

# PROMISE



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# Part I



## PROLOGUE

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 been in before. His eyes were wide open, seemingly fixed on the pines, maples, and oaks high above, but they saw nothing.

Billy Babitzke was dead.



## CHAPTER ONE

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Ryan Shiflett didn't know a thing about Gertie Lundquist, but looking at her casket in the middle of a wrestling ring, he gathered two things about the woman: she must have loved fishing and riding motorcycles. Most people are invited to a getting-to-know-you party when they first move to a small town, but Ryan was invited to a funeral for a woman he never met, by a man he barely knew.

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 Harley Sportster as his canvas, he painted just about anything. His wife's casket was his masterpiece.

The side facing the crowd paid tribute to her love of Wisconsin's state fish, *esox masquinongy*—better known as the muskie. The painting of a huge muskellunge breaking the surface of a still lake as the beast fought lure and line was rendered so well, the splashing water so convincing, one would not be surprised to see the pallbearers on that side of the coffin soaked to the point of dripping. In the background, Grizz fished with a ghost-like image of Gertie, who reeled in the prehistoric-looking fish from the comfort of her beat up *Lund* fishing boat. Below the scene, written on an airbrushed banner, was GONE FISHING.

The top of the casket lid was a tribute to her other love. While everyone around her rode Harleys, Gertie loved British bikes—her garage was packed with Nortons, BSAs, and Triumphs. She made more money in a bad year restoring classic bikes to their original glory than Grizz made in a good year doing art. 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 back in the day.

The image on the casket lid was Grizz's rendition of the couple's last run to Sturgis, South Dakota. In the background of the painting, the two rode along a winding road through cottonwoods and box elders. In the foreground, inside a carved heart in the bark of an ancient elm, were the words:

“GRIZZ + GERT  
FOREVER”

The two met in Badlands National Park, and each year on their way to the Sturgis Motorcycle 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. No amount of cosmetic wizardry can save the face of somebody who lost a Vincent Shadow at seventy-five miles an hour and went head-first into a clump of pine trees and sugar maples.

Ryan squirmed in the folding metal chair numbing his ass; he was the closest thing to a celebrity Promise had ever seen, and all eyes were on him. Coming off a successful run of a 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 often failed, *Marriage* pulled in great ratings. Ryan spent a lot of time thinking about the phenomenon and—aside from Francesca’s beauty and prominently 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’d thought, but it was a chemical experiment ending in an explosive divorce. By the time the fire was extinguished, Ryan sold his two restaurants in Chicago and retreated to the backwoods of northern Wisconsin.

“We’re about to get started,” a gravelly voice said over a public address system. Ryan recognized the voice—it belonged to Terry “Gorilla” Zilligan, a retired wrestler Ryan met the day before.

Squirming in the chair wasn’t helping—Ryan’s ass lost the battle, finally falling completely asleep. To get his mind off his posterior, he looked around and thought about how quickly his life had changed since childhood. Ryan dreamed about living in the north woods of Wisconsin, and his divorce was just the thing he



needed to finally get him to stop talking about moving and actually follow through. When he was a kid, his parents took him camping in the northern part of the state. Each year, Ryan told them he'd one day live there. Now, thirty years later, he owned a Victorian fixer-upper on a hill overlooking a quiet little town called Promise.

“We're gonna give Grizz a few more minutes,” Gorilla said over the PA. “If anybody needs anything, just holler.”

The day before, Ryan walked down the hill to Gorilla's restaurant. Terry Zilligan called his restaurant and bar *Gorilla's Grill*, and he made sure there was no questioning his culinary intent even from a distance. A twelve-foot tall fiberglass gorilla in a wrestling mask, cape, tights, and boots stood on the roof, inviting visitors in with an animatronic arm wielding a giant spatula. It wore a greasy apron that read:

GORILLA'S GRILL  
SUPLEXES AND STEAKS!

The interior of the restaurant surprised Ryan—it looked more like the inside of a warm mountain lodge than the spectacle he expected, based on the gorilla guarding the rooftop. Aside from a

wrestling ring in the middle of the place, it wouldn't have been hard for Ryan to imagine he was in Colorado—not Wisconsin.

No sooner had he entered did he hear a gruff, booming voice say, “You must be Ryan!”

He saw Gorilla standing behind the bar on the far side of the great room. Ryan made his way over and got his first look at the old wrestler.

Gorilla 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-durned thing!” To punctuate the statement, 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 much-anticipated gore to a match, but most times they were caused by those on the opposite side of the evening's card pounding on him. 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 covered his missing eye with an eyepatch. Rumor had it Knuckles Murphy plucked out the orb 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 and cussing and started living for the Lord.

Ryan wondered how somebody so beat up could afford such a nice place in a tiny town. Gorilla was smart with money. He vowed at a young age that he'd never be poor, like his parents. After his divorce, he found solace in wrestling rings. 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 ring, and his stockbroker. 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 spend money, and his nest egg swelled like his massive arms.

"Name's Terry Zilligan," he said to Ryan. "Everybody calls me Gorilla, though."

“Nice to meet you...Gorilla.”

Gorilla extended his hand across the bar. Shaking hands with him was like putting your hand in a vice—Ryan did his best not to wince.

“What can I getcha to drink?” Gorilla said.

“What kind of beer do you have?”

“All kinds, but you want this.” Gorilla pointed to a tap pull with two wrestlers battling beneath a logo reading *Bodyslam Brew*. “Make it myself.”

“I’ll definitely have one of those, then,” Ryan said.

Gorilla handed Ryan a menu and went to work pouring his beer. The entrees at Gorilla’s Grill had gimmicky names like *Toe Hold Tacos*, *The Choke Hold Chicken Platter*, *Suplex Salads*, and *Hammerlock Hamburgers*. For dessert there was *The Mule-Kick Milkshake*, *DDT Delight*, and *Piledriver Pie*.

When Gorilla handed Ryan his beer, he said, “Figure out whatcha want?”

“What do you recommend?” Ryan said.

“Can’t go wrong with a *Hammerlock Burger*, but the *Toe Hold Tacos* go great with the beer.”

Ryan smiled and said, "That's what I'll have, then."

Gorilla pulled an order pad from the pocket of his apron, wrote down Ryan's selection, and rang a dented time keeper's bell behind the bar. A short order cook wearing a Mexican wrestling mask and T-shirt with Gorilla's rooftop mascot printed on the front came out from the kitchen.

"What's up, Mr. Z?" the wrestler said.

Gorilla handed him the slip of paper and said, "We got an order for the new fella in town. Ryan, meet Stephen Howard, the Weyauwega Weasel. Double-W, meet Ryan."

The masked wrestler shook Ryan's hand and said, "Nice meeting ya."

"Nice meeting you," Ryan said.

"We'll have this right out for ya," the wrestler said before disappearing through the kitchen doors.

Ryan took a sip of beer and paused. Gorilla watched closely as Ryan took another taste, swishing the liquid around in his mouth in a chewing motion. Ryan pointed at the glass and said, "That's one of the best beers I've ever had."

"Thank you."

Ryan admired the details in the restaurant's design. "This place is really something else."

"Is that a good something else, or a polite way of saying it's weird?" Gorilla said.

"A *good* something else. And the beer..." Ryan flashed a thumbs up.

Gorilla smiled. "I'm glad. I was a little nervous when I heard you were gonna be moving to Promise. I know you're probably used to better food."

"No, I love burgers and fries and tacos as much as the next guy," Ryan said. "People like me have been trying to dress them up for years, but to find a perfect burger, you have to come to places like this."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome," Ryan said. "This really is a nice place." He pointed to the wrestling ring. "Do you guys actually wrestle here?"

"I don't anymore, but we have live wrestling, here, every Friday night. On Sunday mornings, I climb into the ring and lead Sunday services. This place serves as meeting hall, church, and

even the town's municipal offices...” Gorilla trailed off, changing his tone. “And tomorrow afternoon, we're having a funeral in the wrestling ring—you should stop by.”

A day later, in that very ring, Gertie Lundquist's body rested inside what some would say was the tackiest thing they ever laid their eyes on, while others appreciated its beauty. Ryan thought the center of a wrestling ring was an odd place for displaying a casket, but there weren't many choices in town. The funeral home was run down—fitting as only a place to prepare the dead who didn't mind that the building had seen better days. The only real church near 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 watching wrestling far more than doing laundry.



## CHAPTER TWO

**G**rizz climbed into the ring, towering over the podium. At six foot nine, it didn't take much to figure out why he got the nickname. Even the tallest student in Gorilla's wrestling school looked up to him, and 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 shaggy hair.

Grizz was stocky enough to appear soft around the waist, 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 knotted mass of muscle tougher than a side of grass-fed beef.

Grizz tapped the microphone. “Is this thing on?” He paused for a moment and said, “I always wanted to do that...”

He stalled for time. He hadn’t prepared, or even thought about what he would say about Gertie. The crowd was more than patient, though. 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 couldn’t contain himself; a wet laugh erupted from his clenched lips. 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 a Canadian goose being choked and an antique car horn, until degenerating into the sound of a rusty nail being pulled from a board.

“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 and smiled. “Guess I ain’t got much more to say other than I love her and miss the hell out of her.”

Then the tears came.

Few things are harder to watch for weather-hardened men of the north woods than one of their own breaking down in tears; and it is harder still 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 by the gesture.

After Harvey helped Grizz to his seat, the restaurant fell silent. People looked around, hoping somebody else would say a few words, making sure Grizz knew everybody cared about Gertie. In tense times, the town knew Sheriff Ed Littleton could be counted on, and the room shared 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 years old, he looked ten years younger. He was single and handsome, with rugged features tamed by kind eyes. He was Promise's native son, only leaving to attend college, where he received dual degrees in criminal justice and psychology.

"Brian said it best," Sheriff Littleton started. "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 know just what type of person we're honoring here today. I think—to me—it can best be summed up with 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 north woods has one, a muskie so huge that 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,” the sheriff said, “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—howled with 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 in the wrestling ring, doing Gertie’s laugh the entire time. People 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. Littleton pretended to cry.

“He’s beautiful. Just beautiful,” the sheriff said. He slipped out of character, returning 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 years 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 definitely be missed.”



## CHAPTER THREE

After Gertie's service, Ryan felt like the new guy at school trying to figure out which table he should sit at during lunch. He was glad when Gorilla invited him over to sit with Grizz, Sheriff Littleton, Gorilla's thirty-five year old son, Mickey, and Harvey Beacham.

As soon as introductions were done, Harvey grinned and said, "You're on TV!"

"I *was* on TV," Ryan said. "I'm not anymore."

Ryan was glad that a waiter in a wrestling mask brought a large tray of food to the table, cutting Harvey off. It wasn't that

Ryan didn't want to talk to Harvey—he just didn't want to talk about himself, especially when he was sitting at a table with a man whose wife's body was in a casket nearby. The day belonged to Grizz—not Ryan and his former fame.

Everybody attending the funeral ate Gertie's favorite item on the menu: a combo meal called *The Top Rope Special*. *The Top Rope Special* consisted of *The Sleeper*, a cheeseburger so gigantic, all people wanted to do after finishing the thing was sleep all day. It took hold of the gut like an *Iron Claw* and wouldn't let go. When it finally *did* break free, people wondered why they ate the thing in the first place and promised themselves they'd never eat another. But a week later—there they 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 Fries* alongside the burger, and to wash it down, he included a bottle of *Bodyslam Brew* or *Ropeburn Root Beer*, both brewed by hand in the basement.

"Your wife is pretty," Harvey said. The statement caught Ryan off guard; it was the kind of thing a kid would say, not a grown man. Until that 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."

"I still think your wife is pretty."

"Harv," Gorilla said. "Why don't you eat your burger?"

As Harvey attacked *The Sleeper*, Ryan looked around the room. His eyes stopped on an odd looking man sitting alone at a table.

"That's Earl," Harvey said with a mouth full of food. "He's the bug guy."

"The bug guy?" Ryan said.

"Yeah," Harvey said, as if that clarified things.

*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 remaining locks religiously. When slicked back and sculpted to the sides of his head, the color matched the shade of his skin. 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 then frozen, 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 covet, 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.

“Weird looking guy, huh?” Mickey said. With his long scraggly hair, thick beard, and a missing tooth, Ryan figured Mickey was either a wrestler or a biker.

“A little—yes,” Ryan said, trying his best to remain polite.

Earl worked at consuming 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, Gorilla printed 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 Gorilla had printed.

On a daily basis, Earl ate an entire pie in a sitting, washing 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.

“Most people don’t like Earl,” Harvey said.

“Why not?” Ryan said.

“I don’t know.” Harvey looked to the rest of the group for his answer.

“Earl can be a very trying character, at times,” Mickey said.

“Some of us put up with him—others don’t like him one bit.”

“All he eats is sugar and beer,” Harvey said. “He’s like a man-bug!”

“That’s hardly a reason to ignore someone,” Ryan said.

Gorilla laughed. “I don’t ignore him. He can be a bit abrasive at times, but he’s a child of God and one of my best customers. Others aren’t fond of him, though.”

“How come?”

“Lot of people think 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 could tell Ryan was lost, so he told the story:

“They were going to build a highway through town that would bring tourists in,” Littleton said. “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, buddy,” Littleton said. “A bulldozer broke through the ground and fell into a cave. Nobody around here knew about the thing before that morning. We called in a rescue team to retrieve the bulldozer operator’s body—“

“Tell him who one of the rescuers was!” Interrupting people was obviously one of Harvey Beacham’s special talents.

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

“Oh, no...Eddie tells it better.”

“Then maybe you should let the sheriff finish, buddy,”

Grizz said.

Sheriff Littleton continued. “One of the rescuers was Earl’s brother, Jimmy. They were able to retrieve the body of the worker, but he didn’t make it. Head trauma—“

“That means his head was all bashed in and his brains were everywhere!” Harvey said, drawing a table full of stares.

“Anyway, I was present for the examination and we noticed the bulldozer operator’s body was covered with tiny welts, like something stung it repeatedly. I asked Jimmy if they saw anything in the cave when they went down to retrieve the guy.“

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 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 never heard him talk about nothing like that.”

“Two days later, Jimmy and the other rescuers were dead.”

“What happened?”

“The beetles,” Littleton said. “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 antivenom 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’s right, some people do call them that, Harvey,” Littleton said. He continued with the story. “Earl got the government to protect the bugs, and the highway was rerouted. We used to have a couple thousand people living here, but once the

cave was found, most people moved away. That angered a lot of people counting on the highway for business.”

“Mike Looper says Earl's an asshole,” Harvey said.

Mike Looper owned the town garage. He hired Harvey to keep the garage clean—it was about all that could be expected from him. Mike told anyone who listened, “Harvey’s dumber than lug nuts, 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 skills Harvey used in sculpting things, to the speed with which he produced art, everyone who saw a Harvey Beacham piece believed greater forces were guiding his hands.

“That log-dumb moron 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.

“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.”

Ryan didn’t know what to say. The realtor left out any mention of poisonous bugs when she showed Ryan the town. He assumed the town was quiet because—like many towns in the north woods—most inhabitants didn’t live there year round, only in the summer. 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 north woods, and he found that in Promise.

“Where’s this cave?”

“Out by your house,” Sheriff Littleton said. “But there’s nothing to worry about. The bugs don’t stray very far from the cave, and we have the area around the cave roped off so nobody wanders too close.”

Ryan wasn’t sure if it was another line, like the realtor telling him Promise was the ideal small town he always dreamed about, 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.”

Ryan wondered if he could back out of the deal. There had to be a line in the contract for the house mentioning the poisonous bugs, like a disclosure clause revealing soggy wood overhangs, or bad water heaters. The more he thought about it, though, he knew realtors weren't obligated to reveal things about a house's surroundings. In Chicago, realtors didn't have to tell potential buyers their gentrified brownstone was smack-dab in the middle of gang territory. Even if they did, they'd make it sound nice by saying “There's a tight sense of community in this area,” much like how small houses become “cozy” in the hands of realtor and dilapidated crack houses become “a handyman's dream.”

Ryan was thinking about poisonous bugs and lying realtors when a middle-aged woman entered Gorilla's, looking like a ghost. 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. “Take a deep breath, and tell me what's wrong.”



She took several deep breaths, calming her enough to say,  
“Eddie, I think someone killed Billy.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

**B**illy was Barb 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.

It first became evident Billy was a problem when he was seven, when he beat up Peter Markowski, an eleven-year-old who

lived down the street. The attack left Peter hospitalized and comatose for over a month. Sheriff Littleton kept an eye on Peter's father, Dave, expecting retaliation for the assault. 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.

On his way home from a friend's house one night, Peter was ambushed by Billy. When Peter passed by, Billy hit him in the back of the head with a large metal flashlight. The initial blow knocked 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 of which 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 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 any more..."

Peter never regained basic functions, like speaking, seeing, 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 said, "Because I *felt like it*."

As he grew older, there were many more wicked things Billy did, just because he felt like it. A night of vandalism when he

was sixteen left almost every mailbox in Promise destroyed and a steady stream of car windows shattered in the streets like broken stars. The Molotov cocktail shattered on Main Street drew the attention of Sheriff Littleton. Billy was finally old enough to see two years in a juvenile detention center.

Now, at the age of twenty-one, it was feared—by Barb, at least—that Billy Babitzke was dead. For many of the people eavesdropping on the conversation, whether Billy 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 was genuinely concerned about Billy's well-being, though. 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 big house, or several, most people realized where they faltered and changed for the better in Littleton's world. It was not the Sheriff's duty to judge and hold one to blame for previous actions.

After his release from juvenile detention, Billy wasn't much of a problem. He got into random trouble, but Littleton was always able to make peace. Sheriff Littleton 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.

All eyes and ears in the room were on Barb and Sheriff Littleton when he said, “Now what makes you think Billy’s been killed, Barb? You didn’t find a body, did you, now?”

“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.” They walked behind the bar and disappeared through a door in the back that led to the sheriff’s office.

\* \* \*

Everyone wondered if it was true. 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. 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 Markowski’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—or anybody else—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.

Everybody remembered why they were gathered in Gorilla's; some 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 meet was no longer with them, and there they were, speculating about the possible death of someone none of them liked.

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."

Most had not even finished their meal, but they knew it was time to clear out of Gorilla's. Some said a final goodbye to Gertie on their way to the door. Seeing people genuflect before a wrestling ring was a strange sight, but in its own way, Ryan found it very touching. There was no pretense; it was clear to him that despite the

town's idiosyncrosies and problems, the woman in the casket was loved by all.

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.

On her way out, instead of offering her condolences to Grizz, Kelly Novak looked back behind the bar, toward 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.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Earl said on his way out. Those overhearing him seemed shocked that he exhibited something resembling genuine feelings. "Your wife was a very intelligent, rational woman, the likes that will be missed in a backwater town like this." He bowed his head and walked through the door.

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 really appreciate it."

"No problem," Ryan said.

"We'll have to get together some time. Drink a couple beers and shoot the shit."

"That sounds good." Ryan was used to people saying they needed to get together, but never following through. It was a convenient way of parting, a throwaway statement used with no intention of a future visit. Looking in Grizz's eyes, though, Ryan knew he meant it.

\* \* \*

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 Billy was bad, but I didn't stop it, even when I could have."

Sheriff Littleton pulled a Kleenex from a daisy print 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 continued. “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.

“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. 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.



## CHAPTER FIVE

*Billy and Earl*

(2005)

*Earl Lankford was near the opening of Watchstep Cavern, documenting the range lacteus crustaearli strayed from the mouth of the cave. He watched 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 did 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 movement, 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...*

*Then footsteps.*

*Earl was not alone.*

*There was no law in Promise stating 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.*

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

*Earl saw the source of the sound: Billy Babitzke with a can of fluorescent orange spray paint stolen from an abandoned construction site. He strolled through the woods, covering the trunks of oak trees in anarchy symbols; it was the closest thing to tagging his territory, 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 didn’t startled him. He finished the anarchy symbol and looked up at Earl.*

*“Hey...Bugman. S’up?”*

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

*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.*

*Earl shook his head. “Ya know, if you were a real tough guy, you would not smoke those pussy filtered things.” Earl never smoked while near the cave, but he knew with Billy’s arrival that he was done studying his bugs for the afternoon. He lit an unfiltered Lucky with a match, putting 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 tagged another tree.*

*“I do not give a shit what you do to the trees—you are not going to 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. I thought you hated everybody. What the fuck do you care if I get bit?”*

*“I do hate everybody. And while I do not 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 am sure I would not be the only one happy to see you go. But if anyone dies, no amount of Federal protection will save this place. They would burn out the cave and probably make the anniversary a holiday: ‘Dead Fuckhead and Burning Bugs Day.’ Any excuse for these yokels to drink beer and eat sausage.”*

*“What the fuck did you just call me?”*

*“I do not have time for this shit. If you get bit, it 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.*

*“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 are dumber than that fucking 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 in a drive by. 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 are lucky I do not kill you. I could make it look like a bug bite!” He tightened his grip.*

*Billy 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 fucking eye, punk! I could say it was self defense. Everyone would believe me.”*

*Billy spit between Earl’s eyes—it rolled down his nose like egg yolk, 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 Billy 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 Lucky Strike ignited. It looked like a mask of flame as he struggled to pat the fire out. Earl felt his flesh burning. 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 he ran away.*

\* \* \*



*Earl Lankford spent five days in the regional hospital, treated for burns over most of his face. 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,” 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 couple minutes.*

*“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. You’ve been in trouble before. Minor or not, you could go away a long time for this. And speaking of minors—Earl, Billy’s seventeen. The courts don’t look too highly on grown men attacking minors. If charges are pursued, you’re both looking at trouble.”*

*Littleton looked around the room, scrutinizing Billy and Earl with his stare. He eventually turned back to 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, “I will not press charges, but I am not about to call this even...”*



## CHAPTER SIX

When Ryan returned home after the funeral and opened the front door, the stench reminded him of a task taking precedence over unpacking and paperwork. Before anything, he needed to install a dog door.

A pile of shit, seemingly the size of the fifty-five pound bulldog producing it, greeted him in the foyer. It was as though his dog, Slobberknocker, was getting even with him for leaving home for a couple hours. Now that Ryan lived on the outskirts of a small town and had a large yard, he figured a dog door would be a cure-all, allowing Slobby easy access in and out when nature called.

There was only one problem with the dog door solution: Ryan was the furthest thing from a handyman.

Despite owning what was possibly the largest collection of do-it-yourself books on the planet, when it came to fixing things, Ryan was no Bob Villa. He wasn't even on par with Fixit Sam, a retired accountant with a cable access show back home whose shtick was ruining everything he tried fixing. Fixit Sam was at least funny; watching Ryan ruin things was simply sad.

He could carry a wrench into the kitchen and pipes would burst on sight. Put him near a table saw, and he'd somehow figure out a way to break the blade, split the wood, and knock out power for blocks. And God forbid he tried working on his car—he may have been the only person to ever change his oil and end up destroying a head gasket. As long as Ryan Shiflett walked the earth, anyone writing a how-to book about home improvement was guaranteed at least one sale—and mechanics, plumbers, and anyone else making a living with their hands had job security.

Ryan gathered everything he felt he'd need: a hammer, several kinds of screwdrivers, various kinds of saws, pliers, a small can of wood stain, and a Dremel tool with the largest variety of bits available. If nothing else, he came prepared. He carried a tape

measure, nails, screws, grease pencils, and a box of Band-Aids in a *Prada* shoe box. He always meant to get a toolbelt, but never got around to it. He already had the box containing the parts for the dog door opened and ready to go from an earlier attempt at installation.

He placed the instructions alongside his tools, ready to work. Ryan was one of those rare men who actually asked for directions and followed instructions, but he still ended up lost or ruining what he was trying to build or fix. The instructions before him were no help: they were printed in Chinese, French, Spanish, and German, but not English. At least a template was included so Ryan could trace the pattern on the door and know where to do the most damage.

Ryan also had rags—lots of them. When Ryan worked, he made a mess. When he wasn't knocking over a glass of water, he was spilling paint. When he wasn't spilling paint, he was spilling blood. He had other *Prada* boxes full of rags, which consisted mostly of old T-shirts he never wore, or wore so much, they were falling apart and could only be used to wipe up spills. The rag he grabbed before starting on the dog door was a gag gift he never once wore. It was given to Ryan by a friend at Ryan's bachelor party. For some reason, he couldn't bring himself to throw away the

T-shirt depicting two cartoon pigs fornicating above a slogan reading MAKIN' BACON.

He quickly set to work, first trying to remove the door from its hinges. One peg wouldn't come loose, so he tried working it free with a hammer and screwdriver. No matter how hard Ryan tried—no matter how much WD-40 he sprayed on the hinge—the peg wouldn't come free. When tried and true methods didn't work, Ryan was not above focusing a burst of anger toward whatever it was stopping him from completing a task. He slammed the top of the screwdriver with the hammer, slipped, and put a long gouge in the wall. He decided to work with the door on one hinge.

He pulled a grease pencil from his box and taped the template to the door, a bit lower than called for by the myriad languages he didn't speak in the manual.

Mistake number one.

Mistake number two: cutting into the door from the bottom with a jamb saw, causing a large crack in his back door. It was time for the circular saw.

Sitting on the floor, trying to hold the wobbly door steady with his feet, he started cutting. He sliced straight through the door, taking a large chunk of rubber from his sneaker, revealing a

wiggling toe in an unscathed sock. A close call, but Ryan was used to close calls—even when tackling the simplest project. As long as there was no blood, all was fine.

That didn't last long.

The saw caught on the door and lurched forward, cutting the top of his left hand.

*"Fuck!"*

"Fuck!" and to a lesser degree, "Shit!" were Ryan's favorite words when working on projects. Luckily the cut was nothing serious, but there was enough blood to make someone who didn't know better worry. He pressed the T-shirt to his hand, bleeding all over the two pigs in the throes of ecstasy, and made his way to the kitchen sink.

\* \* \*

Sometime before dinner, Ryan gave up on the dog door. He at least got it installed—that is if one used their imagination. Looking at the crooked flap and the cracks and scratches on his backdoor, he would have been just as well off leaving it open to the elements. The only thing that worked out right early that evening was dinner, but dinner always came out right at Ryan's.

While he couldn't drive a nail straight to save his life, when it came to cooking, he could make *Arrosto Fiorentino* with more care and grace than Norm Abram making custom cabinetry. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America before it was in vogue, Ryan continued his studies overseas, in Florence. While most of Promise dined on greasy burgers at Gorilla's that evening, Ryan dined on *Calamari Fritti*, *Spinaci alla Fiorentina*, *Pollo Vesuvio*, and *tiramisu* for dessert. At Gorilla's, everyone chased their meal down with swigs of beer; Ryan sipped a glass of 1998 *Gaja Chardonnay*. He may not have been able to install a dog door or make a marriage work, but when it came to cooking, he could do no wrong.

After dinner, Ryan scraped the remainder of his dinner into Slobberknocker's bowl. The lazy dog lumbered from the rug near the sink and drooled on his food for a moment—savoring it—before devouring it in a few quick bites.

“You don't know how good you have it, buddy,” Ryan said.

Slobberknocker looked up, licked his chops, and then went to work licking his nuts. “That's quite a dessert,” Ryan said while pushing Slobberknocker away with his foot. Slobby wandered off toward the living room where he could lick himself and not be



bothered. Ryan laughed, then leaned back against the sink and let out a relaxed sigh. It was his favorite time of the day—the dishes done, feeling full from a good meal, and a bit rosy from a glass of wine. He loved how the house smelled, the way the blue light of evening came in low through the kitchen windows. It was that one time every day when stress melted away, no matter how bad things were going.

The calm usually lasted about twenty minutes before he got antsy and wanted to do something, though. People who knew Ryan attributed his restlessness to being easily bored, when in fact, he was lonely. When he was married, he'd bug Francesca, even though her calm mood after a meal lasted until bedtime and she refused to be disturbed. After just a few days on his own in his new house, he almost missed her, even though they'd been separated for months.

She had the hip edge Ryan wished he had, if only he were a little more driven. His manners prevented him from stepping out beyond the comfort of traditional Italian and French cooking; he felt most gimmicks had been done to death, and to mimic others would be stepping on somebody else's fingers. Francesca didn't mind stepping on fingers, toes, or even kicking people in the head to get what she wanted. Hearing about Ryan's traditional cuisine,

she wanted to see what made two modest locations with little press rise above other restaurants in a city full of flair.

The hostess told Ryan there was a woman in the dining room asking for a recommendation from the owner. It was that time in the evening when Ryan's restaurant, *Piazza di Spagna*, was coming to life, but still early enough that Ryan could find the time to make a recommendation for an interested customer. He knew Francesca the moment he saw her; her reputation as a chef preceded 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 absorbed any sparkle. She said nothing, and Ryan found himself feeling nervous.

"I was told you wanted a recommendation. Is there any particular dish you had in mind? Fish, beef, pasta?"

She smiled and said, "Surprise me."

While most chefs would have rushed to the kitchen to throw together their most exciting dish—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. He

explained the olive oil in the dressing came from hand-picked olives near Partanna, Sicily, and made sure she knew the small drizzle of balsamic vinegar took a twenty-five-year stroll through oak, mulberry, chestnut, cherry, juniper, ash, and acacia outside Modena, Italy. As she savored the bread, Ryan discussed the old yeast strain maintained on site and baked in a brick oven in the back of his kitchen. The main course was equally unassuming: spaghetti and sauce, served with a glass of *Fonterutoli Chianti*—not the most expensive wine, but the right wine for the meal.

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

“But you *are* surprised,” he said. It was a statement, not a question. He surprised even himself with his confidence.

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

She didn’t use a spoon; she 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 inhaled deeply before taking a forkful of just the sauce.

Ryan waited.

Finally, she broke off a piece of bread and sopped up some sauce, looking lost in a memory as she chewed.

“Still surprised?” Ryan said.

“That’s incredible! Simple and incredible.”

“Thank you. If you think that’s something, you need to stop by *Chez Vous* sometime and try the rack of lamb—simple and *perfect*.”

It seemed like such a great start to the relationship he later realized was based on building a tiny empire for Francesca, and an attempt to stave off loneliness for him.

Now that Ryan was alone, again, when the pleased feeling after dinner passed, he found himself going mad; now that he lived out in the middle of nowhere, he couldn't just walk down the street and find a variety of things to do. The best Promise offered on a Friday night was wrestling.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

The parking lot at Gorilla's was so full that people parked on the grass. The vehicles packed in every available space were utilitarian: pickup trucks, SUVs that had actually been off-road and covered in mud, and ordinary cars with all-wheel drive. Ryan was glad he decided to walk—his Jaguar would have drawn unwanted attention.

If any passersby didn't know what was going on inside Gorilla's restaurant and bar, the neon sign out front gave it away:

WRESTLING NIGHT

\$5

The sign glowed brightly, letting anyone passing by know there was food to be had inside, all while watching grown men in tights flip and flop in the ring for a \$5.00 entry fee. If the sign wasn't enough to get a person's attention, the sounds of the matches inside blared through the speaker mounted inside the fiberglass gorilla on the roof.

Ryan paid the entry fee to a young, muscled man in a wheelchair and went searching for a place to stand. The place was crowded, loud, and the energy rivaled any place back in Chicago on a Friday night. A fat guy in red and black tights, a mask, and black boots chased the wrestler who cooked Ryan lunch the day before. The crowd laughed as the fat wrestler chased the Weyauwega Weasel all around the ring. It reminded Ryan of a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Just as things were looking good for the big guy, *BAM!* the weasel flipped around and either sent the obvious villain into the ring post, or kicked him in the head.

The crowd loved it.

They loved it even more when the weasel slid out of the ring and grabbed a chair, only to leap back in and hit the big guy three times in the head with it, sending him to the mat. Ryan was amazed when the weasel—in one leap—went to the top rope, facing the

crowd. Without pausing, he used the ropes as a springboard, soared through the air in a high backflip, and came down on the bad guy, pinning him one-two-three! A voice that sounded like Gorilla's announced, "Winner by pinfall, the Weyauwega Weasel!"

The crowd went wild.

Ryan knew wrestling was fake, but it dawned on him that even though the acrobatic wrestler was small, having even a little guy slam down on you had to hurt, no matter how big and tough you were. And the chair hits—they sounded so real. Ryan figured the chairs must have been specially made, just for wrestling—somehow padded to avoid damaging the wrestlers. Nobody would allow himself to be hit *once* by a real folding metal chair, let alone repeatedly. Ryan worked his way toward the bar where a large group of people stood.

He was about to see just how "fake" wrestling was.

Gorilla climbed into the ring after the contestants from the previous match cleared out. Gorilla wore a three-piece suit and motioned to the referee for the microphone. He introduced the next match.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, your next match. One fall with a fifteen minute time limit for the NWWA Hardcore Championship.

The challenger, hailing from Milwaukee, Wisconsin and weighing in at 265 pounds...Nightshade!”

An air raid siren blared over the public address system, and a gigantic man with long, curly hair and a scraggly beard entered the restaurant through a curtained doorway near the back. He carried a “ROUTE 666” road sign. He wore a black Milwaukee Harley-Daveson T-shirt, black pants, and black boots with skulls and crossbones on them. Looking closely, Ryan saw the number “13” on the foreheads of the skulls. A black makeup pattern covered Nightshade’s face around his eyes. He looked like the lost hillbilly member of KISS.

The crowd booed, and one inebriated patron tossed a cup of beer Nightshade’s way. The intimidating wrestler lurched toward the drunk with the sign reared back, ready to strike. Kids shrieked, and everyone cleared out of the way before Nightshade finally made his way to the ring.

The lights dimmed and loud rock music blared over the PA system. Everyone cheered, knowing what was next.

“Promise, Wisconsin...let’s hear it for your very own hardcore champion. Weighing in at 320 pounds...Mickey Zilligan!”



The crowd leaped to their feet when Gorilla's son came through the curtain. The music continued as Mickey made his way around the ring, high-fiving anyone who stuck their hand out. Like Nightshade, he carried a weapon to the ring: a motorcycle chain. He climbed into the ring as Gorilla stepped out. No pre-battle regulations from the referee were given. With the sound of the bell, the match was underway.

Nightshade advanced with the sign, holding it high above his head. Mickey wrapped part of the chain around his fist and punched Nightshade in the gut, causing him to drop the sign. Ryan laughed, amazed that the crowd would get excited over such a fake blow. Mickey tossed the chain to the corner and the two engaged in what seemed like a more traditional wrestling match to Ryan.

They circled each other, taking turns throwing fake punches and locking the other in holds. Mickey moved cautiously around the ring, while Nightshade stomped around like a deranged cartoon character with a maniacal grin. They worked each other over in the corner, slapping one another across the chest as the crowd shouted "Woo!" with each blow. When the tempo slowed, Nightshade threw Hardcore Mickey Zilligan against the ropes. When Gorilla's little boy ricocheted back, Nightshade stuck his boot in his face,

sending him sprawling on the mat. As Mickey crawled around on all fours, pretending to regain his composure, Nightshade grabbed his sign.

Mickey stood up and *WHACK!* – Nightshade clocked him with the sign, bending it over his head and cutting him above the eye. Mickey took two more solid shots before Nightshade sent him back into the ropes. This time when he bounced back, Nightshade lifted Mickey and tossed him clear over the ropes. The crowd gasped at the sound of him hitting the hardwood floor—it sounded like someone dropping a side of beef from a third story window.

Ryan tried figuring out how the trick was done. There was no way the hits from the sign were real; no way the floor around the ring wasn't padded. But he saw the sign bend; he heard Mickey hit the solid floor.

The violence progressed, at one point resulting in a folding metal chair bent over Mickey's bloodied face, and culminated with Nightshade tossed face-first into a garbage can full of barbed wire. Ryan wondered if somebody bribed the health inspector to keep Gorilla's Grill open as a bloodied Nightshade rolled out of the can and struggled to free his shirt and flesh from the barbed wire's grasp.

This kind of showmanship explained the scars all over Gorilla that Ryan spent a better part of the afternoon thinking about. He figured he was probably in a serious car wreck back in the day when nobody wore seatbelts, but watching Gorilla's son and Nightshade go at it, his answer flowed from the foreheads of both men. Ryan figured they couldn't take much more and would soon have to stop.

While Nightshade struggled to free himself and get up, Mickey slid back to the ground and went under the ring a second time. This time he came out with a folding table. He set the table up on the floor and went under the ring again, pulling out a board covered in barbed wire. He put the board on the table, returning beneath the ring one last time for a ladder. He tossed the ladder in the ring, pulled Nightshade to the table, and carefully laid him down on the barbed wire board. There was something inherently gruesome about the scene to Ryan: Nightshade's eye makeup was so smudged, it looked like he had two black eyes. Placing him on the board with a packed crowd watching, waiting for something big to happen, seemed so barbaric, like watching a scaled-down battle between gladiators. Ryan wasn't even sure if it was wrestling.

Mickey climbed into the ring and set up the ladder. Climbing to the top, Ryan figured it was nearly fifteen feet from where Mickey stood, down to Nightshade. There *had* to be a trick to all this, he thought. He was right, there was a trick: being able to take a *lot* of pain and keep going.

Ryan covered his eyes as Mickey not only jumped from the ladder, but dove into a weak flip, meeting Nightshade's body with his shoulder blades.

*CRACK!*

*SLAM!*

Both wrestlers lay sprawled on the floor, writhing in agony. When Mickey completed the flip, his left heel slammed onto the floor and shattered. His left wrist broke as he tried bracing himself for the fall. Nightshade took a deep breath, making sure he felt only broken ribs and not a punctured lung. All things considered, both men were lucky. Mickey rolled over on Nightshade and pinned him to defend the NWWA Hardcore Championship.

Gorilla's voice boomed over the PA, "Your winner, and still NWWA Hardcore Champion...Miiiiiiiiiiiiickey Zilligan!"

The crowd knew he would win, but the way they cheered, one might believe they were genuinely surprised. For Ryan, it was

like they were all in on some sick joke, the entire room staging a spectacle just to dupe the new guy, but no actor could act as hurt as the two grown men on the floor. The ref helped Nightshade to his feet, and the wrestler staggered back through the curtain, defeated. Gorilla helped the ref get Mickey up on his good foot and helped him to the back. Ryan noticed pride, and even a hint of jealousy, on Gorilla's face, as though he wished *he* was the one with broken bones, being helped backstage.

Another voice came over the PA. "Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for coming out and watching NWWA wrestling. Be sure to come back next Friday night for more NWWA action! And remember, if you were drinking, don't even think about driving." Ryan saw Sheriff Littleton on the mic. He was glad to see a familiar face and worked his way over.

"Sheriff Littleton."

The sheriff turned around and smiled. "Ryan. How's it going?"

"Good. That was a crazy match."

"Oh yeah—sure was. A doozy," Littleton said. "I hope Mickey and Dylan will be okay."

"What do you mean?"

“Mickey and Dylan. They got banged up pretty bad.”

“I thought it was fake?”

Sheriff Littleton laughed. “Not hardly. Everyone in this place knew Mickey would win, and the punches and holds don’t hurt much, but all the bumps, cuts, bruises, and breaks? Those are as real as today. Wanna see?”

Before answering, Ryan found himself following Littleton toward the curtain leading to the locker room.

\* \* \*

Backstage, wrestlers traded tights and wrestling boots for jeans and gym shoes. A small crowd had gathered at the far side of the room, where Gorilla stitched one of the cuts in Mickey’s head while a doctor watched. Mickey refused to let anyone other than his father stitch him up; he figured as many times as Gorilla was stitched up in his time, he’d remember how it felt and go easy.

Nightshade was taking a shower, carefully cleaning the caked blood from his hair, face, and arms—he would only require a few butterfly closures and some gauze to stop the bleeding. Ryan stared at his ribcage, where a huge bruise seeped through his skin, staining it like a huge purple and yellow orchid. Each time

Nightshade rubbed his head, he winced in pain, struggling to catch his breath.

It was obvious most of the people backstage were hurting. Ryan was amazed that through it all, they still cracked smiles and even made jokes. The Weyauwega Weasel, now in faded Levis and a ratty *Mötley Crüe* T-shirt, looked at Gorilla and said, “Hey, Mr. Z—before you close that gap up, be sure to push that little piece of brain back in his head...he needs all he can get.” Mickey smiled and pushed his tongue between missing teeth.

“If you had *half* a brain, you’d have grabbed it for yourself, Corky!” Mickey said, causing everyone—including the weasel—to laugh.

Sheriff Littleton excused himself from Ryan to speak with Gorilla as the old wrestler finished the stitch job on his son. They looked Ryan's way a couple times before the sheriff wandered back.

“Well, Ryan—I need to head out to the parking lot and remind the drunks not to drive.” He extended his hand; Ryan shook it. “I imagine it's been quite a strange day for you. Trust me, things are normally much more calm around here.”

Ryan smiled politely and nodded, hoping the sheriff was telling the truth.

Sheriff Littleton left the locker room as the doctor finished wrapping Mickey's wrist and helped him up on a crutch. The doctor looked Nightshade's way as the bruised wrestler toweled off. "You want to ride with us to the hospital, Dylan?" the doctor said.

Nightshade picked up his clothes, wrapped the towel around his midsection, and said, "Yeah, think I better this time. Fuck clothes—this shit hurts."

"I'll catch up with you guys in a bit," Gorilla said.

The three left through the back door.

"Will they be all right?" Ryan said.

Gorilla laughed. "Yep, they sure will. Won't be doing that again anytime soon, and Mickey may be down a bit longer than usual, but they always pull through."

"That was crazy."

"That's what people wanna see. That's what these guys wanna do."

"I thought it was all fake," Ryan said. Before Gorilla could answer, the person collecting money at the door wheeled up with a cashbox.

"Good haul tonight, Mr. Z."

"Thanks, Ollie."



Gorilla took the box, and Ollie wheeled away to talk with the wrestlers.

“Don’t tell *him* wrestling’s fake,” Gorilla said.

“What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t wheel around in that chair to pick up chicks. Wrestling’s about as fake as his chances of ever walking again.”

“That happened in the ring?” Ryan said.

“Sure did. He used to be really acrobatic—something else to watch. Went by *Oliver Twist*, but never again. And a warning—never talk about it around Grizz, he gets touchy.”

“How come?”

“Cause he did it to him.”

“What happened?”

“Bad piledriver,” Gorilla said. “Ollie’s lucky he’s alive. Grizz stopped wrestling after that. Won’t even watch anymore.”

“Man...”

“Yeah. The outcomes may be scripted, but accidents *do* happen. Even when everything goes off as planned, it’s rough in that ring.”

“I’ll be sure to stay away,” Ryan said.

“Well, if you ever decide you want to try, we hold lessons in the barn out back.”

Ryan wanted to ask what Gorilla and the sheriff were talking about when they looked his way, but he didn't want to seem pushy. He feigned a yawn, instead.

“Whew, I've had a day,” he said. “I think it's time for me to head home.”

Gorilla shook his hand and said, “What are you doing tomorrow morning?”

“I'm not sure, yet,” Ryan said. “Unpacking...organizing.”

“A few of us are gonna go for a walk in the woods,” Gorilla said. “Look for Billy Babitzke. You're welcome to come with. Eddie asked me to ask you.”

“What time?” Ryan said, as though his schedule were actually full. The thought of waking up and looking for a body in the woods wasn't high on his list of things to do on a Saturday morning.

“Crack of dawn. We're meeting here, and breakfast's on the house.”

“Yeah, if I'm up, I'll swing by.” Ryan made his way for the curtain. “I'll seeya.”

“All righty. Drive safely,” Gorilla said.

“I’m walking.”

“That’s right—you’re just up the hill,” Gorilla said while knocking on his head. “It’s gonna take me a few times to remember. You have a nice night, Ryan.”

“You too.”

As Ryan stepped through the doorway, he heard Gorilla holler, “Okay boys, gather round. Payout time!”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Ryan woke up early, even though he stayed up later than usual, watching reruns of his old show to pass the time. He hoped, by staying up late, that he wouldn't feel guilty if he slept in and skipped the outing with Gorilla and Sheriff Littleton. The thought of waking up before dawn, eating breakfast with a group of men he barely knew, and then going into the woods to look for the body of a kid no one seemed to like wasn't Ryan's idea of a great Saturday morning. Coffee, sugary breakfast cereal, and cartoons was.

He made his way downstairs to feed Slobberknocker. Slobby slumbered on his rug, breathing heavily into a puddle of

drool, making little bubbles. He stirred at the sound of human feet on the floor. He looked up at Ryan, waiting for him to dump a can of Alpo in his bowl, before stretching and making his way over to eat. Ryan started a pot of coffee and checked the dog door. Smack dab in front of the door was another gift from Slobby. “I give you a door of your own, Slobby, and you still shit inside?”

Slobberknocker gave Ryan a look and kept eating. Ryan felt, had the bulldog been able to speak, he would have said, “*You have opposable thumbs and can’t install a damn dog door?*”

Ryan cleaned up the mess, went back to the kitchen, and poured himself a big bowl of Lucky Charms. After years of preparing the finest food late into the night and staying in restaurants until early morning, Ryan either ate leftovers, or went home to a big bowl of something simple, like cereal. Most chefs he knew did the same—either meeting in closed kitchens and sharing some of the best food in the city with their contemporaries, or eating cereal alone while half watching infomercials. Now that Ryan didn’t have to worry about the stresses of running two restaurants, he enjoyed taking the time to prepare gourmet meals for himself.

He still couldn’t kick the cereal habit, though.

Slobby gave him a sad look; Ryan grabbed a green marshmallow clover and threw it toward the dog's face. Slobby sucked it out of midair and went back to finishing Alpo. When Ryan went to the refrigerator to get milk, he remembered the strange dream he had.

He dreamed he was in a wrestling ring—no big surprise given the previous evening's entertainment. He spent the better part of the night thinking about what people put their bodies through, all in the name of sports entertainment. Ryan dreamed he was wrestling a giant man dressed in leather bondage gear. Ryan ran around the ring, trying to avoid the giant, as the crowd laughed. He realized they weren't laughing at their difference in size or the action taking place before them—they were laughing because Ryan was completely naked.

The laughter intensified, and over the roar of the crowd, Ryan heard the familiar cackle of his ex-wife. She stood in the giant's corner, wearing her wedding dress. In her hands, she held a photograph of the two of them taken on their wedding day. When the giant finally got a hold of Ryan and worked him over in the corner, smashing his head against the turnbuckles, Francesca ripped up the photo and threw it in his face.

It hurt more than any chair hit.

The crowd began chanting, “MID-GET-HEAD! MID-GET-HEAD! MID-GET-HEAD!” Ryan had no idea what they meant, until he turned around toward the giant and was met with a midget against his forehead.

*WHAM!*

Just like a folding metal chair.

*WHAM!!! WHAM!!!*

The giant beat him with a midget in a wrestling mask. The final blow knocked Ryan to the mat; he thought he felt blood flowing from his forehead. The giant kicked him from the ring, to the hard ground below.

Ryan looked up to see Francesca, now dressed as a dominatrix, straddling his chest. She no longer laughed. She leaned over Ryan and slowly let a gob of spit fall onto his face.

When he woke up, Slobby was on his chest, drooling on his nose. The dog Ryan bought to keep him company after the divorce often woke up his “master” in bed, before making his way downstairs to nap some more before Ryan finally made it downstairs for feeding time.

Slobberknocker finished his breakfast and wandered Ryan's way, hoping whatever was in the cereal bowl would somehow become his. Ryan ignored Slobby and made his way to the living room to see what cartoons were on. His love of cereal and Saturday morning cartoons was a source of constant ridicule from his ex-wife, who believed pouring sugar into a bowl, covering it with milk, and watching cartoons was a piss-poor excuse of a way to start a weekend. In her mind, fucking, and then pretending they loved each other for the few moments following, was much better.

Slobby placed his sticky jewels on Ryan's shin and looked up with his big, sad eyes, hoping for some cereal. Ryan tossed a yellow moon marshmallow toward the rug near the front door and Slobby got the hint. Whenever Ryan wanted some time to himself, he tossed whatever Slobberknocker was begging for far away from him, knowing the lazy dog wouldn't make the effort to walk all the way back for more. After a bowl of Alpo, Slobby was ready to sleep again anyway, so he made his way to the rug, slurped up the marshmallow, and dozed off.

Ryan turned on the TV and thumbed through channels on the remote. Cartoons just weren't the same to him anymore. They used to be fun, but now he felt they were little more than extended



commercials for toys, movies, and breakfast cereals. He stopped on a cartoon that he didn't get, but always watched anyway. On screen, close-up shots of a pulsating blue frog with orange spikes on its head were intercut with equally dramatic shots of something Ryan could only describe as a vibrating, purple sea urchin with a spiked tail and lobster claws. They cut back and forth while a kid with huge eyes boasted to an evil, old wizard how he was the best trainer in the world.

Kids lived for this crap.

Ryan started eating his bowl of Lucky Charms just in time to be interrupted by a knock on the door. He sat still, hoping if he didn't answer, whoever was there would just go away. But they weren't about to give up so easily; there was another knock—this one a bit louder—at the door. Slobby looked at Ryan as if saying, *“You gonna get that? I'm trying to sleep here...”*

So much for a peaceful morning all to himself—there was another knock.

Ryan whispered, “I have a fuckin' doorbell,” as he set the bowl down on the coffee table and got up. Slobberknocker was visibly annoyed with having to move from the rug to give Ryan room to open the door. One minute Ryan was telling him to lie

down, and the next he was telling him to move—poor Slobby sure lived a rough life. Ryan opened the door and was greeted by Gorilla, Sheriff Littleton, and Harvey Beacham.

“Mornin’ sunshine,” Gorilla said. “You didn’t come out to the restaurant, so we figured you were running late.” Before Ryan could say he planned to stay in, Gorilla handed Harvey a coffee mug and poured coffee for Ryan from a plaid Thermos. In the chilly morning air, it steamed like a tiny fog machine.

“Here ya go—this’ll knock the cobwebs loose. Get a jacket and let’s go!” Gorilla seemed exceptionally chirpy.

“I was just sitting down to eat,” Ryan said.

“Got that covered, too.” Gorilla pulled a large mug from beneath his jacket and handed it to Ryan. It was full of scrambled eggs, vegetables, cheese, and sausage. Gorilla pulled a plastic fork from his pocket and stuck it in the mixture.

“Breakfast in a mug, delivered straight to your door. How’s that for northern hospitality?”

“I appreciate it,” Ryan said, “but I don’t think I’m going to tag along.”

Gorilla looked hurt.

“I just sat down to eat. And I have some things I need to work on today.”

“I see,” Gorilla said. “You’ll be missing out on a beautiful morning. Sun’s coming up—you can see your breath.” He exhaled to prove it. “It’s the kind of morning that lets you know you’re alive.”

Ryan found it hard saying no when people were insistent.

“Good way to see some of the prettier parts of town,” Gorilla added.

Ryan should have simply said, “I just want to stay in this morning,” but he said, “Let me get my coat,” instead.

\* \* \*

Ryan drank strong coffee and ate a hearty omelet from a mug in the back of Littleton’s cruiser on the way to the woods. Harvey, who sat beside him, watched every sip and bite, making Ryan self-conscious.

“That was funny how your dog was eating your cereal,” Harvey said.

When Ryan stepped inside to grab his coat before heading out, Slobberknocker was on the coffee table, lapping up Lucky Charms.

“Yeah, he does stuff like that,” Ryan said.

“I used to have a dog,” Harvey said. He looked out the window the rest of the ride and said nothing more.

“Ever been in the woods up here, Ryan?” Gorilla said from the front passenger seat.

“When I was a kid, my parents used to bring me up here.”

“Did they take you to the back woods?”

“Nah, mainly just campgrounds and stuff. We always came up in the summer.” Ryan said.

“Well you’re in for a treat.”

Ryan saw what Gorilla meant. The road wound through pines, maples, and oaks; up and down hills and around old farms. The combination of leaves changing red, yellow, and orange wasn’t anything new to him, but this far north, evergreens served as a backdrop, popping the colors out more than he’d ever seen before. Gorilla cracked his window, allowing cold air to swirl about and bring the outside smells inside, where they mingled with the scent of coffee and breakfast. Gorilla looked back at Ryan.

“How ‘bout that?”

Ryan smiled and nodded. “Yeah, that’s nice. I could get used to this.”

Just as Ryan was settling in for what he was hoping would be a long ride in the middle of nowhere beyond his house, Littleton pulled the cruiser off the road and parked on the wide shoulder.

Ryan stepped from the car and listened to the leaves crunching beneath his feet. As Gorilla stepped from the car, Ryan heard Gorilla's spine crunching beneath his weight. Gorilla took slow steps—hearing him walk after sitting for any length of time was like listening to the popping and crackling of a campfire. He cringed as tiny sparks of pain shot up and down his spine, legs, and arms. He turned to Ryan and said, "Don't ever take up wrestling, kid."

Sheriff Littleton went to the back of the car, opened the trunk, and hauled out a small backpack. He looked into the woods and said, "Well, everyone ready?"

"Do you think Billy's body is really in the woods, Eddie?" Harvey said. "I'm afraid of ghosts."

Littleton put his hand on Harvey's shoulder, calming him instantly. "The only thing we're gonna find in those woods is a very pretty morning. No body—no ghosts."

"You promise?"

"I promise, Harvey."

Gorilla creaked over to offer more assurance that the sinister spirit of Billy Babitzke didn't wander Bathmore Forest.

"Sheriff's right, Harv. Billy probably left town is all. He wouldn't be the first, and definitely won't be the last."

"Then why are we out here?" Harvey said.

Gorilla smiled. "Close your eyes, Harvey."

Harvey closed them. Ryan closed his, too.

"Good. Now be quiet and breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Slowly."

Harvey and Ryan both inhaled deeply and released their breath to the chilly air, making tiny clouds.

"Do it again. Just relax. And listen..."

Leaves scattered about on the breeze. Even on the side of the busiest highway Ryan had seen in the area, there were no sounds of civilization. No planes in the air, no distant tires on pavement. No hum of engines, or feet pounding pavement. Just the peaceful sounds of the north woods. Exactly what Ryan needed.

"Okay, Harv, open your eyes."

Ryan and Harvey opened their eyes and looked around.

"Relaxing, isn't it?" Littleton said.

"Yep, it sure is." Harvey smiled.

“That’s why we’re here.” Gorilla pulled his gloves from his pockets and put them on. “Let’s go find some more of that, huh?”

They kicked their way through the leaves and entered the forest. In places, the leaves were ankle deep, a soft bed of colors drowning in the scent of pines. Nobody spoke; each was content with the crisp, morning walk and nothing more. They twisted their way around the trees for half an hour before Littleton finally spoke.

“See Harvey, nothing bad out here, huh?”

“Nope. It’s pretty.” Harvey looked around and laughed.

“What’s so funny, Harvey?” Gorilla said.

“I sure hope the hodag don’t get us.”

Gorilla and Littleton smiled.

“What’s a hodag?” Ryan said.

“You better hope you own a gun to protect yourself from the hodag.” Harvey said.

“I don’t own a gun. What’s a hodag?”

“You gonna tell him?”

“No, Harvey, I think you should,” Littleton said.

“It’s a monster! A big, purple monster that eats people in the woods. I hope it don’t get us.” He went back to laughing like a troublemaker in school about to play a prank on the teacher.

“Yeah, Harvey—you’re right. I’d hate for it to get us,” Gorilla said. “Maybe you should run up ahead and see if you can spot one. Make sure we’re safe.” He winked at Harvey, who got the hint and trudged up the trail before them.

“What was that all about?” Ryan said.

“Just go along with him,” Littleton said.

“What’s a hodag?”

“It’s an old legend up here,” Gorilla said. “A guy supposedly caught one near Rhinelander in the late eighteenth hundreds. It’s got sort of a bull head and a dinosaur body with a spiked tail. Goofiest thing you’ll ever see. There’s a big fiberglass hodag in Rhinelander—you’ll have to drive out there and look sometime. Harvey’s obsessed with it.”

Ryan tossed his usual etiquette aside and said, “Is he retarded?”

Gorilla searched for the kindest description. “God sometimes gives those who aren’t his brightest creations certain talents and abilities. You really have to see some of his sculptures—simply amazing. He’ll probably give you one, too.”

That answered Ryan’s question.



They walked up the trail and heard Harvey giggling behind a tree.

“Act scared,” Gorilla whispered.

“*RARRRR!!!*” Harvey shouted, leaping out before them.

Gorilla grabbed his chest in a mock heart attack and fell flat on his back. Sheriff Littleton yelled in fake terror. Ryan was genuinely startled—not from Harvey, but from Littleton's and Gorilla's reactions. Harvey pointed at Ryan.

“Hahahahaha...scared you, didn't I? You thought I was the hodag!”

Littleton helped Gorilla to his feet. “Yeah, Harvey, we sure did. You scared us good.”



## CHAPTER NINE

As they approached a clearing, Ryan saw a long length of yellow ribbon wrapped around some of the trees in the distance. When they got closer, he realized it was police tape. Maybe Barb was right, maybe someone *had* killed Billy and dumped his body in the woods. Ryan wondered if they'd see the body; he wondered how Billy was killed. Would there be blood? Would there be worse? In a sick way, he found himself hoping so.

They reached the line of tape and Littleton said, "We're here." He set his backpack down and unzipped it.

Sheriff Littleton pulled out a shiny yellow jumpsuit. He slid into it like a second skin, pulling the hood up and then taut against his head. He returned to the backpack and pulled out what appeared to be a beekeeper's helmet and hood. Littleton pulled the mask on and Gorilla grabbed a roll of duct tape from the pack as Littleton pulled on thick leather gloves. Without explaining what they were doing to Ryan, Littleton and Gorilla sealed the area around Littleton's boots, gloves, and the beekeeper's mask with duct tape. Littleton looked like a post-apocalyptic scuba diver about to take a swim into toxic sludge.

"Be right back." Littleton ducked beneath the tape line and trotted off along an tiny trail.

"So you think they found Billy?" Ryan said.

"Who found Billy?" Gorilla answered.

"That's what I'm asking. Do you think they found him?" He ran his hand along the yellow tape. It felt old, almost brittle.

"Oh, the tape!" Gorilla said. "Eddie put that here awhile ago. Boxed off a big area out here to keep people away from the cave."

Ryan thought about Chicago. You could build a twelve-foot concrete fence, top it with constantino wire, and people would still

get into where you were trying to keep them from going. In the north woods, a simple line of tape kept Promise's honest inhabitants away and safe from harm.

"What was with the suit?" Ryan said.

"He's going to check near the cave," Gorilla said. "The suit's to protect him from Earl bugs. They usually aren't too bad this time of the year, but they're still out there. Better safe than sorry, ya know?"

Ryan nodded and looked around. He noticed faint orange anarchy symbols painted on some old oaks in the distance, but didn't bother asking about them. He decided to let his escorts do whatever it was they were doing—no questions asked.

About ten minutes later, Littleton trotted back.

"No sign of anything around the cave." He struggled with the headpiece. "Help me out of this thing?"

Gorilla stepped over and checked the suit out before removing the duct tape and helping Littleton remove the mask. He handed the mask to Ryan, who put it in the backpack. Littleton wiggled his way free from the jumpsuit and tossed it to Ryan. It hit him in the chest, and he scooped it up with both arms before putting

it in the pack and zipping up. He helped the sheriff pull the pack on and the four started out of the woods.

“That was a nice way to start the day, huh?” Harvey said.

“Yeah, it sure was,” Ryan said. “Thanks for dragging me away from the house.”

“No problem,” Gorilla said.

They made their way back to the cruiser and climbed in. Gorilla left the window cracked, and the cool air blew in Ryan’s face. It was the kind of memorable morning he dreamed of having when he decided to move to the north woods.

“Ow!” He swatted his neck.

“What?” Sheriff Littleton said, looking back in the rearview mirror.

“Something pinched me.” Ryan felt along his neck and found a small beetle smashed against his collar. He grabbed it and showed it to Gorilla and the Sheriff.

“Is this what I think it is?” he said

“Oh, shit...”

It was the first time anyone heard Gorilla swear in years.

“I’m gonna die, aren’t I?” Ryan said

Gorilla did his best to not look worried. “Now don’t go saying that.”

“But that’s what’s going to happen, right? You guys said there’s no cure.”

“Just take it easy,” Sheriff Littleton said.

“How the fuck am I supposed to take it easy when I’m gonna die?!”

Nobody in the cruiser had an answer.

Ryan thought about dying a lot. When he was ten, his parents were killed in a car wreck coming home early from a Christmas party where his father worked. They were hit head-on by his father’s boss, who was running late, but began celebrating early. The first cop to arrive on the scene said he was amazed that someone so drunk could have made it that far down the highway. Ryan went to live with his grandmother on Christmas Day.

The following year, his grandmother got up to answer the telephone while knitting. Knitting needles in hand, she tripped in the tangle of yarn around her feet. She fell onto the needles, which found their way straight through her heart. She died on the floor, several feet from the telephone. Ryan found her later that day, an outstretched arm reaching for help. It scarred him for years.

His parents and grandmother weren't the only members of his family to die suddenly and strangely. Aunts, uncles, and even a younger brother who was electrocuted while helping hang Christmas lights when they were younger, paved the way. After a nice walk in the woods, it looked like Ryan would soon join them. It seemed fitting.

"You hang on back there, pal," Gorilla said. "We're almost to Earl's."

"I thought you all hated Earl?"

"Most people do," Littleton said, "but your life depends on him right now."

"Wonderful."

They pulled up before a drab, cockroach brown ranch house that seemed a fitting residence for the bug guy. The sheriff slammed the car into park, and before Ryan could open his door, Littleton had him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"I'm not dead," Ryan said, almost laughing. "I can walk, sheriff."

Littleton got to the stoop and set Ryan down. "Sorry about that," he said, ringing the doorbell. "Sometimes I get a little carried away."

There was no answer; Littleton rang the bell again.

“I don’t think he’s home, Eddie,” Gorilla said.

“He only goes two places in this town: your place and the cave. Your place is closed, we didn’t see him at the cave, so he’s got to be here.” He banged on the door. “Earl, open up! It’s an emergency.”

Nothing.

“A *bug* emergency!” Harvey shouted.

The door opened. While the day was just beginning for most, Earl already had a beer and cigarette in his hand.

“What do you want?” Earl said.

Littleton pointed to Ryan. “He was bit. Near the cave.”

Earl opened the door and ushered everyone inside.

The interior of his house surprised Ryan. Looking at Earl, one would expect a disheveled house covered in crumbs, but it was immaculately clean. Sterile, even.

“Where were you bit?” Earl said. “Do you have the specimen?”

Ryan pointed to the bite and handed the Earl bug to its father—Ryan held on to it the entire ride.



“*Lacteus crustaearli*, all right,” Earl said. He examined the bite. “Yep, definitely.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Gorilla said.

“Nope, he is screwed. Sorry.”

“Come on, Earl. Not even an antivenom you’re dying to test out on someone?” Littleton said.

“Sorry, not even that. I am working on it, but I have nothing more than notes right now.”

“Notes are something,” Littleton said. “Is there anything in them that can help?”

“I am sorry,” Earl said, “these things take time.”

“Any advice, then?” Gorilla said.

“I would tell him to call his family and say goodbye.”

Littleton shook his head in disgust. “Let’s get him to the hospital. And Earl, if I find out you had something here that could have helped, I’ll arrest you.”

“On what charges?”

“Being cold hearted.”

“There is no law against that.”

“There is in my town.”

\* \* \*

Littleton turned on the cruiser's sirens and lights for the twenty-five mile run to the nearest hospital. After being injected with known remedies for other venomous bites, Ryan asked the attending doctor, "Am I going to die?"

"We've done all we can do."

"So that's a yes?"

"It's my understanding that there's no cure," the doctor said.

"But we're doing all we can."

"I want to go home," Ryan said.

"You're in a safe place," the doctor said. "It's best that we keep you under observation and keep trying."

"I don't want to die in a hospital."

"We're doing all we can to ensure that doesn't happen, Mr. Shifflett."

Ryan turned to Sheriff Littleton. "They can't legally hold me, can they?"

Littleton shook his head *no*. "But it's probably best to stay here and see what can be done."

"I'm going home."

\* \* \*

Ryan had Littleton drop him off at home and asked him to check on him the following morning. Littleton, Gorilla, and even Harvey understood.

“You have about twenty-four hours to live,” Gorilla said. “Eight should be pretty pain free, so make them good.” He gave Ryan a hug goodbye.

The hug surprised Ryan; he hardly knew Gorilla. “I feel like this is all my fault,” the old wrestler said. “You probably just wanted to stay in this morning. If you’d like me to sit with you, or help out in any way, just say the word.”

“I really appreciate that,” Ryan said, “but I’d like to be alone with my thoughts.”

“I understand. Still, if you need anything, just yell.”

“Thank you,” Ryan said.

Harvey was the next to hug him. “I’m sorry the Earl bug got you. At least it was a pretty morning.”

“Yeah,” Ryan said.

“Make sure your dog doesn’t eat all your cereal.”

“I will.”

“Would you like me to check on you later?” Littleton said.

“I appreciate that, but I’d like to be alone.”

Sheriff Littleton clapped him on the shoulder and then handed him a card with his number.

“You change your mind and need anything—*anything*—just give me a call.”

The three headed back to the cruiser, but were stopped by Ryan.

“Hey, guys!” he said.

They turned around.

“Thanks. I really would have liked it here.”

“We’ve loved having you,” Sheriff Littleton said. “Take care.”



## CHAPTER TEN

Like anybody else in Promise, even Sheriff Littleton was nervous when going near the Babitzke household. Barb's children charged around the front yard like feral canines, yipping, howling, and snapping at one another. Stabbing and hitting things seemed to be a hobby for the boys; it was like watching a small tribe of dirty cherubs practicing for a big kill.

As Littleton approached the yard, he noticed one of the middle Babitzke boys hanging upside-down from a low tree limb, thrashing about like he had rabies. He held one of his father's hunting knives, and as he swung back and forth from the branch, he

stabbed the same piece of ground repeatedly—with amazing accuracy—creating a cloud of dust that coated his dingy blond hair.

One of the older boys smacked one of the youngest across his bare back with a tree branch. The Babitzke boys went shirtless until the first snow, and even then, it was not uncommon to see them, even in the dead of winter, charging out of the house wearing only long underwear. The older boy continued swinging the branch, crisscrossing the younger boy's back with white, chalky scratches until a sturdy blow finally snapped the piece of wood in half and the deeper areas of the marks turned red with blood. Put the Babitzke boys on the same island as the shipwrecked kids from *Lord of the Flies* and the island would belong to the Babitzkes in no time. Not even the approach of the sheriff had an effect; they all continued with their feral little ways.

Sheriff Littleton didn't have the authority to stop everything going on in the front yard, but an eleven-year-old thrashing around with a Buck knife was within his boundaries. He approached the upside-down boy and said, "Hey, there. Which one are you?" Littleton knew everybody in the tiny town, but when it came to remembering the names of all the Babitzke boys, even their own parents had a tough time.

“Bernie,” the wild Babitzke boy said.

“That’s really good there, Bernie” Littleton said, pointing to the hole the kid had made in the dirt with the knife, “but you shouldn’t be playing with that. Can I have the knife?”

The upside-down boy flipped the knife, and for a moment Littleton thought he was going to throw it at him, but he grabbed it by the top of the blade and presented it—handle first—to Sheriff Littleton. When the sheriff took the knife, Bernie unlocked his legs from the branch and fell onto the ground with his shoulders, where he rolled into a somersault, vaulted across the front yard, and tackled one of his siblings. Littleton made it to the front door and rang the doorbell.

Barb Babitzke answered the door; she held a Bible in her hand. She had given up on most of her offspring, but felt there was still hope for her youngest, Bobby Junior. She read the Bible to him daily, hoping the words would sink in and work their magic. Even Sheriff Littleton, ever the optimist, suspected that when it came to the Babitzke litter, not even the *Word of God* could make a difference.

“Hi, Barb,” Littleton began. “We checked around town for Billy this morning.”

“Please tell me you found something, Eddie.”

“I’m sorry, we have nothing,” Sheriff Littleton said. “It looks like Billy just left.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Barb said. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Lots of young men leave this town.”

“I know,” she said. “But I just know something bad happened to him. I just feel it. A mother just knows things.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong—you know that. I’m just saying after doing what we can do, things point to Billy just leaving.”

Barb stopped talking and gave crying her full attention. Sheriff Ed Littleton didn’t like seeing his friends hurting. He took his job seriously—these were the people he was sworn to protect, the people who counted on him to make everything right.

“Hey, now, Barb. It’s gonna be okay,” he said, sliding into his native accent. Littleton felt it was important to carry no accent with him when he was in uniform, but there were times he knew people wanted to be reminded he was still one of them. “How ‘bout this? How ‘bout I call in someone from outside to investigate? Would that make you feel any better?”



“Who?”

“Well,” he said, not sure himself. “Well, how ‘bout I dig around some more and try finding enough signs saying something’s not right. Then maybe I can get somebody from the state in to look around. You like that idea?”

Barb looked up at the sheriff, her face red and puffy. She snorted and said “Yeah, that would be great.”

“Okay, then. I’ll try finding something, then call around and see if I can get someone in here to help us out.”

“You really found nothing?” Barb said.

“Yeah. The only eventful thing that happened this morning was the new guy in town, Ryan, was bitten by an Earl bug.”

Barb took a deep breath and covered her mouth with the Bible. “Oh, no...”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“Will he be—“ she said, cutting herself short when the obvious answer connected somewhere in her brain. “I’ll pray for him...”

“That’s about all that’s left to do,” Littleton said.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ryan spent the day preparing to die. He played with Slobberknocker, letting him drool all over him and the furniture, not giving a shit about the mess. He made lunch, wondering when he would feel the effects of the venom. He called a couple friends, just to catch up on old times, but he didn't tell any of them he was about to die. He spent the day wondering when it would hurt.

By evening, Ryan felt flushed and was running a fever. He never thought about his last meal, but it seemed like he an occasion meriting something special. He went through a list of some favorites, Rack of Lamb, *Filet de Bœuf à Rossini*, *Veal*

*Saltimbocca*, but in the end, he decided on the basic meal that won over Francesca Barsanti: spaghetti with sauce, salad, a glass of Chianti, and canolli for dessert. Ryan didn't remember too much about his father, but he remembered one particular piece of advice passed from father to son: "In life, your best bet is keeping it basic." Ryan's last meal would have made his father proud.

When he was done, Ryan still did the dishes so he could bask in that feeling of a clean kitchen and full belly as the last rays of light began hiding the world outside. He watched shadows spread across his yard like the venom spreading deeper into every layer of his body. He leaned against the counter, listening to Slobberknocker eating spaghetti, not caring where it ended up after its journey through the dog's digestive tract. He'd be dead by then; all he cared about at the moment was the smell of garlic and Ivory hand soap kept near the sink.

He stayed in the kitchen longer than usual. The antsy feeling never came, and he thought about how content he'd be dying in the kitchen of all places. But he had a few other things he wanted to do before dying. He went to the living room to call his ex-wife.

Throughout the day, he thought about what he'd say to her: how he wished things could have worked, but they weren't meant

to be—they were each too driven and busy. Making a relationship work was simply not at the top of their lists. He wondered if he should tell her he really did love her, even though he never felt that love in return. He wondered if he should tell her one reason he couldn't stand her was jealousy—she was a better chef than him. He was ready to spill his heart and get it all out of his system, but when he called, he got her voice mail.

“Hey, it's me, Ryan...I was just calling to say goodbye. I'm gonna die tonight. I got bit by a poisonous bug.” He ran his fingers through his hair.

“Christ, that sounds goofy, but it's what's happening. I just wanted to say I think I figured out why it didn't work for us. Besides you being a bitch and me an asshole, you're a better cook than me. That's tough to admit, but it's the truth. I realized something today, that we both tried so hard to be what we thought we should be, we were never what we are. Maybe it's the poison talking, but I want you to know I don't hate you. I hope you think about what I said, because life's too short to act your way through it. Don't worry too much about what you think you should be, Francesca...just be what you are. Take care.”

He hung up the phone, belched, and immediately called back.

“Oh yeah,” he said, relishing the taste of the burp. “Never forget: no matter how much better a cook you are than me, my red sauce will *always* be better than yours!”

Ryan sat back in his favorite chair, wishing he could call his parents or other relatives, but he really was alone. He dozed off. When he woke up, the house was dark. His stomach ached, but it wasn't as painful as he thought it would be. He went upstairs to try taking a shit, but had no luck—just cramps. He hopped in the shower.

It felt like his fever broke; the warm water on his neck felt good. He masturbated while trying to think of every girl and woman he ever had a thing for. He saved the release for Tasha Sommers, a cheerleader who drove him crazy during his teen years. He tried imagining what she looked like all grown up. She was the first person he *really* thought about while masturbating, so it was fitting she also be the last. He stepped out of the shower, toweled off, and looked in the mirror, staring at the bite on his neck.

Then he climbed into bed, prepared to sleep forever.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Ryan was awakened by the sound of scraping—something was on the front porch. He put on his robe and grabbed the hammer he kept on his nightstand for occasions like an intruder on his front porch at four in the morning. He made his way downstairs, and from the living room, he made out a figure standing near the front of the door. A tall figure, like a giant. He crouched down and went to the phone to call Sheriff Littleton.

As he crawled along the floor, Slobberknocker trotted up and licked his face. It was obvious he'd just had a big drink of water.

“Slobby, no!” Ryan whispered, while thinking a *real* dog would have barked and scared the intruder off, or at least warned its master that someone was there. Instead, the bulldog soaked his face with cold water and drool. When Ryan got to the phone and saw the figure on the porch from a different angle, he realized something strange: it had wings.

He set the receiver down.

Ryan grabbed a candle from its stand on the coffee table and threw it toward the front door, hoping some noise would startle whatever was standing on the porch. The candle hit the wall, making a small hole. The figure didn’t move, though. In a rare wave of courage, Ryan ran to the front door and threw it open, claw end of the hammer ready to sink its way into the head of the intruder. He didn’t swing the hammer, though; instead, he froze.

Before him stood an angel.

He turned on the porch light and saw the face of a gargoyle. He heard laughing from the bushes at the side of the house.

“Who’s there?”

The laughter got louder.

“I’ve got a gun and a phone,” Ryan said. “I’m calling the sheriff.”

“I thought you said you don’t own a gun.”

“Harvey? Is that you?”

“Yeah.”

“Come out of there.”

“No, you’re gonna shoot me.”

“I’m not gonna shoot you,” Ryan said. “I don’t have a gun.”

“You just said you did.”

“I was just saying that ‘cause...” Ryan thought of the best way to explain to Harvey what he meant. “I just said that ‘cause I thought you were a bad guy.”

“I’m not a bad guy.”

“I know,” he said, stepping past the gothic angel and onto the porch. Ryan noticed a spiked tail poking out from beneath its robes. Harvey climbed from the bushes and came up the stairs, into the light. He pointed at the angel.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes. What is it?” Ryan said.

“It’s the hodag. I’m sorry I scared you in the woods. I wanted to make a pretty hodag for you, so you wouldn’t be afraid of the woods. The woods are beautiful, except for the ghosts and the hodag. I thought you’d be a ghost by now.”



Ryan took a good look at the angel, amazed by its majesty. Its body looked like painted, fired clay, but parts of a polished metal skeleton stuck out here and there. Bronzed armor that very well could have once been the roof of a VW Beetle covered the angel's chest; it held a gleaming sword with a carved bone handle and bronze inlay in its right hand. The face was sculpted. While grotesque, it was somehow beautiful.

“Gorilla told me about angels, and they sure sounded pretty, so I made the hodag an angel so you wouldn't be afraid of the woods when your ghost goes there. Angels protect dead people, so I made him to save you from bad guys.”

Ryan was moved to tears. “Thank you, Harvey.”

“You're welcome. I'll leave you alone now, so you can die.”

“I don't think I'm going to die.”

“But you were bit by an Earl Bug.” Harvey thought for a moment and said, “Do you think my angel saved you?”

“Maybe, Harvey. Stranger things have happened.”

“I bet that's it. I bet the angel I made saved you.”

Harvey shivered in the cold morning air.

“Why don’t you come inside where it’s warm, Harvey. I’ll make you breakfast.”

“What about the angel?”

“He’ll be fine there. We can figure out what to do with him later.”

\* \* \*

Ryan made Harvey’s favorite breakfast: French toast. Harvey poked at the meal, as though he were trying to figure something out.

“This is fancier bread than my mom used,” Harvey said.

“Does your mother live in Promise?”

“She’s dead. So’s my real mom.” There was no sorrow in Harvey’s voice, but Ryan didn’t ask Harvey to explain. Slobberknocker sat at Harvey’s feet, waiting for him to drop something. “Is it okay if I give your dog some? He sure is funny looking.”

“Go ahead.”

Harvey dropped a piece of French toast to the floor and Slobberknocker snapped it up before it hit.

“He’s good at that.”

“Yeah, he’s had lots of practice.”

“What are you thinking about?” Harvey said. It surprised Ryan; his attention had wandered to other things after serving Harvey breakfast.

“I’m wondering why I’m not dead.”

“The hodag angel saved you!”

“That’s right,” Ryan said. “Of course.” He noticed Harvey eyeing the last two pieces of French toast. “You can have those if you’d like, I’m full.”

“Thank you.”

The short time Ryan spent in Promise was the strangest week in his life, but the previous twenty hours were simply surreal—a deep-down, life-changing experience.

“Harvey, can we move the angel later today?”

“Okay. I need to get to Gorilla’s and help him set up chairs for church. You should come. Gorilla’s really nice and he doesn’t beg for money like other churches.”

“I need to make a phone call to tell somebody I’m alive, and then I’ll stop by.”

Ryan showed him to the door. The black sky was giving way to deep blue on the horizon. Harvey ran off with all the zeal of a kid trying to catch the last rays of sun on a school night.

When Harvey was out of sight, Ryan tried moving the hodag angel. It didn't budge! He took a running start, hoping to get it rocking so he could move it back from the front door, but even that didn't work. All Ryan's efforts led to was an aching shoulder. He looked for a rut in the yard from Harvey dragging the angel, but there was none. It was like it magically appeared. For all Ryan knew, Harvey could make things float—it sure would explain a lot.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The parking lot at Gorilla's wasn't as full as a Friday wrestling night crowd, but people still had to park on the grass. Ryan made his way inside the restaurant and saw the tail end of one of the strangest church services he ever laid eyes on.

Gorilla delivered his sermon from the wrestling ring, pacing back and forth with all the passion of a tent-revival preacher. He carried a wireless microphone—the same microphone that was used on wrestling night by the Masked Mauler to call out Tommy Thunder for a loser leaves Wisconsin match. Gorilla wore colorful religious robes; they reminded Ryan of a wrestling outfit the way

he worked the ring. Ryan entered just in time to see Gorilla climb to the second rope, rock his head back, and shout, “Do you smell what the Lord is cooking?!” Whether one believed in God, or not, to see Gorilla preach in a wrestling ring—firing up the crowd like he was about to powerbomb evil to the mat and pin it one-two-three—was a sight to behold.

The only available seat was in the back, next to Earl the Bug Guy, who frantically took notes in a notebook. Earl immediately perked up, almost seeming friendly, when he noticed Ryan sitting beside him.

“How are you doing?”

“My stomach's a little upset, but I feel fine,” Ryan said.

“Wonderful!” Earl seemed genuinely concerned. He flipped several pages forward in his notebook and started writing. “Your fever has gone away?”

“Yes,” Ryan said.

“That is great!” Earl wrote some more.

“What are you writing?” Ryan asked.

Earl ignored the question. “So you feel okay?”

“Yes.”

Earl frantically scribbled in his notebook. When Ryan questioned him, Earl waved him off, annoyed. When Ryan tried peeking, Earl covered his notebook with his body, like a student trying to prevent someone from copying test answers in class.

“We’ll have to talk after this bullshit sermon,” Earl said, and then returned to what he was writing before Ryan sat down.

In the ring, Gorilla took a deep breath, met Ryan’s eye, and said, “Isn’t it funny how people come in and out of our lives? How out of the blue, you can meet someone for the first time and feel as though you’ve known them forever? We talk about love, here, a lot. It’s no secret that I love my friends.

“But what is a friend? A friend is someone who gives without looking for a return. Friendship is giving the shirt off your back; it’s about unconditional love.”

Gorilla flipped through his Bible, stopping at a bookmark that fell onto the mat with others, piling up among the bloodstains made during wrestling matches. Holding the Bible high above his head like a championship wrestling belt, he said, “This is perhaps best illustrated in the Bible by the friendship between Jonathan and David. Take a look at First Samuel Eighteen Three and Four: *‘Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as*

*himself. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, including his sword and his bow and his belt.”*

“Jonathan gave David the shirt off his back, so to speak,” Gorilla said before a dramatic pause. “Friendship is gained by giving it away.”

With that, Gorilla stripped away his robes, showing off jeans and a T-shirt reading: I’M GORILLA’S FRIEND! He pulled the shirt off, revealing a gut sculpted by years of hard work, red meat, and dairy products. He balled the shirt up, threw it to Ryan all the way in the back, and said, “There’s the shirt off my back, pal. I’m glad you’re okay...and I’m glad you’re my friend!”

\* \* \*

Gorilla provided a free meal to everybody in attendance following his service. Whether people came to see him preach, or for the free food, there was no arguing he was good at both things.

Mickey, who rested his broken foot on a vacant chair, signaled Ryan over to the “cool table.” Earl stepped in front of Ryan, halting Ryan’s walk to join his new friends.

“Sit with me,” Earl said. “I need to ask you a few things.” He flipped his notebook to a new page. Ryan held up his index



finger, signaling to Mickey that he'd be there in a moment. He followed Earl to his lonely little table away from everybody else. The entire town watched as Ryan sat down beside Earl the Bug Guy.

“Hey, Paco!” Earl said to a waiter in a Mexican wrestling mask. “My pie!”

The wrestler gave Earl the finger and said, “Be right there, sir.”

“They usually have my pie on my table before I sit down,” Earl said as though he were royalty. “Mister Zilligan really needs to stop talking about disciples and discipline his staff.”

A free meal and Earl still complained. Ryan speculated Earl not getting his pecan pie served right away had nothing to do with poor service and everything to do with Earl being an asshole.

“Do not forget my beer!” Earl shouted after the wrestler. Ryan thought about his time spent in cheap diners, coming up through the ranks to become one of Chicago's better known chefs. He started in the kinds of places where the cooks and wait staff spit in obnoxious people's food. Ryan walked from places like that—it was against everything he believed in—but sitting with Earl, he

hoped the waiter was pulling back his mask and hocking a big loogie into the pecan pie or beer.

“So you lived to see morning,” Earl said. “I figured as much.”

“Why didn’t you say anything yesterday, then?”

“I did not want to get your hopes up in case I was wrong. What do you think I am, an asshole?”

“No. I don’t know you,” Ryan said, quickly realizing why nobody liked Earl.

“Well when you get to know me, you will think I am an asshole. Everyone does, but this town is full of touchy-feely pussies if you ask me.”

Ryan never found it too difficult to sit and listen to people most others ignored; something about the way even rude individuals carried themselves genuinely interested him. When confronted by an asshole in his restaurant, Ryan made the most of it—and in some cases—even had fun at the person’s expense. In Earl’s case, however, he wasn’t having fun.

“What can I help you with, Mister—“ Ryan realized he didn’t know Earl’s last name. “What’s your last name?”

“Lankford,” Earl said. He paused a moment, seeming almost confused. “You know, you are the first person here to ever ask me that.” He lit a Lucky Strike and blew the smoke into Ryan’s face, but not on purpose. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Ryan said, fighting the urge to cough. “What can I help you with, Mister Lankford?”

“Earl. Call me Earl.”

“Earl.”

“I have had a theory about *lacteus crustaearli*. I am not surprised you are alive, although these dim-witted, backwoods yokels will probably attribute it to a god that does not exist.”

“What would you attribute it to?” Ryan asked.

“Autumn.”

Ryan gave Earl a sideways look.

“*Lacteus crustaearli*’s venom is seasonal. Or so I have believed. Get bit in the fall and you will feel shitty for a few hours, but you will live. Get bit in the winter, and nothing. Spring: you may live, you may die—depends on the month and how the weather hits. Summer...get bit in the summer, and you are deader than Fred.

“So I am glad you are alive. Not for any sympathetic reason—strictly scientific. I really could not give a shit if you live

or die, but thank you for asking my last name. Now, if you do not mind, Mister Ryan, I have some writing I need to do.”

“It’s been all my pleasure, Mister Bug Guy,” Ryan said. He excused himself to the other table as the waiter in the mask returned with a piece of *Piledriver Pie* and a beer for Earl.

“Please tell me you spit in that,” Ryan said as he passed by.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Ryan sat down at the table with Mickey and Harvey, a plate of bacon, eggs, hash browns, and toast appeared as if by magic by the hands of an enormous wrestler in blue spandex. It looked like Harvey was already on his second plate; perhaps divine forces didn't just give him the ability to sculpt objects defying description, but also gave him the ability to eat whatever he wanted, *whenever* he wanted—without gaining an ounce. Maybe he needed the calories to fuel his metabolism; it had to take a lot of energy to move what Ryan guessed was a 700 pound statue onto his porch at four in the morning.

“I liked the French toast you made this morning,” Harvey said.

“Thank you,” Ryan said. He noticed Mickey looking him up and down.

“How ya feelin’?” Mickey said.

“Hungry,” Ryan took a bite of scrambled eggs, savoring the fluffiness and dripping butter.

“Harvey told us you were doing fine. We were gonna get Sheriff Littleton and check on you before Dad set up for services this morning. We’re all glad you’re okay.”

“I made a hodag angel that saved him from being a ghost!” Harvey said with a mouthful of bacon and hashbrowns. “I saved him from being in the woods with Billy’s ghost!”

“That’s great, Harv,” Mickey said. Ryan wondered if the hardcore wrestler with the broken foot was humoring Harvey, or if he really believed Harvey’s sculpture saved Ryan’s life.

“Does your dog still like cereal?” Harvey said.

“Huh?”

“Remember when we went into the woods to look for Billy’s ghost and your dog was eating your cereal,” Harvey said, as though they’d known each other for years and Slobberknocker

climbed on the coffee table and finished Ryan's Lucky Charms months before. "That was funny how he was eating your cereal like that."

"Yeah," Ryan said, half wishing he'd stayed home. He didn't mind Mickey's company, although he found the big wrestler intimidating, despite his warm demeanor. The way Harvey talked, his speech seemingly controlled by random firing of his synapses, bothered Ryan. He was glad when the more familiar faces of Gorilla, Sheriff Littleton, and Grizz came to the table.

"Hi, Grizz!" Harvey said so enthusiastically that bits of food shot out of his mouth, fortunately landing only on his own plate.

"Hiya, Harv."

"How ya holding up?" Mickey said.

"All right, I guess."

Grizz didn't look all right to Ryan, but he wasn't about to say anything. That didn't stop Harvey.

"Do you think Gertie's a ghost by now?"

Ryan cringed, half expecting Grizz to do something ugly.

"I don't believe in ghosts, Harv. She's gone and buried and that's that. In some ways, that makes me calm—almost at peace with it. And in other ways, it pisses me off so much, there's not

enough stuff I could ever break or hurt to make me feel any better, so I'm not even gonna try."

Surely Gorilla would offer some words, Ryan thought, but there was only silence. Finally, Harvey spoke.

"I don't want to be cremated—I don't like fire. When I die and I'm in the ground, I want my favorite sculpture put above me, because that's who I am and it says more than any words."

"That's beautiful, Harvey," Gorilla said. Ryan was surprised by Harvey's moments of lucidity: one moment, a grown man practically drooling on himself, and the next, a man who said things that stuck.

"What do you want on your headstone, Mickey?" Harvey said, apparently in charge of the conversation.

Mickey looked at Grizz; Grizz nodded okay. Mickey smiled. "When I die, I don't want a headstone."

"If you want one of my sculptures, you can have one," Harvey said.

"Thanks, buddy—that's really nice of you, but I have it all figured out." Mickey ran his fingers along a big scar on his arm. "See this? This is who I am. I got this scar in Japan—fell into a pile of barbed wire from the top of a ladder in a match with Travis Fury.



It's hard to convey what these scars mean to me, but when I finally die, I know what I want marking my grave. I want a signpost.

“I want arrows pointing off in the directions of all the places I've been. I want *Tokyo, 6,000 miles* pointing one way, and *Cape Town, South Africa, 8,500 miles* pointing another. Wrestling's taken me to a lot of places, so it'll be a big signpost.

“People always ask why I do what I do to my body in the ring. I've seen the world and lived harder than most people will even dream of living. Everything I've felt—from the breaks and bruises, to the good times and bad—was real, and when I die, I want people to feel something, too. I want people to stand over me, looking down at my grave. I want them to realize there's a dead body down there—a dead body that lived life to the fullest! I want them to look up at that signpost and have it click in their minds: *Life's short and there's a great big world out there, and one day I'll be dead.* No inspirational words on the signpost—just all the places that dead body below their feet had been. It should say to them, *Go! Live your life and have fun before it's too late!*”

Everybody at the table nodded their heads and smiled.

Harvey turned his attention to Ryan. “If you get bit by another Earl Bug and die, what do you want us to put on your headstone?”

While he spent the entire night before thinking about dying, Ryan didn’t think about a funeral or what he’d want done when he passed. He had a will directing what to do with his assets, but nothing describing an actual service—and not many friends to put one together.

“You know,” Ryan said, “about all I can think of is the typical slab: my name and the date I was born and died. Pretty sad, huh?”

“Yeah,” Harvey said. “Really sad.”

“You sure say what you think, don’t you, Harvey?” Ryan said.

“Yeah.”

“You’re right, though. That’s a pretty boring thing to have sitting above me forever. I guess I need to do something about that—come up with something good, even though it’s going to be hard to beat Mickey or you.”

\* \* \*

On his walk home, Ryan thought about dying. His family had all gone suddenly; many of them in odd ways. He almost followed family tradition with a little bite from a tiny beetle. It seemed everybody else had a plan for being remembered long after their last breath was gone and their reputations were the only thing keeping them alive. Ryan felt outdone.

He had owned two successful restaurants and was one half of a popular cable TV show, but he realized that meant nothing if he didn't reap what came with success. Finally having the courage to close a chapter in his life and begin writing a new chapter in a sleepy north woods town was a step in the right direction, but Ryan wanted to do something crazy—something unlike anything he'd ever thought about before. He wanted to take a blind, running leap at something new, so he turned around and went back to Gorilla's to enroll in wrestling classes.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There were no feral young boys to navigate around on Sheriff Littleton's walk across the Babitzke's front yard this time. While the Babitzke boys hated school and did their best to wreak the Babitzke magic for mayhem in classrooms, the playground, and the lunchroom, with Barb's renewed interest in ensuring her boys grew up to play a decent role in society, her children—to their dismay—spent the day in school.

Sheriff Littleton knocked on the front door, but there was no answer. He noticed Barb's minivan—the vehicle she bought in an effort to at least *appear* like a normal, happy family—wasn't in the

driveway, but he knew Bobby sometimes took it places when his beat up old Maverick wasn't running. He knocked one more time, and when there was no answer, he turned and crossed the yard, heading back to his cruiser. As he opened the car's door, he heard the front door to the Babitzke residence open.

"Can I help you, sheriff?" Standing at the door, looking scraggly and hung over, was Bobby Babitzke in all his glory. He wore dark blue sweat pants and a Budweiser shirt, even though his beer of choice was Old Style. Littleton turned back toward the house, and before he had a chance to speak, Bobby said, "If you're looking for Barb, she's out shopping."

"Actually, I wanted to talk with you, Bobby. If you have a moment?"

"I'm kind of busy," Bobby said while smacking his lips and wiping sleep from his eyes.

"Really?" Littleton said. "Something around the house I can help with?"

"Nah, I just need to get ready. Go looking for work."

"Been working lately?" Littleton asked.

"Here and there."

"That's good. Have you had breakfast yet?"

“Nope, was just getting ready to get a bite to eat. Then I was gonna hop in the shower and get moving.”

Littleton looked at his watch. “Starting a job hunt this late in the afternoon?” It was said in a manner meant to make Bobby think, maybe feel slightly shamed. It was meant to subtly say, *Look, you lousy bastard, I know you would have kept sleeping had I not knocked twice, so give me a couple freakin’ minutes of your precious, lazy time.*

“I overslept,” Bobby said.

“Well, can I ask you a couple questions while you have breakfast?” Littleton said, making it clear he wasn’t leaving.

Bobby Babitzke opened the door for Littleton, shot him a dirty look, and said, “Sure.”

The carpet inside the Babitzke residence was like the grass out front: worn bare in spots from the racing footsteps and concerted destruction of the Babitzke boys. Other than worn carpet and abused furniture, however, Barb kept a clean house. A spicy scent of potpourri masked the smell of her sons’ dirty little scalps and the brewery stench of her deadbeat husband. Family pictures lined the paneled walls: pictures of gap-toothed little boys posing in baseball uniforms before they were kicked off teams for fighting or

swearing; school photos that allowed Barb to pretend for a moment that she hadn't given birth to a litter of monster children, but rather, fine, clean-cut boys who would one day grow up to become model citizens, not criminals; there was even one honest-to-God family photo, taken at the K-Mart in Rhinelander—everybody dressed nicely, smiling, and looking like they were actually enjoying themselves.

The photo that grabbed Littleton's attention most was the photo of Bobby Babitzke hanging over the television. It was taken during his senior year in high school, when he played football. It was a low-angled shot of Bobby, the star quarterback of a school so small, it could barely field a team. The angle made Bobby seem taller than he really was. Bobby's left arm was thrust out in front of him, old-school style—his right arm far behind his head, getting ready to lob a football deep into the end zone, cinching a last-minute victory and securing his status as a local hero. It was a classic pose evoking memories of Bart Starr on the frozen tundra of Lambeau—a hero for a frozen state where there was little more to do than drink, fish, and root for the Pack.

The picture was placed there with a hope—it hung above the television to remind Bobby of his potential as he sat on the

couch, watching Packers games and cop shows while draining cases of beer. It seemed that Barb hoped, that in the depths of a drunken stupor, Bobby might look at the photo, remember that he once thought he'd amount to more than a couch drunk, and get off his ass, be a man, and contribute to the family he sired but resented every day of his life.

Bobby plopped down on the couch obviously serving as his bed the night before. Whether Barb was angry and told him to go sleep in the living room, or if Bobby just couldn't make it to bed (a coffee table full of Old Style cans hinted that was the more likely scenario), it was clear that Bobby Babitzke had a symbiotic relationship with the old piece of furniture.

“I thought you were needing breakfast?” Littleton said.

Bobby bounced back up. “Yeah. Just one of those mornings where it's hard to get started, ya know?”

Littleton ran his fingers along the brim of his sheriff's hat, and then smoothed out wrinkles on his shirt that weren't there. “Most of us call this afternoon.” Bobby got the point—Littleton, Barb, and everybody else in town had woken up hours before and started their day; why couldn't he? Littleton followed Bobby into the kitchen and watched him pour a bowl of Frosted Flakes. He



drowned them in milk, grabbed a spoon, and went to work, standing at the food bar, eating breakfast.

“So what do you need to talk to me about, sheriff?” Bobby’s mouth was full of partially chewed cereal. Milk rolled over his lower lip like water over a spillway—Bobby tried stopping it, but had no luck. It splashed into the bowl and onto the counter. Bobby didn’t care—he knew Barb would get it.

“Just wanted to check on you. See how you’re doing about Billy.”

“Ya know, the kid was trouble. Guess I’m doing all right. If he decided to leave, I sure can’t blame him. If I didn’t have a house full of kids, I’d have left long ago.”

“So you think he left?” Littleton said.

Bobby shoveled another big spoonful of Frosted Flakes into his mouth, but this time, kept it in his mouth as he spoke.

“Probably. Most kids his age do.”

“You’re not worried about him?”

Bobby swallowed and took a couple seconds to think about what Littleton said, as if it were just crossing his mind that his son could have been harmed. “Nah, he’s a tough kid.”

“When did you last see him?”

“Hell, a few days ago. He asked me for some money.”

“How much?”

“Nothing specific. He just asked if he could have some money.”

“How much did you give him?” Littleton said.

“Nothing. Told him if he wanted money that he should go get a job like the rest of society.” The hypocrisy of the statement seemed lost on Bobby.

“Did he say if he was going anywhere? What he needed the money for?”

“Nope, just said he was needing some money. He headed out and that’s the last I saw of him.”

“I know it’s not my place to get involved in personal matters, but for somebody whose son just left home, or maybe something worse...you’re sure taking this pretty easy.”

Bobby set the spoon in the bowl and looked at Littleton. “Look, I didn’t like Billy much—I never tried hiding that. There was always something about that one. So yeah, I’m not taking this hard. I hope nothing bad happened to him—I’m serious—but if he’s in trouble, he brought it upon himself and I’m not going to lose sleep over it, ya know?”

Littleton took his hat off and rubbed his forehead. “Okay, like I said, it’s not my place. I shouldn’t have gone there. But if you hear anything, please let me know. Or at least tell Barb, she’s worried sick about him.”

Bobby nodded his head and said, “Well, I got some job hunting to do.” He walked out of the kitchen and down the hallway, to the bedroom. When Littleton heard the bedroom door close, he wiped up the spilled milk, poured the cereal down the garbage disposal and rinsed the bowl out. The bedroom door opened.

“You don’t have to do that, sheriff,” Bobby said from the bedroom.

“I know.”

The bedroom door closed. Sheriff Littleton looked around, hoping to see some obvious clue that would wrap up a case before really starting. It wasn’t really a case, even—Billy was old enough to leave town, and he definitely wouldn’t be the first young adult to pack it up without telling a soul and leaving Promise. There was nothing from Littleton’s cursory look around the house that said, “Billy Babitzke died here” though.

Sheriff Littleton left the Babitzke residence and sat in the cruiser writing notes and looking around. With some grass seed and

a little paint, the Babitzke house could be a cute place. Instead, the lawn was balding like a desperate door-to-door salesman, and the house paint was scarred from rock fights gone awry and the hands of the dirty little cherubs Barb called her sons.

A few minutes later, behind the house, Sheriff Littleton heard Bobby Babitzke try starting his old Maverick. It didn't turn over, and Sheriff Littleton wasn't about to give him a jump.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ryan had waited all week for the premier of Francesca's show. He made an evening of it, preparing *bracirole di vitello* with a fennel and olive salad and fresh baked bread. He planned to eat in the living room, in front of the TV, instead of at the kitchen table like he usually did.

He thought about getting a TV for the kitchen once, but it was the one place where, no matter how bad things were going, he could always find solace. Listening to Haydn while cooking was akin to a week-long retreat in Ryan's mind, soothing his nerves—even evoking tears of utter happiness on occasion. The frantic pace

of TV commercials, pundits on 24-hours news stations arguing in circles, and loud talk show hosts didn't carry the same promise of easing his nerves. In Ryan's mind, televisions had no place in kitchens.

Ryan made a display of the moment. He dug through his linens, finding only a green and red table runner perfect for the holidays, but a pre-mature birth in autumn. Still, he put it on the coffeetable, along with two chunky candles pulled from a box and destined for his fireplace mantel. He lit the candles and returned with his food.

Slobberknocker was used to seeing Ryan put down bowls of cereal in his favorite chair while watching cartoons, but it was the first time the bulldog ever saw his would-be master putting out a full spread in the living room. With the green and red table runner and the plates of food, it was potentially an early Christmas for Slobby.

"Don't you dare," Ryan said to the true master of the house. "You've had your dinner already." But Alpo was a far cry from braised veal rolls. Slobby gave Ryan *the look*.

"Oh, geez...okay," Ryan said, going to the kitchen to retrieve Slobby's bowl and a towel. He returned and spread the

towel on the hardwood floor and put the bowl of food in the middle. For a moment, Slobby seemed unimpressed, but the chunky dog knew whatever Ryan made beat any slaughterhouse scrap shoved in a can and called food; he went to work in the bowl as Ryan sat down and savored the dish with a bit more class than the grunting, fifty-five pound eating machine on the floor.

The meal was perfect: the veal roll succulent, the roasted pine nuts the right consistency—the currants and *prosciutto* tying it all together. A perfect marriage of flavors. The salad reminded Ryan what he loved best about Italian cuisine: simplicity. The sweetness of the fennel, the slight bitterness from the artichoke hearts, and the bite from the olives—it was a *mélange* needing nothing more than what nature so generously offered. The bread was like something from a commercial, earthy and soft—steaming when pulled apart. To befoul it with butter would almost be a sin—to sop up some of the sauce from the main dish, however, was heavenly. All that, and a glass of *Gaja* chardonnay—life didn't get much better.

Even Slobberknocker savored the meal more than usual. He still wolfed it down in a few quick bites, but Ryan noticed the roly-poly dog consumed the salad first, a roll, and then the *braciolo*.

Ryan finished his glass of wine and said, “If only you drank, you’d truly know heaven, buddy.”

Slobberknocker licked his chops, and then proceeded to lick his nuts, as if saying, “No, *this* is heaven...”

Francesca's show started, and the intro was tight. Various scenes from Tuscany moved across the screen, fading in and out, while classical guitar music played. Rolling hills, vineyards, and rustic buildings flip-flopped with trays of olives and breads, platters of meat, and glasses of wine. It was inviting without being too much, like the first bite of a delicious meal. The final scene, a postcard-perfect image of the countryside, panned to the left, to a terrace at the back of Francesca’s villa where the show was set.

“Hi, I’m Francesca Barsanti, and welcome to *Taste of Tuscany*.”

Her voice was soothing—it always was. Even when she was yelling, that hint of accent drove Ryan wild. When she wasn’t yelling, it was a perfect tone, a voice you could slide into like a warm bathrobe on a Saturday morning.

The chardonnay took hold, giving Ryan’s life a rosy glow. “That’s my ex wife,” Ryan said to Slobby, who was settling in for a nap. “You probably don’t give a shit, huh?”



Slobby yawned, set his jowls on the floor, and closed his eyes.

“Thanks, pal. I can always count on you.”

Ryan had trouble keeping his eyes open as well; he faded in and out as the show continued, struggling to stay awake. Francesca prepared a canellini bean soup with pancetta for starters, and moved on to a roasted pepper chicken.

“When people think of Italian food, they often think of red sauce, garlic, and pasta,” she said. “But, depending on the region, simple soups and roasted meats are just as much a staple of Italian cuisine as pasta dishes.”

She rubbed the chicken with course ground peppercorns while peppering her dialogue with stories about growing up in the region and cooking advice learned from her mother. Ryan was lulled by her voice, teetering between sleep and the waking world. His eyes finally closed, and when he opened them, Francesca was standing in the middle of the kitchen set from their old show. He thought the network was rerunning old episodes, but Francesca was totally nude, save a fig leaf covering her crotch. Her hair fell just over her breasts.

She cooked an apple dish.

The roar of the crowd startled Ryan, who was now looking up at the kitchen set from the floor. The set was on a raised platform—in the middle of a wrestling ring. The crowd laughed and pointed at him; he realized he was covering his crotch with both hands. In the ring, Francesca raised another fig leaf high above her head and said, “Should I give this back to him?”

The crowd bellowed a resounding, “Nooooooooooooo!”

Somebody threw a cup of beer at Ryan’s face. A woman pointed between his legs and shouted, “PEE-WEE! PEE-WEE!” He felt for his penis, feeling only smooth flesh, like a Ken doll.

He looked up at Francesca and the kitchen set. The counter was shaped like a V so both Ryan and Francesca had room to work their culinary wizardry. He wanted to climb back into the ring, to hide behind the counter.

Francesca wouldn’t let him.

She pulled out a metal mallet, hit him in the head, and everything went fuzzy for a moment. He felt her reach out, touching him, and then he felt like he was floating. He waited for the bodyslam, preparing to spread his body out to distribute the landing like he’d seen people do on wrestling night. He waited for the mat, but instead, he hit something hard about waist level. He

smelled seared flesh before hearing the sizzling. Then he felt the pain—he'd been slammed on the grill top!

He struggled to leap up, to actually defend himself, but the grill refused to give up its scorching grip. Ryan tried kicking Francesca, but his legs were tied together with butcher's twine, as though he were some fowl waiting for a roasting pan. He didn't know why, but as he lay cooking on the grill, Ryan tried summoning any happy thoughts about his marriage to Francesca. He remembered his first visit to Francesca's villa in Tuscany—the first time he'd visited that section of Italy. They were cooking on the same terrace where *Taste of Tuscany* was produced. They grilled beef and drank wine—it was still early enough into the marriage that Ryan dared to be playful. While Francesca's back was turned, he dipped his hand into a pitcher of ice water and slung it on Francesca's back.

Later in the marriage, Francesca would have scolded him, telling him he needed to grow the fuck up, but instead she shrieked and laughed and made her way to the pitcher. She returned a barrage, slinging water back at Ryan. They continued back and forth, both getting wet until Francesca finally grabbed the pitcher and emptied what was left over Ryan's head.

Suddenly, Ryan felt like that very moment as he lay on the grill. It was a cleansing cold, like being dunked into a mountain stream. He could trace the water back to the source, following the stream to a heap of melting snow that had fallen from a cloud that was once rising vapor from the lake that fed the stream. He opened his eyes and realized he was still in the wrestling ring, sitting on the grill.

A caped superhero held an empty pitcher of ice water. Ryan opened his eyes, waking up in his chair. In his clouded daze, he swore that just for an instant, the costumed hero was standing over him in the living room. He looked around, shaking the sleep from his head while trying to remember everything he could about the dream.

*Who was that masked man?*



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sheriff Littleton and Earl walked through the brittle leaves blanketing Bathmore Forest. Even though they were on what could turn out to be a somber mission, Sheriff Littleton still took the time to savor every sight, sound, and smell as they made their way toward the cavern's entrance. He took a deep breath.

“Ah! Wonderful day, eh, Earl?”

Earl kept his head down and continued moving forward. He had a strange way of walking, like a scarecrow about to fall over with each step. Drunk or sober, his gait was the same.

Littleton gave it another try. “Day like this...lets you know you’re alive!”

Earl rocked from one side to the other, looking back at Littleton, annoyed. He knew if he didn’t respond, the sheriff would keep babbling. “Yes,” Earl said, rocking a little faster.

Earl had a packback slung over his shoulder; it looked like a blue, alien growth on his lanky frame. Earl was about to light a cigarette when Sheriff Littleton said, “You gonna be able to see down there?”

“Yes,” Earl said. “I have got the head lamp,”

“Good, good...” It bothered Littleton that Earl didn’t talk much. He took another deep breath, savoring the sweet scent of pine needles and distant burning leaves. Then he said, “Do you think we’ll find Billy in the bottom of the cave?” He did his best to study every minute detail of Earl’s reaction, looking for a slight tensing of a muscle, a change in foot speed, or an increase in breathing.

But Earl continued his slog through the woods at a steady pace, and the tiny puffs of breath didn’t fluctuate one bit. “Who knows? We’ll find out soon I guess.”

They walked a bit farther and Earl finally lit the cigarette, stealing the scents of autumn. Burning maple and oak leaves gave way to the sticky odor of unfiltered tobacco leaves rolled in chemical-coated paper.

They made their way through the picture-perfect woods, and into Anarchy Forest. There were some in Promise who wanted to clean up the trees, to scrape away the bark where Billy Babitzke had left his anarchy marks, but Sheriff Littleton didn't find the orange symbols on the trees any less offensive than the orange marks on trees slated for removal when the highway was going to come through town. At least Billy was reacting out of teen angst—not greed.

The anarchy symbols became more frequent, and soon the two approached the boundary of police tape warning people to stay back. Earl's body rocked violently to his left, and in one sick motion he ducked under the police tape, his body seeming to collapse at the middle like a folding ruler, then springing back upright and clumsy on the other side. Littleton stopped at the tape.

“Earl.”

Earl kept walking. “Yeah?”

“The pack. The suit?”

Earl stopped, rocking forward a moment, obviously annoyed. He seemed to swivel at the hips and turn back to the sheriff. He walked back to the tape line and tossed the pack to the ground. Littleton unzipped it and pulled out the *Tychem* jumpsuit.

“Where’s the other one?”

“I do not need it,” Earl said.

“You need it, Earl.”

“No. Not this time of the year. The new guy lived,” Earl said. “He should be dead. The venom is seasonal. Right now, a bite is not even as bad as *latrodectus mactans*.” He waited a moment, and then added, “Black widow.”

“Ah,” Littleton said. “That may be, but maybe Ryan was just lucky. Maybe he didn’t get a deep bite.”

“Trust me, he would be dead. You do not want to get bit, but if you do, you are not going to die right now.”

Littleton pulled the *Tychem* suit on. “Well, I don’t think I’d want to be bitten by a black widow, and I know I don’t want to be bitten by an Earl—“ He paused.

“I know what everybody calls them,” Earl said. “I guess it is too much for you hicks to say *lacteus crustaearli*.”



“There’s a lot of wildlife up here, Earl,” the sheriff said, making sure the suit was secure. “We can’t all remember the scientific name for everything.” Littleton pointed to a squirrel in a tree. “That’s why we call that fella a squirrel.”

“*Carolinensis hypophaeus*,” Earl said.

Littleton pulled on the bee keeper’s helmet and taped the bottom to the suit. “That’s pretty amazing, Earl.” He meant it as a compliment, but something in Earl’s face made Littleton think he took it as an insult.

Earl reached into the pack and pulled out climbing rope, a harness, and gear. He also grabbed a head lamp that, when secured in place on his head, made him look like some strange, cyclopean insect about to spin a web.

*Earlitis assholeius*.

They made their way to the opening in the forest floor, Littleton checking for Earl bugs with each step. “You sure about this?” Littleton said. “I can go back and get the other suit...”

Earl was silent for a moment, and then he said, “I hate climbing in that thing. It is dangerous.”

While Littleton checked the suit again, making sure it was impenetrable to the tiny beetles that ruled this part of the forest,

Earl slid into his harness and tied a knot in his rope. He then anchored a length of webbing in a water knot to the trunk of a medium-sized tree. A small ring had been worn around it where previous trips into Watchstep Cavern had been made, smoothing the bark down so it was no longer jagged and risked damaging the rope that was the only thing keeping Earl from falling into the belly of the cavern, to be devoured by millions of his six-legged children.

He repeated the process with two more lengths of webbing and joined the three loops with a couple carabiners. In one quick motion, he attached his rope with a double figure eight knot and locked the carabiners. He ran his rope through a smooth piece of carbon steel—a figure eight—and secured the smaller loop to a carabiner attached to his harness.

Littleton had seen Earl prepare to enter the cave before, but remained amazed at just how relaxed and knowledgeable Earl was when it came to tying knots and preparing to rappel into a dark hole in the ground. Spelunkers were lean, Littleton thought, but not so thin and unhealthy looking that they evoked images of *Auschwitz*. People who climbed rocks and rappelled had goatees and drove cool off-road vehicles. They spoke in slang and lived on protein

bars and electrolytes; they didn't speak in scientific terms and sustain themselves on nicotine, pecan pie, and beer.

Earl turned on the head lamp and pulled on a pair of leather gloves. He checked his connections, making sure the knot on the other end of the rope was just right. He eased his weight against the gear and rocked back and forth, giving everything one last test. Then, like an insect entering its burrow, he entered the hole in the forest floor.

Sheriff Littleton heard him descending slowly, hanging above what the sheriff imagined was a pulsating mass of milky white beetles just waiting for a meal. Earl had mentioned in the past that they were primarily carrion feeders, but that they also ate vegetation—anything that fell into the cave was devoured. Whether consuming animal, vegetable, and probably even mineral, the beetles' ability to adapt to the harsh conditions of the north woods amazed even Earl. Everybody else just wanted them gone.

Littleton walked near the opening of the cave and said, "Everything okay, Earl?" Littleton made sure he was far enough back from the entrance that he couldn't fall into the cave and into a grisly death he didn't even want to think about. "Do you see anything?"

Earl didn't reply.

"Earl, are you okay?" Littleton said, louder this time. There was no reply. Littleton scurried over to the backpack Earl had hung on a tree branch to keep the pack off the ground. He checked for any Earl bugs and went in for a flashlight. Then he slowly made his way to the hole and turned the light on. "Earl, are you okay?"

"Yes! I heard you the first time. I am just...looking." The beam of Littleton's flashlight moved across Earl's face, right into his eyes. "Would you turn that damn light off?!"

Littleton turned the flashlight off and took a couple steps back.

"What do you see down there?"

"The brood. They are very docile—the cooler weather."

"Do you see any bodies?" Littleton said. Or signs of bodies? Bones?"

"Yes, I see a couple skulls."

Littleton's heart raced. "A couple?! Human?"

"No," Earl said. "A lot of deer fall in here. Seen them before."

"Can you go down lower for a closer look?"

What seemed like minutes—but wasn't—passed and Earl said, "Nothing."

"Okay, that rules out the cave. You can come back up."

But Earl didn't. Littleton stepped closer to the cave entrance.

"Earl?" He turned on the flashlight and shined it against the wall. There was no response, so he stepped even closer to the hole and pointed the flashlight straight down, spotlighting Earl who was hovering just feet above a writhing mass of millions of insects—even Littleton could hear them. Earl's eyes were closed.

"Earl, we need to get going," he said, a little softer. Earl's eyes opened and he ascended the rope, hand over hand, like a spider.

*Earlitis creepius.*

Earl's gloves were off as he came back to the surface and Littleton noticed an Earl bug on the rope. Before he could say anything, in a motion as calm and regular as a breath, Earl gently knocked the beetle from the rope, down to the cave floor with its brothers and sisters. Littleton stepped back to give Earl room.

When Earl was back on solid ground, he broke down his gear, checked it to make sure nothing was frayed or damaged, and

rolled it back up. He put it back into the pack without checking for beetles. Littleton wanted to say something, but it was Earl's pack and not his place—Earl had obviously come to some agreement with the beetles that inhabited Watchstep Cavern. He may have spoken their language for all Littleton knew.

They made their way back toward the tape line boundary, and once Littleton was on the other side, he had Earl check him for beetles.

“You are clear,” Earl said after barely looking. He lit a Lucky Strike and Littleton did the best check he could before removing the *Tychem* suit and putting it into the backpack.

“So there was nothing down there?” Littleton said.

“There is a lot down there—more than you hicks will ever realize. But nothing you are interested in.”

“No body? You're positive?”

“Yes, positive. I was right there. They will eat flesh, but they do not eat bones.”

Sheriff Littleton walked about ten yards before finally saying, “Good...”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The first time Ryan saw Allison Payne, she was flying. Her dark, wavy hair scattered as she sailed through the air; her smile hit him like a piledriver. Ryan was never a body man—when chatting with other men, his tastes differed greatly. “Give me dark hair, great eyes, and a killer smile and I’m there!” he’d say, while all around him was talk about tits and asses.

Allison would have satisfied both parties.

Allison worked on moves with the Weyauwega Weasel. Ryan couldn’t tell if it was scripted or improvised, but he’d soon learn all the secrets—he was there for his first wrestling lesson.

Watching Allison and her opponent run through acrobatic move after move, Ryan had second thoughts about what he was about to do.

In the ring, Allison worked the Weyauwega Weasel over with some open handed chops to the chest. the weasel slid to the floor for safety, but Allison wasn't about to let him catch his breath. She charged the ropes near the weasel and ricocheted sixteen feet to the other side of the ring where she met those ropes even harder. The force sent her sailing back at full speed. Her feet barely touched the mat; she seemed to be gliding just inches above the ring's surface. Ryan couldn't take his eyes off her.

Just before hitting the ropes, Allison leaped skyward, arching her back and extending her arms high above her head. A plancha—a move perfected in Tijuana, but elevated to a thing of beauty in a ring hidden in the north woods of Wisconsin.

Allison crashed down on the Weyauwega Weasel, sending him smacking to the hard floor. *It's gotta be fake*, Ryan thought. *No one could just get up and walk away from that*, but Allison leaped to her feet and climbed on to the ring apron. Before Ryan could guess what she might do next, she grabbed the top rope with both hands and used the middle rope for a springboard. She sailed



through the air in slow motion time, arching her back and rolling into a high backflip.

Falling like a feather.

Ryan didn't think about how it was all done—he relished the moment until Allison crashed down on the Weyauwega Weasel again.

Allison and the weasel lay still—even Gorilla looked nervous. There were no signs of life after the hard hit. Finally, Allison's ribs began to rise and fall—it sounded like she was crying. Ryan fought the urge to rush to her side and see if she was all right. What first sounded like crying grew into full-blown laughter; Allison and the weasel sounded like two people who'd just cheated death and realized how good it felt to be alive.

Allison stood up and extended her hand to the Weyauwega Weasel, helping him to his feet. A gigantic guy looking like something out of a comic book clapped his hands. The class joined in. When everybody stopped applauding, Ryan continued clapping, catching Allison's attention. Their eyes met for a moment and he became self-conscious. He stopped clapping and looked at the floor until Gorilla slapped his back, almost knocking him over. "Ready for your first lesson?"

The haze of the moment finally lifting from his head, Ryan realized he was standing in the wrestling ring that couldn't contain Allison.

Gorilla spent half an hour teaching Ryan basic moves. It bored Ryan—he was there to learn all the tricks, not the moves. He was happy when Gorilla said, “Headbutt me.”

“Are you going to teach me how to do it properly?” Ryan said.

“Nothing proper about a headbutt. You take your forehead and hit the other guy's forehead. Come on.”

Ryan stepped in front of Gorilla, swung his head forward, and stopped a couple inches shy, figuring that's how it was done.

“What the heck was that?!” Gorilla said.

“A headbutt.”

Gorilla hit his own forehead with the palm of his hand—it sounded like somebody smacking a bowling ball. He did it again, saying, “You didn't even touch me!”

“But—“ Ryan stood before Gorilla, afraid of what might follow. He thought about the night he watched Mickey and Nightshade wrestle each other. He remembered Nightshade's

broken ribs and Mickey's shattered heel. Still, Ryan thought there had to be some trick. "But it's wrestling..."

"Don't tell me you're gonna say 'It's fake,'" Gorilla said. "'Cause that's gonna hurt my heart." He locked eyes with Ryan. "I want you to headbutt me like you mean it. On the count of three. One... Two... Three—"

Ryan lunged forward, and this time, connected with Gorilla's forehead. Ryan saw stars—he clutched his forehead right between his eyes.

*"Oww!"*

"That's nothing!" Gorilla said. "You pull back like that and it hurts more, see? You have to commit and sell it to the crowd!"

Ryan's focus returned, and when the pain between his eyes was swallowed by endorphins, it actually felt kind of good.

"You can't sell a weak hit like that," Gorilla said. "I want you to climb to the top rope and come down with a killer headbutt to end all headbutts. Don't worry, you won't hurt me."

"It's not you I'm worried about," Ryan said.

"Don't lead between the eyes," Gorilla said. "Right below your hairline... hit me with that."

Ryan was nervous, but looking at all the other wrestling students staring at him—knowing every one of them would have gone full bore and sold the hit on the first try—machismo got the best of him. Before he knew it, he was teetering on the top rope.

*What the hell are you doing?* he thought. Then he caught a glimpse of Allison below him. With that, he flew through the air, his head on a crash course with the cinderblock Gorilla called a head.

Their heads met with a resounding *THUNK!* and Ryan sold the hit by crashing to the ground.

Gorilla rubbed his head and said, “All right! That was pretty good...now stand up and do it again without leaping from the top rope.”

Ryan lay still on the mat.

“Hey, Ryan,” Gorilla said. “Do it one more time and that’s that.”

Ryan was breathing at least.

“Ryan?”

Tom White, the Milwaukee Mangler, laughed. “I think the son of a cuss is flat unconscious, boss.”

Gentle slaps to the face pulled Ryan back to consciousness.

“You okay?” Gorilla said. “You hurt?”

Ryan’s head felt like it had been cleaved wide open with an ax, but he didn’t care. Allison was looking at him, her smile taking away all his pain.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Gronlund helps and entertains people by moving words around pages and screens. His writing has appeared in newspapers, magazines, comic books, and the Web. He lives with his wife somewhere between Dallas and Ft. Worth, Texas.

Christopher blogs at [thejugglingwriter.com](http://thejugglingwriter.com). You can listen to him read his first novel, *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors* for free or buy the ebook at [roadtripfromhell.com](http://roadtripfromhell.com).