

PROMISE

A Novel

by

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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.

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Fall, 2009

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, it looked like a photo—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 BSAs, Nortons, and Triumphs. She wasn't the kind of woman to sit back and rely on her husband's income. 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 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, the retired wrestler who invited Ryan to the funeral the day before.

Squirring 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 retired 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 definitely have to 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 looked around, admiring 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.

Grizz 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-five, 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 in a little story."

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

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

"The instant Big Ralph hit her line," 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. He pretended to cry.

““He's beautiful. Just beautiful.”” said Littleton. 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 be missed.”

After Gertie's service, Ryan felt like the new kid 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 time” 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.”

“Why’s that?”

“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, and told the story:

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

“Tell him how!” Harvey interrupted.

“I’m getting there, 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 ain’t never heard him talk about nothing like that.”

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

“What happened?”

“The beetles,” said Littleton. “All three fellas cramped up like they had appendicitis, or something—then they got fevers. We got them to a hospital, and they pumped them full of 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.”

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

Mike Lundy 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’s 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.”

Billy 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. Billy Babitzke was the scourge of Promise, Wisconsin; he was hated even more than Earl the Bug Guy.

It first became evident Billy was a problem when he was seven, when he beat up his eleven-year-old neighbor, Peter Melofsky, leaving him hospitalized and comatose for over a month. While it's no surprise to anyone when young boys get in a scuffle, the method and ferocity of the attack left even Larry Soucek—a medic in Vietnam who thought he'd seen it all—sick to his stomach.

On his way home from a friend's house one night, Peter was attacked by Billy. Billy set up an ambush. When Peter passed by, Billy hit him in the back of the head with a large metal flashlight. The initial blow 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 no 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. 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. 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?”

“Oh, no! No, Eddie—no body.”

Littleton put his hand on her shoulder. “Good. Then there's hope things won't be so bad. Let's go to my office and talk.” 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 Melofsky’s best friend, “but anyone in this town who would have killed Billy would have done it already. Maybe it was someone outside town—Billy got around.”

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

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

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 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, though. I always knew he 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.

5

*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 territory so far north, out in the middle of nowhere.

“What the hell are you doing?” Earl said. Billy had reached a level of rebellion that the sound of an adult voice when he was up to no good 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 be smoking those pussy filtered things.” Earl never smoked while near the cave, but he knew with Billy’s arrival that he was done studying 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 in all their ant-like glory.

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

“You little shit!”

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

“’Bitch?’ Is that all you can say? You 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 melting. He balled up the bottom of his shirt and pressed it to his flaming face like a fire blanket.

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

** * **

Earl Lankford spent five days in the regional hospital, treated for burns over most of his face. His only visitors the entire week were Littleton, with Billy Babitzke in tow.

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

"Now Earl, please calm down—"

"Calm down? That little monster almost killed me. He should be locked up!"

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

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

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..."

6

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 belt 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 delicacy than Norm Abram could make custom cabinetry. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America before it was in vogue, he 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 *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, 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 zone 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 that Ryan's restaurant, *Piazza di Spagna*, was coming to life, but still early enough that Ryan could find the time to make a recommendation 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 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.”

“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.

The parking lot at Gorilla's was so full, 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 a skinny guy with long hair 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 little guy 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 little guy 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 little guy—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 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 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-Davidson 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.

Nightshade was evil personified. 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 Michael 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 hit. When the tempo slowed, Nightshade threw Hardcore Mickey Zilligan against the ropes, and 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 in a garbage can full of barbed wire. Ryan wondered if somebody bribed the health inspector to keep Gorilla’s open as 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 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 the ladder up. 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...Miiiiiiiiiiickey 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 were 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 noticed 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 wonder how banged up Mickey and Dylan are after this one. Hope they’ll be okay.”

“What do you mean? It’s all fake, isn’t it?”

Sheriff Littleton laughed. “Fake? 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 helped Mickey up on crutches. 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?” Ryan was like a little kid who didn’t know when to stop talking.

“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,” Gorilla said, “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. “You're welcome to come. Eddie asked me to ask you.”

“What time?” Ryan said, as though his schedule were actually full.

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