

## 58

# Graphic Detail

The mood in Joe's bedroom had become somber.

Praveen turned to Joe. "Your turn."

Joe pulled out his phone to check the time. It would be a while before Mom got home. The last thing he wanted to do right now was talk about his father. Breaking down in front of the guys just wasn't an option.

"You want a glass of water first? Since you didn't really get one."

"I did get one," Praveen said, "although it did nothing to quench my thirst. What I need now is the story of Joe McKinnon and his father."

"You know the story. My dad died in a car accident ... almost a couple years ago."

"Yeah, yeah, and you lost your leg too," Praveen said. "Blah blah blah. But what about before the accident. What was life like?"

"It was good. Just ... it was good."

Joe was looking at the computer screen again, but he could feel Praveen staring and expecting more.

"Your parents didn't fight about you?"

"They didn't really fight at all."

"Bullshit," Praveen said, "all parents fight. Either you're lying, or they were extremely good at hiding their fighting from you."

"Well, they argued sometimes, but they didn't yell and scream at each other."

"What did they argue about?" Praveen said.

"Umm ... once they remodeled their bathroom. They argued about the layout and what tile to use, stuff like that."

“They never argued about *you*?” Sam said sounding skeptical. “Like what school to send you to, or what activities you should do?”

“Never. Mom took care of all that stuff. Dad taught me construction and how to camp and fish.”

“Well, that sounds too good to be true,” Praveen said. “Maybe someday when you trust us more, you’ll open up.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “I trust you guys.” He squinted at Praveen, “Except that *you* identify with a poker-playing dog who’s kind of sketchy.”

“We all have our dogs in the closet,” Praveen said.

Joe sighed. “Well, the only other thing they fought about was Dad drinking in front of me.”

“Aha!” Satisfaction brimmed in Praveen’s eyes. “The truth emerges!”

“It wasn’t that big of a deal,” Joe said. “Dad didn’t drink that much, but I heard Mom lecture him that he was setting a bad example. Like if I saw him drinking, I’d start drinking too.”

“And she was right, wasn’t she?”

Joe scoffed. “No she wasn’t. And she won’t ever *be* right. After the accident, there’s no way I’ll ever drink.”

Sam perked his ears. “There was drinking involved in the accident?”

“No, I mean ... no.” There was no drinking in Dad’s accident. Joe had been thinking about Fred’s accident. He’d come to regard both accidents as his own.

Praveen picked up the guitar once again.

“Tell us about the accident,” Praveen said. “What was—”

“You don’t have to talk about that if you don’t want to,” Sam said. Then he turned to Praveen.

“Have a heart, man.”

Praveen shrugged.

“It’s okay. I can talk about it,” Joe said.

The room quieted.

“Dad and I were on our way home from Christmas shopping—not last Christmas, the one before. We’d picked out some cool ski clothes for Mom. Dad was in a really good mood, which ... you had to know my dad. He was a nice guy, but he didn’t joke around a lot. But that day, I think he was happy about the holidays ... you know, had the Christmas spirit. He was goofing around at the ski shop. He had me laughing really hard. Anyway, after that we went to Denny’s, then we headed home.”

Joe’s eyes began to glaze.

“We came to a stop sign at a road that curved—it was hard to see traffic coming from the left, especially with all the snow piled there from the plows. And we were in Mom’s Civic, which is a pretty low car ... was. Dad stopped. Then he pulled out.”

There was a long silence.

“Is that when it happened?” Praveen said.

Joe looked down. “One second, the heater was blowing and the radio was playing ... and then BAM! No more music. Just hissing. And gurgling. Our car ended up on its side ... my door was against the ground and I could feel Dad lying on top of me. His hand was on my chest. Like he was checking for my heartbeat. I felt him squeeze me once.”

Sam looked up to the ceiling, blinking his eyes.

“Then I could hear cars pulling up and people talking to each other all serious and panicked. This one woman kept going ‘Oh my God! Oh my God!’ and they were walking all around our car. I could hear their shoes scraping the pavement. I tried talking to my dad, but he didn’t answer. Then I heard sirens. Dude, they should *not* use their sirens once they get close. When you hear them coming, and you know it’s for you, it scares the shit out of you.”

Praveen was bug-eyed.

“So it went from being totally quiet, to there being just a ton of people all around, and sirens and car doors slamming and firetruck engines and voices on radios. But it felt like forever before someone finally said anything to *me*. I don’t think they saw me at first. The fireman or whoever, says, ‘Hey, there’s someone under this guy,’ and then he bends down so he can see my face and looks me in the eye and says, ‘Don’t worry, we’ll get you out of there.’ I was still trying to talk to my dad, but ...”

Joe sighed. “So then they started cutting metal and using a machine that pries it apart so they can get you free.”

“Jaws of life,” Praveen said, his voice more subdued than usual. “That’s what they call it.”

“And that’s when I started to hurt. Before that, I guess I was numb or something, but when they started moving stuff around, the pain was so bad I just passed out.”

“What about the guy who hit you?” Sam’s voice sounded oddly thick.

“He was fine. A nineteen-year-old. Turned out he blew his stop sign. Mom said he didn’t know it was there ... said the piled-up snow made it hard for him to see.”

“It was still his fault, right?” Sam said. “Was he drunk?”

“It was his fault and he was driving too fast. But he hadn’t been drinking.” Joe shrugged. “Just made a mistake.”

“A really big one,” Praveen said.

“I bet he felt bad,” Sam said.

“Don’t know.” Joe shrugged. “Never heard from him.”

Sam shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

“Mom says it’s because of legal reasons. Like if they sent a sympathy card, it could be taken as an admission of guilt or something and could be used in court.”

“I’m not saying your mom’s wrong about that, but I still think he should have done ... something,” Sam said. “Saying nothing is just ... man, that’s just cold.”

“Was your dad drunk?” Praveen said.

“Jesus, Praveen!” Sam said. “Why don’t you just say whatever’s on your mind?”

“Just asking,” Praveen said.

“He wasn’t drunk.” Joe glared.

“Are you sure?” Praveen began playing Green Day’s “Good Riddance” at a morbidly slow speed. “You said he was in an unusually good mood.”

“Fuck, Praveen! Don’t you think I’d know if my dad was drunk? And I told you it was morning. People don’t drink in the morning.”

Praveen shrugged. “Some people do.”

Joe leaped to his feet and leaned over Praveen.

“Not my dad!” he shouted. His voice was ragged, like he’d just ridden ten hard miles on his bike. “He would’ve *never* risked our lives like that!”

Sam worked his way between them, his hands on Joe’s shoulders.

“It’s all right,” Sam said. “Praveen didn’t know your dad. Didn’t know what a good man he was.”

Joe’s voice struggled between heavy breaths.

“Not my dad.”

Praveen stopped playing. “No, not your dad,” he said without a trace of sarcasm. “It was just a terrible accident. And I’m sorry it happened to you.”