trust you. You remember when Benjamin died?"

Benjamin was the Babitzke's second child, born four years after little Billy stormed onto the scene. The official cause of death was SIDS, but Barb had a secret she carried with her for seventeen years.

"Yeah, Barb, of course."

"I don't think it was SIDS." She looked around the office. "I never told a soul, not even Bobby."

"What?"

She choked back tears. "In the crib, right beside Benny's things, was Billy's pillow. I think Billy suffocated him."

"Ah, geez, Barb."

Littleton scooted his chair around his desk to Barb's side. He put his hand on her shoulder and let her get it out of her system.

INTERLUDE: BILLY AND EARL

Earl Lankford was near the opening of Watchstep Cavern, documenting the range lacteus crustaearli strayed from the mouth of the cave. He had a theory; he believed the beetles behaved like a hive. He was watching a smaller beetle make its way beneath the leaves, out to a perimeter Earl speculated it would mark with pheromones, letting all the others know not to cross the line into no-bug's-land. Other scouts were doing the same thing all around the cave opening, marking a new territory based on the changing season. Somehow they all knew exactly how far to venture from the crack in the earth leading to their subterranean lair.

Based on the previous scouts, Earl knew the beetle he was following would soon do a wiggle dance similar to a bee's, somehow getting a bearing from its vibrating, and release an odor known only to others like it. Earl's eyes were fixed on a spot on the ground where he speculated the beetle would stop when he heard the sound.

Fsshhh...

It sounded like somebody letting air out of a car tire in steady, controlled bursts.

Fsshhh...

It was followed by footsteps—Earl was not alone.

There was no law in Promise stating that people couldn't wander Bathmore Forest near the cave entrance, but—just like a beach with a dangerous undertow, or a lava flow in Hawaii—it was something done at one's own risk. One bite and it was goodnight. Earl was the only person to wander the woods.

To drive the point home, though, Sheriff Littleton worked with Earl, establishing their own perimeter in the hope of keeping people away from danger. Instead of releasing pheromones at their decided spot, they roped off a safe radius from the cave opening with yellow police tape. But that wasn't stopping whoever had joined Earl in Bathmore Forest that afternoon.

When the footsteps stopped, Earl heard a rattling sound, like somebody shaking an empty soda can full of BBs. It was followed by the *Fsshhh...*

Earl kept one eye on the beetle, watching it trudge its way along the forest floor. He also wanted to make sure no other beetle found its way above the edge of Earl's boot, just under his jeans, where they could take a bite of Earl's pasty ankle, putting an end to their one and only ally in the world.

He kept his other eye to his left, where the sounds were getting closer.

Fsshhh...

This time, Earl saw the source of the sound; it was Billy Babitzke with a can of fluorescent orange spray paint stolen from a construction site. He was strolling the woods, covering the trunks of oak trees in anarchy symbols; it was the closest thing to genuine tagging so far north, out in the middle of nowhere.

“What the hell are you doing?” Earl said. Billy had reached a level of rebellion that the sound of an adult voice when he was up to no good no longer startled him. He finished the anarchy symbol he had started and looked up at Earl.

“Hey...Bugman! S’up?”

“You need to get the hell out of here is what’s up.”

Billy paused to light a cigarette. He took his time, inhaling deeply while watching the flame on his trusty Zippo lighter swaying in a slow breeze. With a quick snap of his wrist, the top came down and the lighter clacked shut. He walked over to Earl and blew a cloud of smoke his way.

“Ya know, if you were a real tough guy, you wouldn’t be smoking those pussy filtered things.” Earl never smoked while near the cave, but he knew with Billy’s arrival that he was done studying lacteus crustaearli for the afternoon. He lit an unfiltered Lucky with a match, shaking it out with a couple shakes of his wrist. It wasn’t as cool as a Zippo, but Earl believed lighter fluid would lead to cancer; an odd thought for somebody who sucked down sixty unfiltered smokes a day.

“You need to get out of here, Babitzke.”

“It’s a free country,” Billy said. To prove his point, and to show Earl how rebellious somebody who smoked “pussy” cigarettes could be, he shook his paint can and began tagging another tree. Earl, however, was far more apathetic than Billy could ever hope to be.

“I don’t give a shit what you do to the trees, you’re not gonna get a rise out of me. But you *do* need to get the hell out of here.”

Billy chuckled. “That’s not like you, Bugman—concerned with the well being of a kid. I thought you hated everybody. What the fuck do you care if I get bit?”

“I *do* hate everybody. And while I don’t care if you get bit, I *do* care about the effect a death would bring on my study.”

“If you were bitten,” Earl said, “it would be doing this town a favor. I’m sure I wouldn’t be the only one happy to see you go. But if anyone dies, no amount of federal protection will save this place. They’d burn out the cave and probably make the anniversary a holiday: ‘Dead Dick and Burning Bugs Day’; any excuse for these yokels to drink beer and eat sausage.”

“What the fuck did you just call me?”

Earl would fight anyone with his mouth, but when it got him in trouble, he turtled like a scared kid on the playground. He knew he was pushing Billy too far. He looked down at the ground, following the scout and the train of other beetles behind him.

“Look, I don’t have time for this. If you get bit, it’s your own damn fault.”

But Billy wasn’t done. “Bitch, I’m talking to you! What the hell did you call me?”

Earl ignored him. He crouched down and watched the beetles in all their ant-like glory.

“Bitch, I’m talking!” Billy kicked Earl over, into the line of beetles. Earl leaped up, swatting at his clothes, like somebody on fire—acting like somebody actually afraid of the bugs he loved.

“You little shit!”

“What did you call me, bitch?!” Billy was ready for a fight.

“Bitch? Is that all you can say? You’re dumber than that fuckin’ retard!”

To prove he could do more than call people names, Billy flipped out his Zippo, lit it, and sprayed the paint through the flames toward Earl’s feet. A gout of flame charred the line of beetles Earl had been tracking most of the afternoon.

Earl stomped out the tiny fire and turned toward Billy like an enraged father who’d just seen his children gunned down. He knocked the lighter from Billy’s hand, grabbed him by the throat, and pushed him up against a wet anarchy symbol.

“You little fucker!” Earl yelled. “You’re lucky I don’t kill you. I could make it look like a bug bite!” He tightened his grip.

Billy—even though Earl was in the driver’s seat—remained defiant. He took a deep drag from the filtered pussy smoke between his teeth and exhaled into Earl’s face. Earl grabbed the cigarette from Billy’s mouth with his free hand.

“I should put this out in your fuckin’ eye, punk! I could say it was self defense. Everyone would believe me.”

Billy spit between Earl’s eyes—it rolled down his nose, hung there for a moment, and fell to the forest floor. Earl may not have extinguished the cigarette in Billy’s eye, but grinding it out on Billy’s cheek was enough to make him yelp and fight back. Earl waited for a punch, but before he could react, Billy wiggled free and sprayed the paint into Earl’s

face, where his unfiltered Pall Mall ignited. It looked like Earl was wearing a mask of flame as he struggled to pat the fire out. He could feel his flesh melting. He balled up the bottom of his shirt and pressed it to his flaming face like a fire blanket.

He heard Billy shout, “Bitch!” one more time as the little punk ran away.

Earl Lankford spent five days in the regional hospital, treated for burns over most of his face. Had he not been wearing glasses, he would have been blinded in addition to the burns. His only visitors the entire week were Littleton, with Billy Babitzke in tow.

“Get that slimy little fuck out of here!” Earl shouted when he saw Sheriff Littleton and Billy enter his room.

“Now Earl, please, calm down—“

“Calm down?! That little monster almost killed me! He should be locked up!”

“That’s why I’m here, Earl,” Littleton said. “We need to talk about this. I want to hear your side of the story and see if it matches up with Billy’s.”

Earl told Sheriff Littleton what had happened. While the emphasis leaned toward Billy Babitzke being the instigator, Earl admitted his role in what had transpired in Bathmore Forest. When he was done, Sheriff Littleton looked out the window for a minute or so.

“Okay,” the sheriff eventually said. “You’re both pretty much telling the truth, as far as I can figure things. Billy showed me his shirt—it had paint all over it from where you shoved him up against the tree. He has the scar on his face where you attacked him with the cigarette.”

“Yeah, see? It was self defense!” Billy said, grinning at Earl. “Self defense.”

Littleton turned to Billy. “And you...you put a man in the hospital. Self defense or not, you instigated things. If we have to bring the outside in, you’re both looking at time. Billy, you’re a repeat offender. You could go away a long time for this. And Earl...you attacked a minor. Courts don’t look too highly on that.”

Littleton looked around the room, scrutinizing Billy and Earl with his stare. When he finally said something, he looked back out the window and said, “Let’s just call this even...”

Earl ran his hand over his burned face, feeling the bandages and puffy flesh where dressings had been removed. It felt like a relief map from grade school. He locked eyes with Billy Babitzke and said, “Yeah. Even...”