





TUB OF  
SPIDERS



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David Rowell Workman





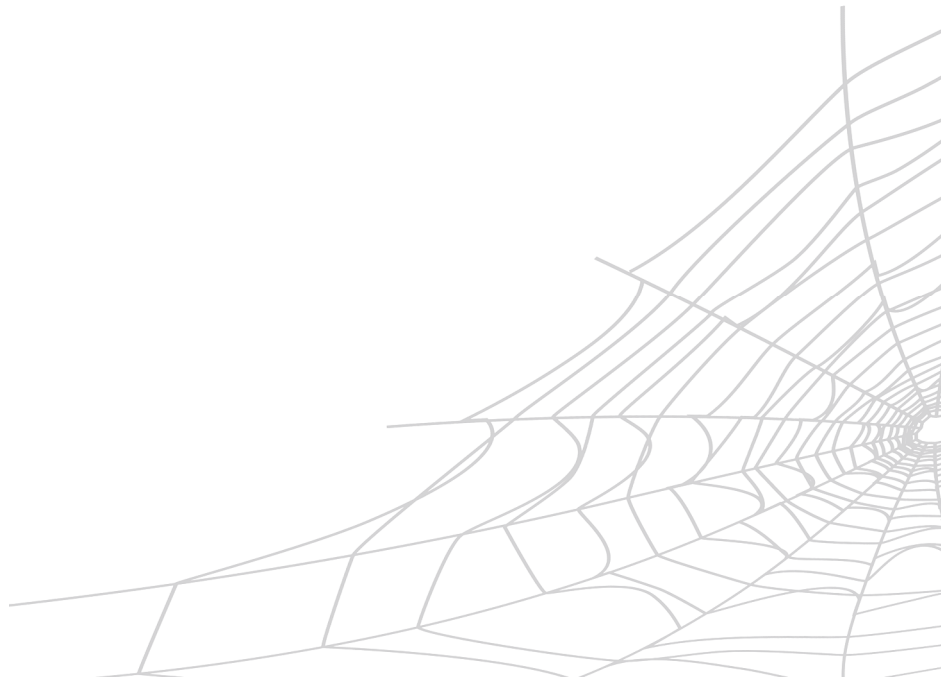
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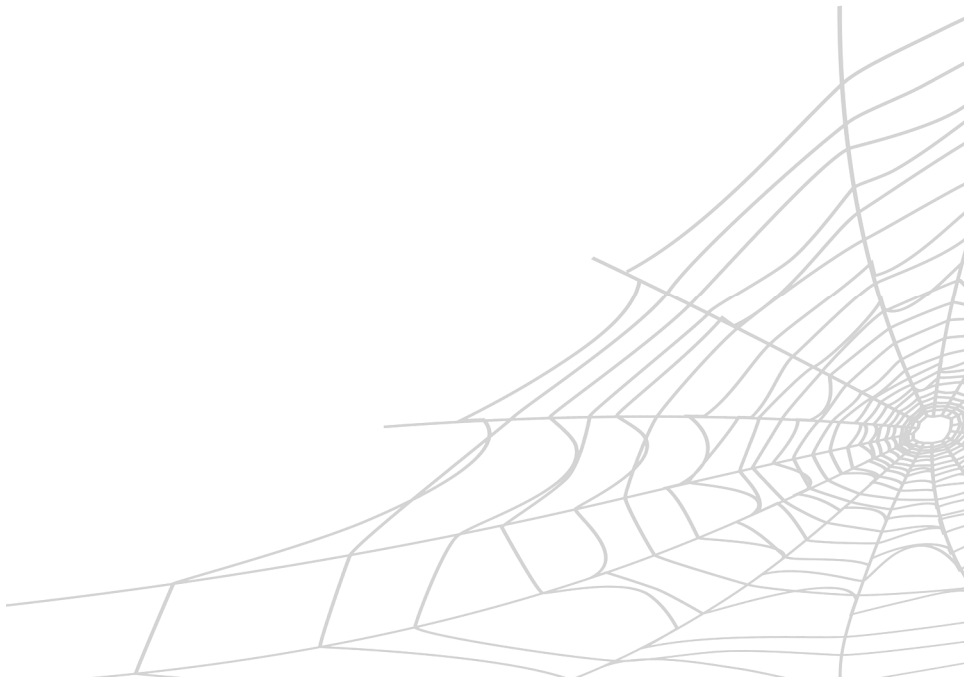
## Dedications

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Special thanks to Jessica Hegstrom for her invaluable guidance and to Lisa Cook for her patience.

To my father, Floyd, an avid reader, a man full of wonderful insights, and who was always there for me with unconditional love.

To Craig, because our relationship, including the end of it, forced me to face my tub of spiders.

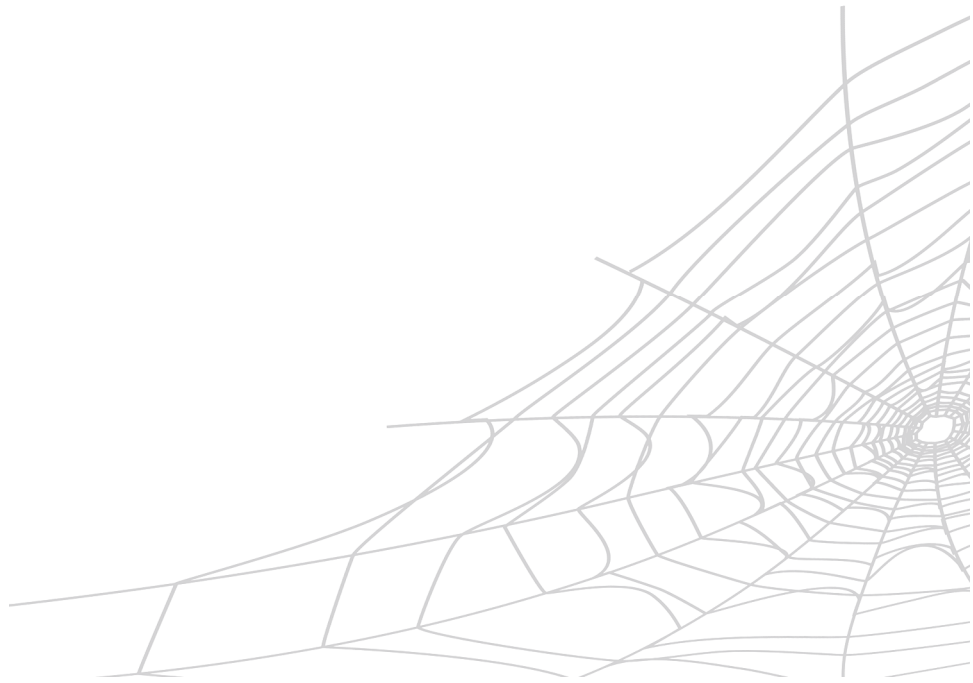




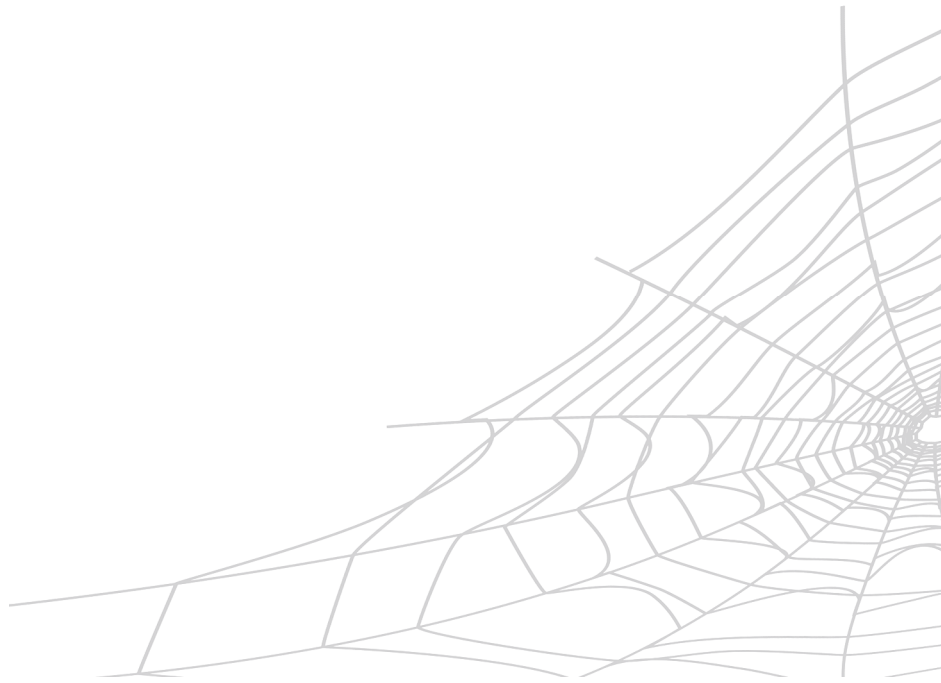
PART ONE



# The Storm









## PROLOGUE

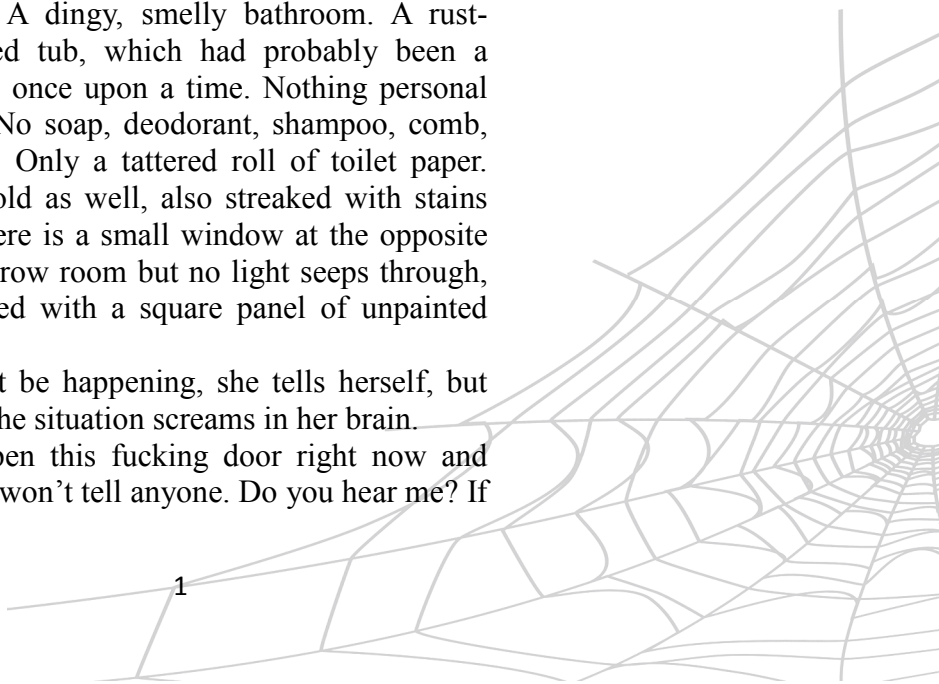


In the blackness a chain rattles. A voice whispers somewhere in the dark. Had she really heard it? A light snaps on and she is blinded for a few moments by the sudden glare from the bare 100 watt bulb above her. She rapidly blinks her eyes until her vision clears. She realizes she is chained. The chains are held in place with metal bands. One around her left wrist and the other one attached to her right ankle. The bands are tight - uncomfortably tight. The skin around the band is already raw and chaffed. She follows the chain with her eyes to where it is fastened onto the tile floor with heavy bolts.

Once her eyes focus, she gazes at her surroundings. A dingy, smelly bathroom. A rust-colored stained tub, which had probably been a brilliant white once upon a time. Nothing personal in the room. No soap, deodorant, shampoo, comb, or toothbrush. Only a tattered roll of toilet paper. The toilet is old as well, also streaked with stains and...shit? There is a small window at the opposite end of the narrow room but no light seeps through, as it is blocked with a square panel of unpainted wood.

This can't be happening, she tells herself, but the reality of the situation screams in her brain.

"Hey! Open this fucking door right now and unchain me, I won't tell anyone. Do you hear me? If



you want a ransom you're out of luck," she shouts out. "No one in my family has any money."

She waits for a moment and listens for a response. "We'll just chalk it up to a misunderstanding." Her ears are now straining against the silence. Desperately wanting to hear something-anything. "I have some money in my account- not a lot but judging by the shape of your bathroom, you could use it."

The light switches off and all is dark and silent. She goes into panic mode-anything can be in the dark - anything! "Turn that back on, do you hear me?" She kicks her free foot against the door and rattles the chain that is binding her.

"Hey!" A faint, muffled scraping comes from beyond the bathroom door. The young woman scoots nearer to the door and presses her ear against the wood. The door is cool on her flushed cheek. There is a cold, rock hard lump forming inside her chest. This is real, she realizes, and I'm going to die! A loud bang startles her and she quickly crawls away, bumping her head against the base of the toilet. She grabs her head in pain.

A whisper of a voice comes from a small hole in the upper part of the door. The voice of the man is calm, almost soothing.

"What do you fear most, Sara?" he says.

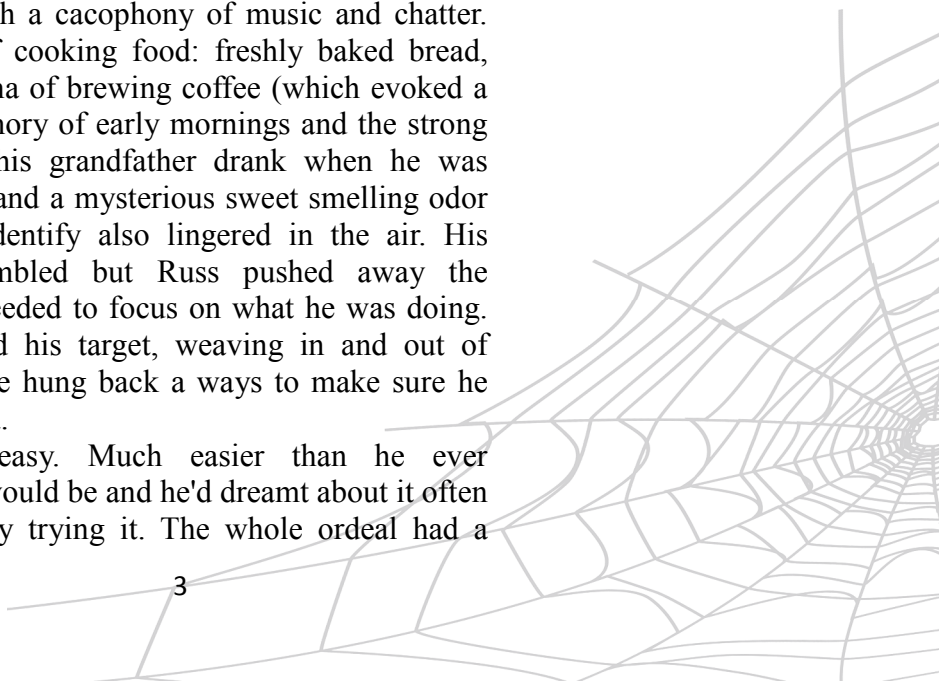
# CHAPTER ONE



Saturday Market in Danner Falls was always considered a big deal. Tables and booths bustling with vendors filled the north side of Bloom Park. Russ wore his usual uniform that consisted of a green hoodie, jeans and well-worn tennis shoes. He needed the comfortable footwear because he was following someone. Others at the crowded market dressed similar to him, as they were college students, so he knew he would blend in pretty well.

Of course most of the others gathered in groups, hanging out with friends. Russ had no friends. He knew lots of people but none he would call his friend by any measure of the word. The air was filled with a cacophony of music and chatter. The scents of cooking food: freshly baked bread, the acrid aroma of brewing coffee (which evoked a fragment memory of early mornings and the strong black liquid his grandfather drank when he was growing up), and a mysterious sweet smelling odor he couldn't identify also lingered in the air. His stomach grumbled but Russ pushed away the feeling. He needed to focus on what he was doing. Russ followed his target, weaving in and out of crowds, but he hung back a ways to make sure he wasn't spotted.

It was easy. Much easier than he ever fantasized it would be and he'd dreamt about it often before actually trying it. The whole ordeal had a



predator-stalks-prey kind of feeling. The target stopped to rummage through a rack of tie-dye dresses, T-shirts and a bin of colorful knit hats. Russ quickly stopped and turned, pretending to examine some badly painted watercolor art. He occasionally glanced out of the corner of his eye so not to lose sight of her. He didn't think the woman he was following looked the type to wear the kind of stuff she was pilfering through. That shit was for hippies, he thought. This bitch definitely was not the type. Maybe she needed a gift for someone else. That would make more sense.

The weather had been in the market's favor that Saturday, it wasn't excruciatingly hot yet but it was still early. The sun beating down promised the day would get hotter soon. Much too hot for someone hiding himself in a hoodie. A welcomed breeze blew around him and the food smells intensified. Russ' stomach growled at him a second time and he realized he had skipped breakfast. He knew his target habitually showed up at the market just before 10 a.m. and usually parked her Volvo near the same spot. Russ had trailed her for three weeks in a row now trying to understand all her habits. That knowledge would be very useful later. Several people bumped against him and he realized he blocked the pathway. He moved to the side to let others pass by.

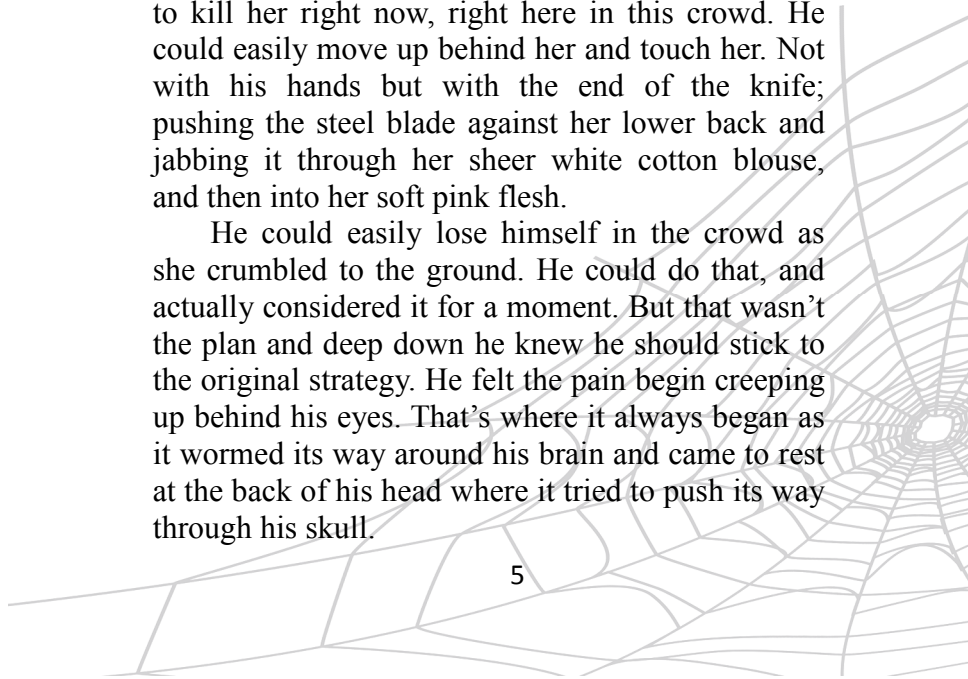
He could hear brief fragments of their conversations, "What happens at the coast, stays at the coast," one woman said confidentially to her friend.

"We should get a coffee, I need some badly," one man said to someone who could be his wife or girlfriend, and someone in the crowd complained of

heartburn. *Nothing worth eavesdropping on.* There were scores of children there, some with their parents, some older kids, wearing cut offs and baggy t-shirts. A few sped by on skateboards and ignored the 'NO SKATEBOARDING' signs hung up all over the place. His target continued on to a covered booth cluttered with homemade jewelry. She tried on a ring, then picked up a pair of dangly earrings and held them up to her ears while staring into a small mirror mounted on a table stand. Russ found it all quite boring. The crowd thickened and it was harder to follow her at a comfortable distance now, especially with people pushing past him.

He fingered the blade of the knife in his pocket. It was extremely sharp. He had spent hours honing it. You can't successfully kill anyone with a dull blade, he thought. And that was the thing. He originally had an entirely different plan to make her pay for what she did to him. He had concocted an entire setup. But that could all change if he decided to kill her right now, right here in this crowd. He could easily move up behind her and touch her. Not with his hands but with the end of the knife; pushing the steel blade against her lower back and jabbing it through her sheer white cotton blouse, and then into her soft pink flesh.

He could easily lose himself in the crowd as she crumbled to the ground. He could do that, and actually considered it for a moment. But that wasn't the plan and deep down he knew he should stick to the original strategy. He felt the pain begin creeping up behind his eyes. That's where it always began as it wormed its way around his brain and came to rest at the back of his head where it tried to push its way through his skull.



He removed his hands from the knife and the pain slowly melted away. It was close that time. Very close.

He caught one last view of her as she disappeared into the sea of people just before a man came up and gave her a lascivious smile that showed they were sleeping together. He leaned and kissed her on the lips. Russ suddenly felt like throwing up.

### *TWO MONTHS EARLIER*

When thinking back on his childhood, Russell St. Cloud would have said he felt more like a stranger than a member of his own family. The Crispin Hill home where he grew up was a sprawling mansion, at least compared to the other residences surrounding the property. At the time, Danner Falls in Hill County was jammed with nearly 314,000 people. Harding University could be blamed for some of that. Students came to learn at the school from all points of the globe. The number of students more than supported the local coffee houses, museums and night clubs.

His father had his claws into several shares of the luke-warm timber industry and ore factories. The St. Cloud name had such an air of importance that the University named an entire wing after him. As he grew up, Russ saw the town as a large village and his home a castle, with the poor villagers surrounding the mansion for its protection, like in the days of the Feudalism. The entire place just needed a mote and a dragon to be complete. And



planted on a massive imported leather chair, sat his father, King Ryan St. Cloud. Of course, that was how he appeared through the eyes of a child. And as a child, Russ wanted for nothing. His father transformed the family into one of the richest in the county - perhaps even the state. His mother was truly void of any maternal instinct and acted as though her son was more of a hindrance than a wonderful gift.

Russ wondered why they had allowed him to be born at all. Then it came to him, as easily as snapping on a basement light: his father wanted a son. Sons can be high school football heroes; can follow in their father's footsteps and take over the family business. Sons can be heirs to the family throne! The trouble was Russ hated football. Russ hated his father's job. Russ hated showering naked in front of the other boys at school during Physical Education class. Something like being naked in front of your peers opened a young sensitive boy to ridicule, even at twelve the experience could be a devastating.

One time during PE, Ivan Turnbow, one of Russ' school chums, got a stiffy in the boys' shower - and the bullying began. Some of the bigger kids would push Ivan into his locker as they passed him in the hall, or flick at his slightly protruding ears with their fingers until his ears were beet red and sore. Russ tried to tell his mother about the episode but all she asked was whether Ivan was gay or not. But she didn't say gay, she actually said homosexual which Russ had no idea what that word meant. Then using simpler terms, she asked her son if he was gay. The young boy had heard the term

many times at school from the other kids, but sometime the word was disguised as fag or faggot and was usually spewed out toward those who appeared weak.

His mother went into a slow explanation what homosexual meant. This parent-child conversing made Russ squirm in his seat as if he had a belly full of worms. All he wanted to do was run back to his bedroom, to his hobbies and comic books, instead of talking to this overtly thin, pasty faced woman he had to call Mother.

“It’s all right if you are, dear. I can handle it.” She patted him on his knee with bony skeleton fingers. Russ had a hard time pulling his eyes from her highly polished, French manicured nails “Your father might have some trouble but he would come around - eventually.” She had said this as if they spoke of something mundane, like playing in the park or going to the fair, but her face betrayed her. Something behind her eyes, cold and dark.

Russ told her he didn't have those kinds of feelings for other boys and her shoulders relaxed, her taut face spread into a pleasant smile and she happily said, “Oh that’s good, dear.” She went on to explain to him it was probably the excitement during dodge ball or something sports related that caused Ivan to - have a problem. This made Russ feel somewhat better, even when he saw Ivan getting the shit kicked out of him by seniors. They would have tried to beat down Russ as well because Ivan was his friend and that made them both open game. But the bullies didn’t touch him because they were afraid Ryan St. Cloud would fire their dads from the factory. Russ decided he wouldn’t be the

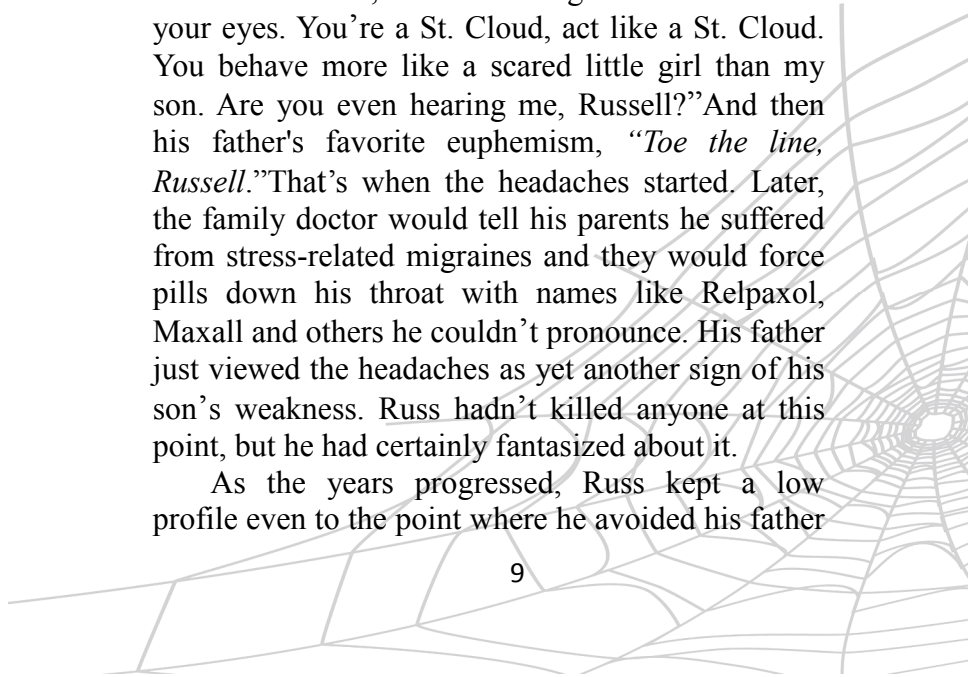
guy that got a boner in Phys Ed, so he feigned sickness as much as possible, which made his overtly heterosexual-conservative father very upset.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Russell? Competing in sports is extremely healthy for a normal boy.” He noticed his father put heavy emphasis when he said ‘normal’. He just somberly stared at the floor of his father’s study. He had gazed at the rug many times. He knew every bare thread, every colored line. Slowly, as his eyes skimmed across the fabric, he fell into the pattern of maroon colored squares, surrounded by brown parallelograms, accented by beige colored circles.

He memorized the rug so well he could draw it from memory and sometimes did so in class when his mind was wandering. Besides, his father never allowed him in the study unless he was in trouble and needed to be admonished by his grace.

“Look at me when I’m speaking to you,” his father demanded, before droning on. “Never lower your eyes. You’re a St. Cloud, act like a St. Cloud. You behave more like a scared little girl than my son. Are you even hearing me, Russell?” And then his father's favorite euphemism, “*Toe the line, Russell.*” That’s when the headaches started. Later, the family doctor would tell his parents he suffered from stress-related migraines and they would force pills down his throat with names like Relpaxol, Maxall and others he couldn’t pronounce. His father just viewed the headaches as yet another sign of his son’s weakness. Russ hadn’t killed anyone at this point, but he had certainly fantasized about it.

As the years progressed, Russ kept a low profile even to the point where he avoided his father



and only showed his face at dinner. The beatings Ivan received in Middle School spilled all the way into his high school years. One fine fall day when Russ dug through his locker search for his science book, a senior tough jock named Mark Lanley, (who was a valued member of the school football team) punched Russ in the stomach as he turned away from his locker. Russ dropped his books and collapsed onto the highly polished floor. A small crowd of kids gathered around waiting to see what would happen next. Oh, how the pimply-faced masses loved a good fight or to watch a popular school jock plummet a junior into submission, even though they dreaded the thought of it happening to them. Instead of fighting back, Russ got to his feet and pushed his way through the laughing crowd of students. Several kids tried to trip him and called him names as he passed.

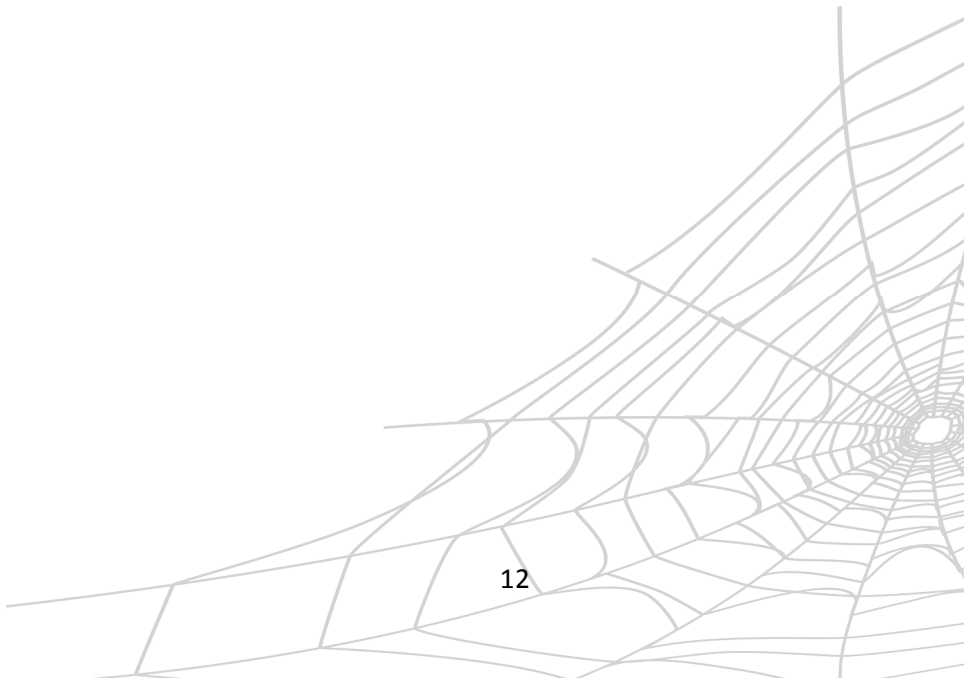
Mark's voice was the loudest. "What a pussy," the senior called after him. Satisfied with his small victory, Mark went to his scheduled class as usual. He laughed about the incident with his inner posse of friends, high-fiving some of them. They all agreed that wimpy Russell St. Cloud, who burst from the loins of wealthy Ryan and Kathryn St. Cloud, was a waste of sperm. Mark started out the door of his social studies class with his other classmates as the period over bell rang. He was one of the last ones out of the class after flirting with the new teacher, Miss Hemperson. Mark floated on a testosterone-heavy high until he stepped through the doorway. He didn't see a red faced Russ St. Cloud waiting for him in the hall nor did he notice the broken mop handle, gripped white-knuckle tight in the younger boy's right hand. The piece of jagged

wood slammed into Mark's wide fleshy nose, breaking it in three places.

The sickly thud was like someone slapping their hand hard against a wet thigh. The spewed blood splattered across Russ' face and the front of his shirt. Even after Mark doubled over, hollering in pain, the blood spilling through his fingers and onto the wooden floor. In this position, the jock couldn't see the next blow aimed at his left unprotected ear. The crowd gathered once again but they were silent this time and no one was laughing. This event happened sometime after The Storm. The unspeakable event that changed his life forever and sealed the fate of those involved.

Russ was just beginning to realize the path he would eventually travel. He had little fun after The Storm and began to immerse himself deeply into his own projects: bug collecting, reading a book series entitled, 'Hitman for Hire'. A sting of penny dreadful sequels about a hit man named Church and the violent ways he disposed of his victims. But that was fiction, and reading about serial killers and hit men was akin to reading comic books. Mass murderers often started out killing animals when they were children and worked their way up to people. Russ liked the way Church the Hit man disposed of people. He didn't know who his victims were or what they could have done to warrant being eliminated. Russ believed you shouldn't kill the innocent. Only the ones who were guilty. Or bullies, to be more precise, you should always kill bullies. That was when he decided enough was enough and bulky Mark Lanley was the first step into Russ' new way of thinking. Russ didn't run away after

smashing the football hero in the face. But he did drop the broken mop handle to the floor, step next to the prone senior, who was now withering on the floor holding his nose with one hand and his ear in another, blood gushing over both his hands. Russ smiled, leaned in whisper close, and said, “You mean nothing to me.”



## CHAPTER TWO

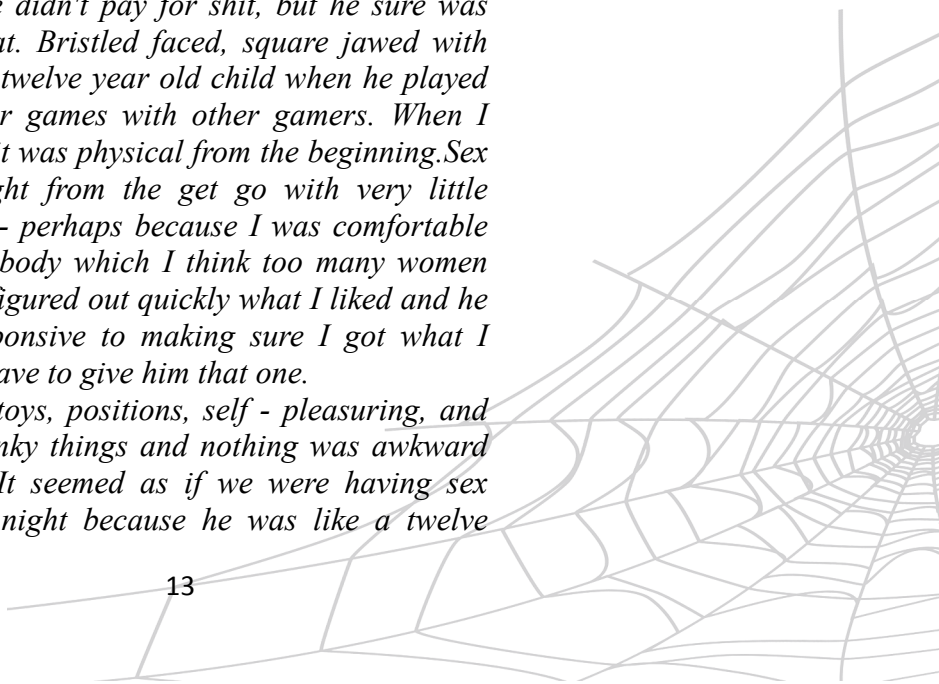


Sara Doyle slowly entered her apartment on Wilcox Lane, kicked off her shoes and made it to the overstuffed gray couch. The apartment complex was a set of four beige and bare wood affairs with limited parking and not many windows. She was in building three. She paid the rent, the utilities and when Michael had the money he paid the cable and internet. In her latest diary entry she remarked heavily on the subject of Michael. It read:

*Dear Diary,*

*Mostly he didn't pay for shit, but he sure was nice to look at. Bristled faced, square jawed with the mind of a twelve year old child when he played his online war games with other gamers. When I met Michael, it was physical from the beginning. Sex was great right from the get go with very little awkwardness - perhaps because I was comfortable with my own body which I think too many women aren't. I also figured out quickly what I liked and he was very responsive to making sure I got what I wanted, so I have to give him that one.*

*We tried toys, positions, self - pleasuring, and even a few kinky things and nothing was awkward at any time. It seemed as if we were having sex almost every night because he was like a twelve*





*year old that had no control over his penis. He would look at me and spring a woody or at least a partial chub. I could look at him or even touch him on the arm and he would have to close his eyes and think of ice water to reduce the blood flow.*

*Ahhhh, the power I had over him - and still have, only not so intense. He still gets wood when he looks at me just not so often. He also uses sex as a tool for punishment when he's upset at me for some stupid reason (because it's usually over stupid shit). For example, he would get mad at me because he didn't like the dinner I made, but instead of telling me didn't care for it, he will stew in silence for days until he finally blows up at me like Krakatau. I guess I'm supposed to be a fucking mind reader as well, so I'll add that to my next resume. And he knows I love sex and really enjoy it, so if he can't be the winner with the great job, or make the most money, he can at least be superior by withholding sex.*

*What guy does that? I have never heard of a guy with holding sex before. That's just weird and unusual that he would rather rub one out in the shower than pleasure his woman. I feel as if we have role reversal going on, with him more of the woman and me more of the guy.*

Sara plunked her slender frame down sinking deeply into the soft material. She felt she could easily fall asleep sitting up-plus her feet hurt. She absently rubbed her left arch. Sara took her focus off herself and glanced around the room. Her boyfriend's boots were in the middle of the floor, along with a pair of discarded jeans, socks, and God-forbid, his dirty spandex underwear. She

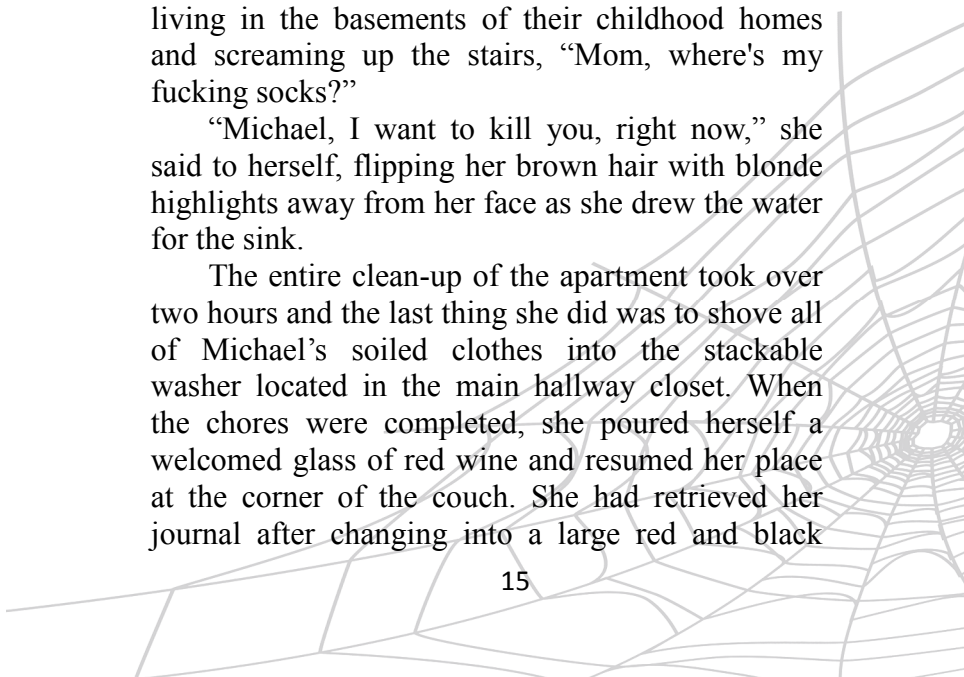


preferred a man in boxers but Michael said he liked to keep his balls from hanging loose. She continued her quest into the kitchen and wished she had stayed at work. Dishes were stacked high in the sink, some still held remnants of bean dip and sour cream. There were scattered flies having a feast in them now. Their tiny black bodies were crawling and hopping from plate to plate. She frowned when she spotted a jar of Mayonnaise that sat unhappily on the counter in one of the few spots not cluttered by dishes.

*Fuck, Michael, really?* Sara snatched up the jar and dropped it into the trash bin. *Nothing yummier than warm Mayonnaise.* She remembered him telling her he was having a few friends over while she was at work. *Just a few friends, baby.* From the looks of the kitchen, it was an entire regiment. She had met her boyfriend's friends a couple of times. None of them had a job; they all depended on girlfriends and parents. She pictured most of them living in the basements of their childhood homes and screaming up the stairs, "Mom, where's my fucking socks?"

"Michael, I want to kill you, right now," she said to herself, flipping her brown hair with blonde highlights away from her face as she drew the water for the sink.

The entire clean-up of the apartment took over two hours and the last thing she did was to shove all of Michael's soiled clothes into the stackable washer located in the main hallway closet. When the chores were completed, she poured herself a welcomed glass of red wine and resumed her place at the corner of the couch. She had retrieved her journal after changing into a large red and black



jersey with the number 17 emblazoned across the front. Her former therapist had talked her into starting the journals to 'work through' her troubled childhood. So far it seemed to be working since this was the sixth journal she was filling up. She kept the journals in a safe place in the back of her cluttered closet where no one but her could ever read them.

Michael had no idea about the journals and probably wouldn't care if he did. He was always in his Me-Me-Me phase. She named each journal, Sara's Diary-book one, two or three, in fat, black tip, felt pen. She always addressed her new entries as Dear Diary as if she was still a young girl scribbling down the events of her day. Did it sound a bit juvenile? Maybe. But she felt comfort in that. She had once read that Anne Frank had named her diary Kitty. But Sara couldn't think of a clever name so her entries remained as they were. She opened her diary to the last account and began to write:

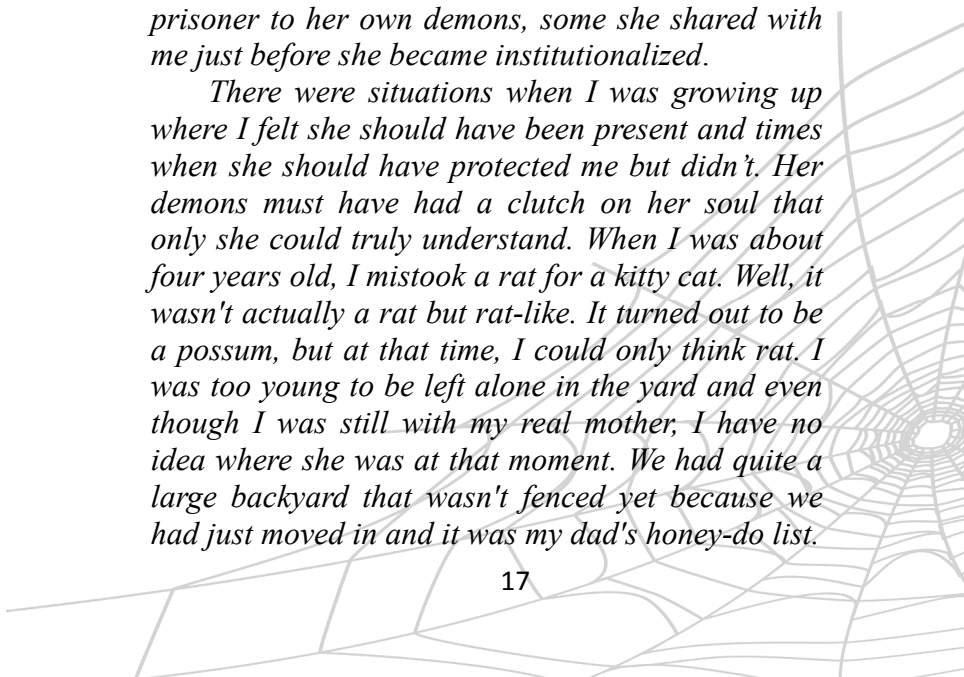
*Dear Diary,*

*The memories of my childhood that led to adulthood are very few, and for the most part, not pleasant. I was bit by a rat, had a smashed forehead, and was lost twice, all before the age of eight. And my mom lost custody of me once after her boyfriend beat me to a pulp right in front of her, but that was years later. I had a rough time connecting to my new host of families I was shuffled around to, mostly because I had always relied on myself. Being in someone else's house seemed unnecessary.*

*I was very adamant I could take care of myself, since I had been doing this my entire life, having pretty much no one else to depend on. But since I was only 14; I had no choice but to be placed in Foster care. And the ones the state chose for me were either overly religious do-gooders or there just to collect the twelve-hundred dollars that was shoveled out to them for my care. My sister was nearly 18, so she escaped the clutches of prison aka foster care - we were never close.*

*My childhood ended before I knew it and I became an adult, but things didn't seem to get much better. I had frequent moments of feeling like I belonged somewhere else and with someone I had yet to meet. This feeling had stayed deep in my soul but always seemed to remind me that it was there. Sadly, I don't have many memories of my mother. It seemed that she was always unavailable - locked in the bathroom, asleep on the couch, or just somewhere else. I began to realize she was a prisoner to her own demons, some she shared with me just before she became institutionalized.*

*There were situations when I was growing up where I felt she should have been present and times when she should have protected me but didn't. Her demons must have had a clutch on her soul that only she could truly understand. When I was about four years old, I mistook a rat for a kitty cat. Well, it wasn't actually a rat but rat-like. It turned out to be a possum, but at that time, I could only think rat. I was too young to be left alone in the yard and even though I was still with my real mother, I have no idea where she was at that moment. We had quite a large backyard that wasn't fenced yet because we had just moved in and it was my dad's honey-do list.*



*Looking back, I think we lived in a white version of a trashy ghetto. A couple of times I have driven through the old neighborhood with my car doors locked because I still don't feel safe.*

Sara paused long enough to rest her cramped writing hand and take a few sips of her glass of wine. She shook her hand vigorously, letting the blood flow freely again, then resumed her narrating.

*Behind our house was a family with an absent dad, an earsplitting boisterous mother, and two little boys, Max and Bobby. They were about my age, but they seemed developmentally challenged or just stupid, I don't know. The boys used to come into my backyard to play with my sister and me because we had all the best trees to climb. We had a cherry tree, two plum trees, an apple tree, and the grandiose walnut tree ever created! The walnut tree was my favorite because the outer casing of the walnuts was covered in blackish sticky goo which we loved to throw at one another because of the stains it would leave on our skin and clothes.*

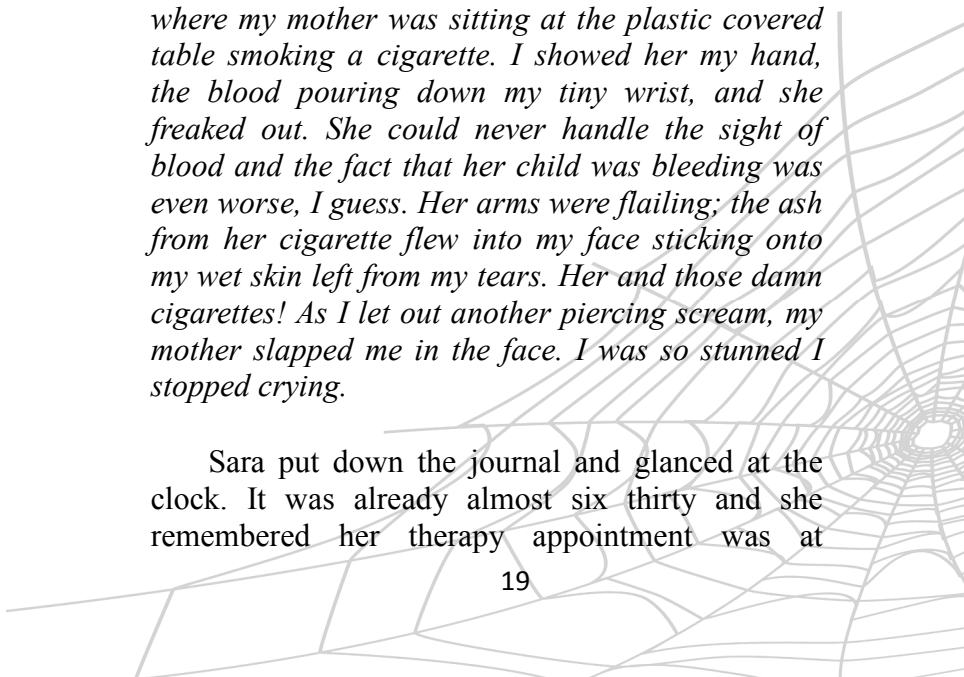
*My mom hated that tree for the very same reason so it ultimately was cut down with dad's chain-saw. On this occasion, we played in the neighbor's back yard instead of mine. I remember a large garbage pile in the backyard because of the sheer size; it took up most of the neighbor's yard. Max and Bobby knocked on the back door and asked if I wanted want to come out and play. Of course I did! Escape the smoke-filled, filth called my house - yes sirree! Because of what happened that day, I began to suppress my feelings to not show emotion. Something a child should never have*

*to do. I will never forget the walk I took to my neighbor's backyard.*

*When I close my eyes, I can still see myself turning left at the back door with both of the boys running through the field of trees into their junky yard. We played on a rusted red and white swing set for quite a while before Max hollered and we rushed over to the junk pile to see what he had found. I came around the corner so fast I tripped on a piece of wood with nails protruding out of it and fell right in front of the garbage pile. When I raised my head, I was face to face with what I thought was a kitty cat. I reached out to pet the kitty. The force of its jaws was assaulting as it pierced the flesh of my little hand, between my thumb and my wrist. Scrambling to my feet, I held my bleeding hand tightly against my chest and ran home to my mother, screaming all the way.*

*It was hard to see through the blur of my tears but I made it home. I entered through the kitchen where my mother was sitting at the plastic covered table smoking a cigarette. I showed her my hand, the blood pouring down my tiny wrist, and she freaked out. She could never handle the sight of blood and the fact that her child was bleeding was even worse, I guess. Her arms were flailing; the ash from her cigarette flew into my face sticking onto my wet skin left from my tears. Her and those damn cigarettes! As I let out another piercing scream, my mother slapped me in the face. I was so stunned I stopped crying.*

Sara put down the journal and glanced at the clock. It was already almost six thirty and she remembered her therapy appointment was at



7:00pm. Now she had to haul ass to get cleaned up and drive across town to make it in time. If she was more than fifteen minutes late, Mr. Jacobs would charge her for the session and make her reschedule! She started going to therapy because, in the end, she didn't want her parents to win. She felt they messed her up as a child, and she desperately wanted to get her head on straight if she was going to help others.

Besides, she didn't want to mess up her own kids if she ended up having any. All these thoughts filled her head as she scrambled to look presentable. The traffic wasn't as bad as she thought it would be and made it with two minutes to spare. As soon as she crossed the threshold into his office, a wave of calmness came over her. It was as if she was going into a bubble of safety, where she knew nothing could hurt her.

Perhaps this is why I enjoy going to therapy, she thought. After the formalities of greeting one another, she took her usual seat in the soft leather chair and the therapist started the session. He was a short, slightly heavysset man with dark features, thick sparse black hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He actually looked, as you'd imagine a therapist would look. He rested his elbows on his large walnut desk and pressed his fingertips together. The room smelled of sandalwood and Sara sucked in a tuft of air. A frail pair of wire rim glasses clung to the bridge of his nose.

"You have been talking a lot about events in your childhood," he said in a soft voice. "The rat bite, your mom losing you twice, the neighborhood boys, the rape. Did you enter all of this in your



journal like I asked you to?” Sara nodded. “So let’s shift the focus a little.”

“Okay, what do you want to talk about?” she said, in a more relaxed state now.

“Keeping those events in mind,” he said. “I want you to talk about how you felt, not only during those events, but how you felt since growing up,” he said.

“How I felt growing up?” she repeated, almost in a whisper. What he asked seemed a bit vague to her. Silence blanketed the room as she considered his question. She sat for several minutes without moving a muscle or making a sound. Finally she tilted her head back, eyes staring blankly at the tiny holes in the ceiling tile.

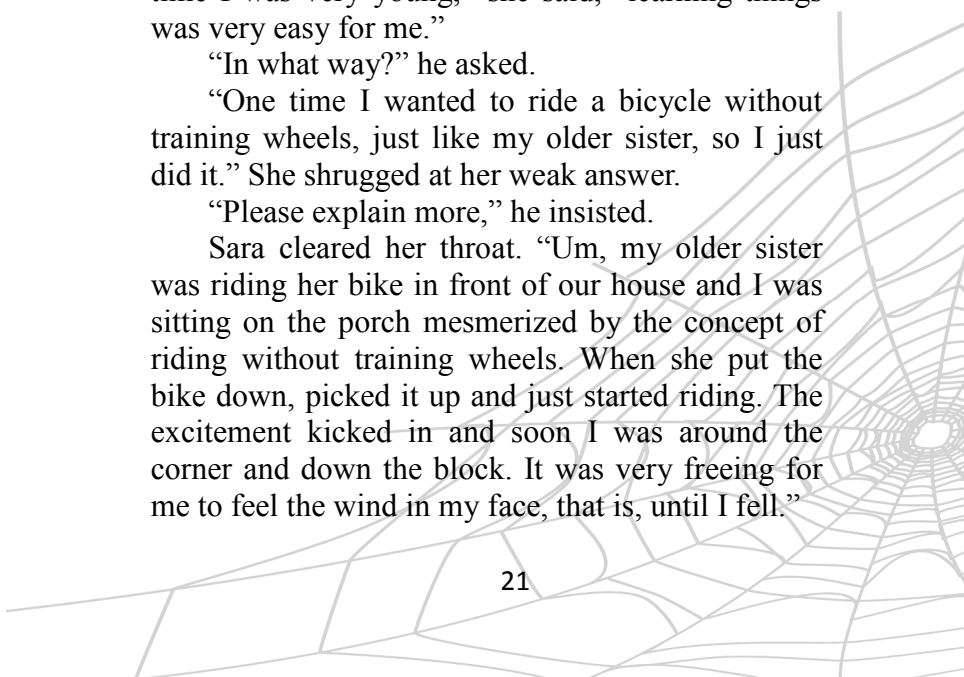
Several minutes passed when she finally leveled her head and started talking. She talked the entire session without him saying anything except to acknowledge the time. “I remember from the time I was very young,” she said, “learning things was very easy for me.”

“In what way?” he asked.

“One time I wanted to ride a bicycle without training wheels, just like my older sister, so I just did it.” She shrugged at her weak answer.

“Please explain more,” he insisted.

Sara cleared her throat. “Um, my older sister was riding her bike in front of our house and I was sitting on the porch mesmerized by the concept of riding without training wheels. When she put the bike down, picked it up and just started riding. The excitement kicked in and soon I was around the corner and down the block. It was very freeing for me to feel the wind in my face, that is, until I fell.”



Sara let out a breath. Her face felt as if the warm blood was resting inside her cheeks. She didn't know why that memory fragment upset her so.

“You fell?”

She nodded. “I came to the end of the street and a car pulled up waiting to turn, so I needed to stop but suddenly didn't remember how. Panic set in and then I heard my sister, Melinda, yelling behind me to push back on the pedals. I pushed back on the pedals but must have done it too hard because I was sent flying over the handlebars. See these scars?” She pointed a finger at the tiny blemishes on her forehead. “They're from hitting the pavement. Next thing I remember I was laying in my mom arms, bleeding from my head and my chin.”

The therapist kept a stoic look on his face. “Your mom was holding you? Are you sure?” He asked, his eyebrows rising slightly.

“Yeah, it was her.” Just then it hit Sara, that perhaps deep in her soul, her mom did actually love her. Was it possible, she thought, her mother struggled to show any outward emotion most of the time because she didn't love herself?

“Tell me more about why you felt some things were easy for you. What did you mean by that?” the therapist prodded.

“Sports were easy for me.” Sara said, reluctantly. She suddenly felt drained and became anxious to end the session. “I loved playing softball and could play any position. I was quick and agile and could adapt to any situation on the field.” Unconsciously, she began to twist at a lock of her hair. “Playing catcher was my favorite because you were involved in everything and that position was



really an anchor for the team. In football, the quarterback is the anchor because he calls all of the plays, and in softball, it's not the pitcher. The catcher tells the pitcher what type of pitch to throw so they are really steering the game. The catcher has to keep a watchful eye on all base runners, whereas each base man only has to worry about their own."

"Interesting," the therapist said and jotted down a couple of notes. He seemed pleased with her answers.

"I also know how things work."

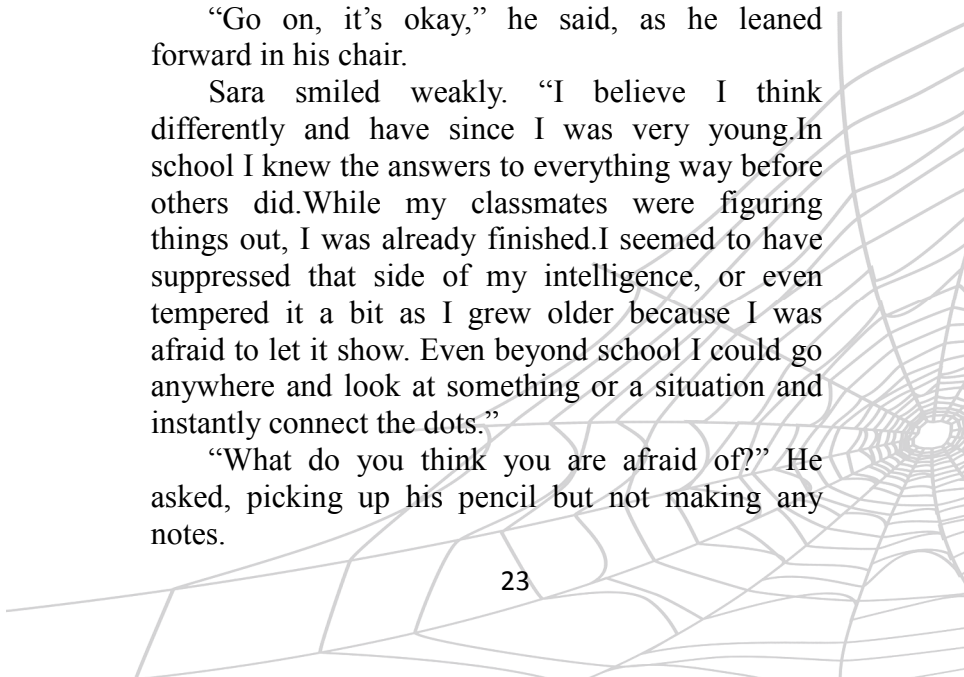
He stopped writing, shot her a smile and placed his pencil down next to the open notebook to give Sara his undivided attention. "Please go on," he insisted.

Sara sighed, but continued. "When I look at things I see how they work. I instantly tear them apart in my mind. And not just gadgets, but situations as well. I think ..." She stopped talking, feeling as if she was trapped in a fishbowl.

"Go on, it's okay," he said, as he leaned forward in his chair.

Sara smiled weakly. "I believe I think differently and have since I was very young. In school I knew the answers to everything way before others did. While my classmates were figuring things out, I was already finished. I seemed to have suppressed that side of my intelligence, or even tempered it a bit as I grew older because I was afraid to let it show. Even beyond school I could go anywhere and look at something or a situation and instantly connect the dots."

"What do you think you are afraid of?" He asked, picking up his pencil but not making any notes.



“Excuse me?”

“What do you fear most?”

Sara lowered her eyes and bit at her bottom lip. “I knew you would ask me this.” She paused for a moment. She wasn't sure she knew the answer but silently wondered why she suppressed this wonderful ability. She could feel tears forming in her eyes. She struggled to push them back. Why were there tears? The therapist closed his notebook, glanced at the watch on his wrist and scooted his chair away from the desk.

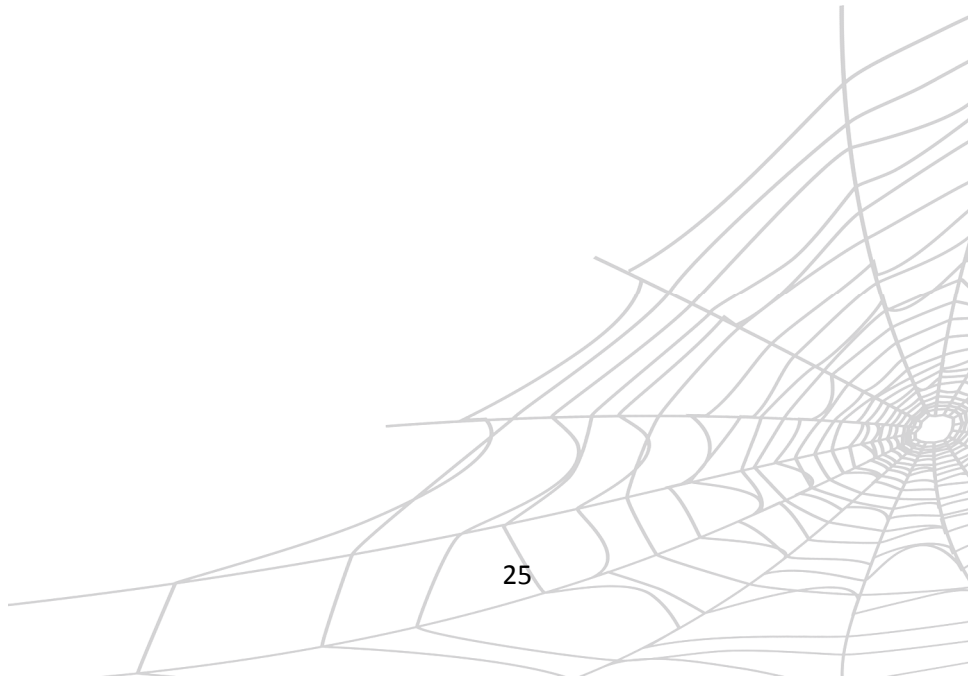
“Okay, this is actually a good place to stop, not only because we're about out of time, but because the answer to this one will take a little longer to get to. Your homework is to think about why you suppressed this attribute and we'll get more into this at your next session in two weeks.”

For the first time in a long time Sara left her therapy session feeling she had more questions than she had answers. I guess that's the price of therapy, she thought, as she descended the short flight of stairs to the street. Its two steps forward and one step back, but only after you start out one step forward and two steps back. So if she was so intelligent and could figure shit out so easily back then, where was this wonderful gift now when she needed it?

The car ride home seemed unusually long. Sara sang along with the radio tunes to drown out her thoughts. Just before she arrived home she began thinking about Michael and wondering if he had come home with any of his friends in tow. *I just cleaned the fucking house, she thought, and I'll be damned if I'm going to do it again. With any luck he'll be watching TV in bed, which means he's eaten*

*already and I don't have to cook for him.* It also meant she might get lucky and get to have sex. Sex with Michael was perfect most of the time, but even that seemed to be wearing a bit thin. There were some other habits he did that really needed improvement. He was a lazy slob sometimes, as well as being opinionated and judgmental towards her on occasion. Those things were the downside of the relationship. Then she thought, maybe she was just staying in the relationship for the sex?

*"Why am I staying?"* she said to herself as she drove the last three blocks to her apartment. *"Figure that out, almighty intelligent brain of mine."*



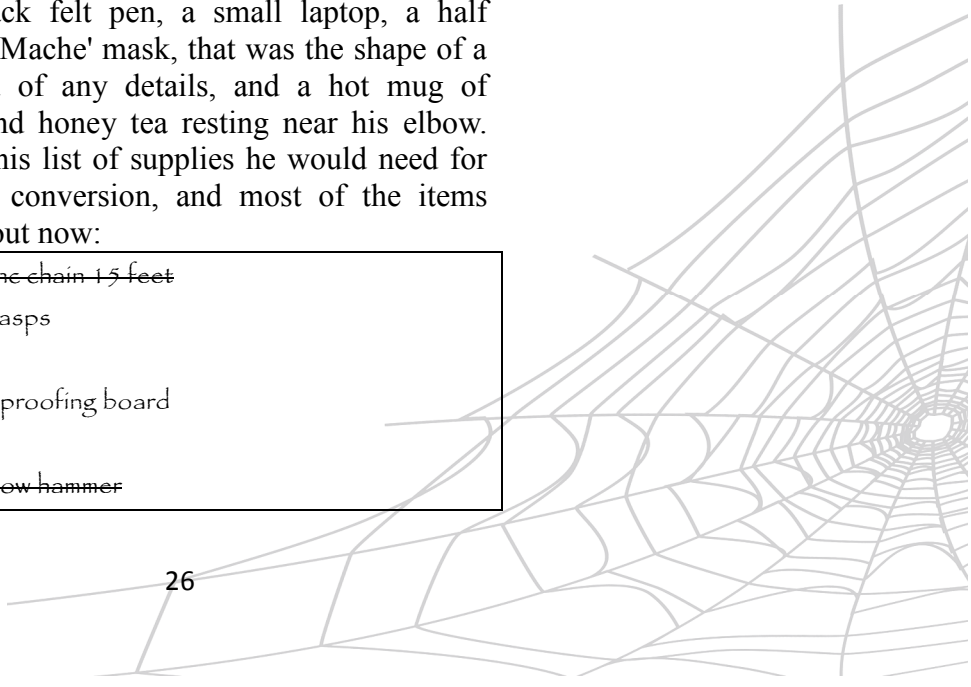
## CHAPTER THREE



Russ sat at the yellowed kitchen table he used as a desk, various items spread out in front of him. His school yearbooks from the fourth grade and eighth grades stacked up on top of each other. He kept the high school yearbooks to one side so they would be at hand when he was ready for them. In the early yearbooks, he had circled various pictures of his young classmates in red felt pen. These were the people who would pay; the guilty ones. *The ones from the night of The Storm.*

He stared down at the items on his desk making sure he hadn't forgotten anything he may need for his hunt: an unfolded city map with locations circled in black felt pen, a small laptop, a half painted paper Mache' mask, that was the shape of a face but void of any details, and a hot mug of Chamomile and honey tea resting near his elbow. Also, he had his list of supplies he would need for the bathroom conversion, and most of the items were crossed out now:

<p><del>5/16 zinc chain 15 feet</del></p> <p>Metalclasps</p> <p><del>Bolts</del></p> <p>Sound proofing board</p> <p><del>Nails</del></p> <p><del>Deadblow hammer</del></p>
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There were a few other things he would pick up later. He slowly sipped at the steamy liquid as he stared at the laptop screen: the face of a woman in her twenties, straight hair that was more brown than blonde. Her skin was lightly tanned, but not dark and her eyes sparkled with life even on the LCD screen. She had a fire in her eyes. She wore a light green sweater over her white blouse and if he stared deeply enough at her chest he could just make out the subtle outline of her breasts. He took a deep breath despite himself, and felt a stirring in his groin. He found her very attractive and hated himself for it. Her picture had the same effect on him as seeing her in real life, though he usually had to watch her from ten feet away or more to keep from being detected.

Since the night of The Storm she had never left his mind. When he was younger, moving through life as one did with the past behind him, she never wandered far from his consciousness. They became connected, whether she knew it or not. He had to be careful when he watched her. On more than one occasion a nosy neighbor would peer out a window when he spent too much time watching her apartment. He'd seen her latest boy-toy, too. Typical bimbo guy, with that unshaven five o'clock shadow, strutting next to her like a fucking rooster.

*Who killed Cock Robin?* I could kill Cock Robin. He pictured slitting the bastard's throat, but the man's only connection to The Storm was his relationship with Sara. Sweet, sweet Sara. He didn't even know the boyfriend's name yet but quickly came to calling him Brock or Blaine or Mason or some-such fucked up name.

When he was growing up, way before the night of The Storm, he had gone to Sunday school a few times with different friends. There were the Methodists and the Mormons and the Christians. And one hot august night, Russ and an acquaintance went to a Holy Roller church where the congregation stood up during the sermon and screamed Praise God, Halleluiah and Amen. The hollering mixed with organ music gave Russ goose bumps so he never went back. But all the religions had the same message, just told in different ways: Thou shall nots. The list was endless and got Russ wondering how many of those rules he had already broken.

After a while he believed he just might be going to Hell. That's where the vengeful God would send him. The Christian church seemed to be a bit more forgiving. The congregation was singing, not screaming and telling everyone they loved each other. There was hugging and quiet praises for God and a long haired, bearded man named Jesus. There was even a spirit called The Holy Ghost floating around invisible somewhere. The hugging and praising each other seemed okay to him. But the God thing, that was something different.

The only one Russ ever felt watching over him was his father. Even at that young age Russell didn't believe there could be an actual omnipotent being, controlling all things from above. The other attraction for him was the bible. There were stories in that thick black book that could match any horror film at that time or any story the best horror writers could come up with. Floods, Locusts and he didn't even pretend to understand the chapter of Revelations.

There was another thing he didn't quite understand and he wasn't even sure he had heard it right. When you were in Heaven, hanging out with God and it was your turn to come to Earth via a Mother's Womb, you made the plan of your life before you even came down to live it. All planned out, from birth, through all those nasty trials and tribulations, and then your death. Whichever death you decided to have; whether it be cancer, a car accident, murder victim or of old age. And that's really where the whole religious thing fell apart for him.

Russ doubted he picked the horror he experienced during The Storm. There was just no fucking way. Senior St. Cloud stated many times he believed religion was for the weak - people that needed a crutch and couldn't make their own decisions. Russ' mother didn't have an opinion one way or another on the subject. Even his Grandpapa and Grandnana avoided churches and religious get-togethers. But when Russell was invited by his friends he would go because he could get free cookies and Kool-Aid and get to draw pictures and use glue and scissors to cut up colored paper.

But as he got older, that opportunity all but disappeared. Russ opened one of the last school yearbooks he had got from his high school. He flipped through the pages and found a picture of himself surrounded by unknown classmates. His portrait was unsmiling, devoid of any real emotion. Not handsome or a piece of useless man-meat like a television or magazine model, but definitely not ugly. He wondered if his dark side seeped through enough for others to notice if they stared at his



photograph long enough. Russ ran a hand through his greasy hair and decided a shower would do nicely.

Shutting the lid to his laptop, making sweet Sara's face disappear, he pushed his chair back and shuffled upstairs to the bathroom. The house had a full bathroom downstairs but he was converting that for a special occasion. His needs were small and the upstairs half bath contained a toilet, a shower and a large antique mirror encased in a gaudy frame over the sink. Only one bulb of the three light fixtures actually worked. He had been meaning to replace the burnt out bulbs as well as repair the cracked sink below them but he always seemed too busy with other tasks. His Auntie hadn't had any repairs done to the old house since she had moved into it nearly thirty years before. Russ kept all his toiletries there: electric razor, deodorant, and a disposable razor for the close work.

He never used a bathtub anyway - there was no sense in sitting in dirty water. Russ pissed, and then took an overlong shower lathering up with real soap, not that liquid crap in a fancy bottle that was more water and perfume than anything else. That shit didn't clean anything didn't kill the germs. He took the stiff brush and scraped at his flesh, scrubbed it until his skin turned raw.

No pain, no gain, right? His mind wandered as he showered, taking him to a time spent with his Grandnana. His recollections about his grandparents always clung tightly to the memories that were good. Those memories never included his father or mother. The only love and caring he ever remembered receiving was from them. Once in a while his Grandnana would run a bath for him full



of bubbles accompanied by the scent of bubble gum. She would talk to him in low soothing tones as she scrubbed his back with a terrycloth puppet of a blue puppy. He would look up fondly at her sunken cheek bones, as her thin skin hands rubbed the soap onto his back; the warm water rushing over him like a welcomed hug.

“Why does father hate me, Grandnana?” asked Russell, one time. Grandnana pressed her slender lips tightly together.

After a short pause she said, “He doesn't hate you dear, he's just preoccupied with his work.”

Russell considered this for a moment then said, “Was he ever a boy like me?”

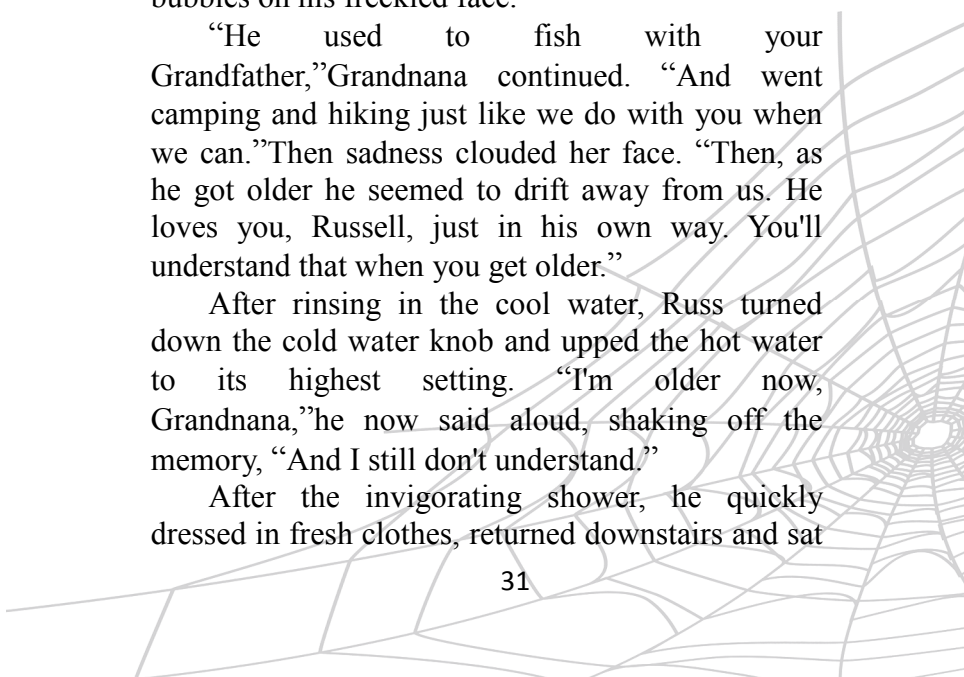
She smiled sweetly at all the innocent questions. “Yes. Once upon a time, he was just a regular boy like you.”

Russell beamed, happy with that answer as he ran his arm across his nose, leaving a trail of bubbles on his freckled face.

“He used to fish with your Grandfather,” Grandnana continued. “And went camping and hiking just like we do with you when we can.” Then sadness clouded her face. “Then, as he got older he seemed to drift away from us. He loves you, Russell, just in his own way. You'll understand that when you get older.”

After rinsing in the cool water, Russ turned down the cold water knob and upped the hot water to its highest setting. “I'm older now, Grandnana,” he now said aloud, shaking off the memory, “And I still don't understand.”

After the invigorating shower, he quickly dressed in fresh clothes, returned downstairs and sat

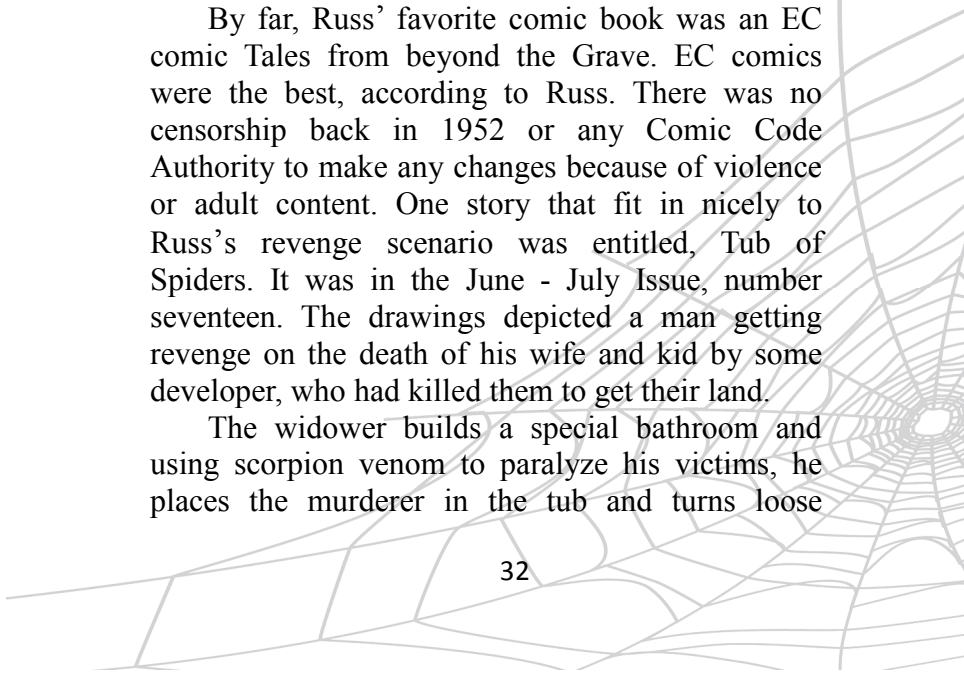


down at the table. There was so much to do. He shuffled through his papers and pulled out a crude but detailed blueprint. Russ based the entire bathroom setup on a comic book his childhood friend, Ivan had given him. Ivan and his family eventually decided to move, and Russ believed part of the reason was to escape the torment his friend had gotten at school.

There was also the fact that Russ' father had fired Ivan's father for insubordination during an argument about company layoffs. Before Ivan said his final goodbyes, he left Russ his entire comic collection. They promised to stay in touch but Russ never heard from Ivan again. The senior St. Cloud frowned on his son reading comic books or anything that didn't have to do with the real world. Russ didn't care what his father thought. Regular boys read comics, so he kept them hidden in his room and only took them out to read when it was safe.

By far, Russ' favorite comic book was an EC comic Tales from beyond the Grave. EC comics were the best, according to Russ. There was no censorship back in 1952 or any Comic Code Authority to make any changes because of violence or adult content. One story that fit in nicely to Russ's revenge scenario was entitled, Tub of Spiders. It was in the June - July Issue, number seventeen. The drawings depicted a man getting revenge on the death of his wife and kid by some developer, who had killed them to get their land.

The widower builds a special bathroom and using scorpion venom to paralyze his victims, he places the murderer in the tub and turns loose



deadly spiders that spout from the shower head. Then the spiders have a nice meal and the victim dies in agony. The twist was, when they were done eating the man they were still hungry, attacked, and ate their master.

So the ending sucked a bit, Russ thought. After all it was a comic book. But it was one hell of an idea, and that was what stuck in his mind. So he built his version of The Tub of Spiders using the unique colorful comic drawings as his blueprint. Of course, updates had to be made but that was to be expected. He was very pleased with the outcome so far.

He reached over and scooped up another yearbook. The one that held a continuing interest for him was the grade school record. There were tons of pictures of his old classmates. They were lost somewhere in the past and that was fine with him. His only interest in the yearbook was to remind him of his task and The Storm itself - as if he could forget. The three most important people were not buried in his past.

He kept tabs on them even now. He knew where they lived, where they worked. Actually, there were only two of them left now. One had escaped his fate through a car accident that took his life - mangled his body where metal intermingled with torn flesh and the muddy remnants of blood mixed with oil and fuel.

That was fine with Russ. It actually made his task easier in some ways. Now there was just Shaun Luke and Sara, the girl from the pit. As he thumbed through each page the memories flooded him so quickly he started getting a headache. He sat back in his chair and realized he wasn't breathing. He

sucked in the air-breathing in the oxygen slowly, deeply. He returned his attention to the book. When he pushed away, he had inadvertently opened the one page he always tried to avoid. In the upper left corner of the page was a crude grainy photo of a chubby young boy dressed in a cowboy suit posing for the camera, an enormous smile planted across his face. This was a picture of Russ taken two days before The Storm and he quickly turned away.

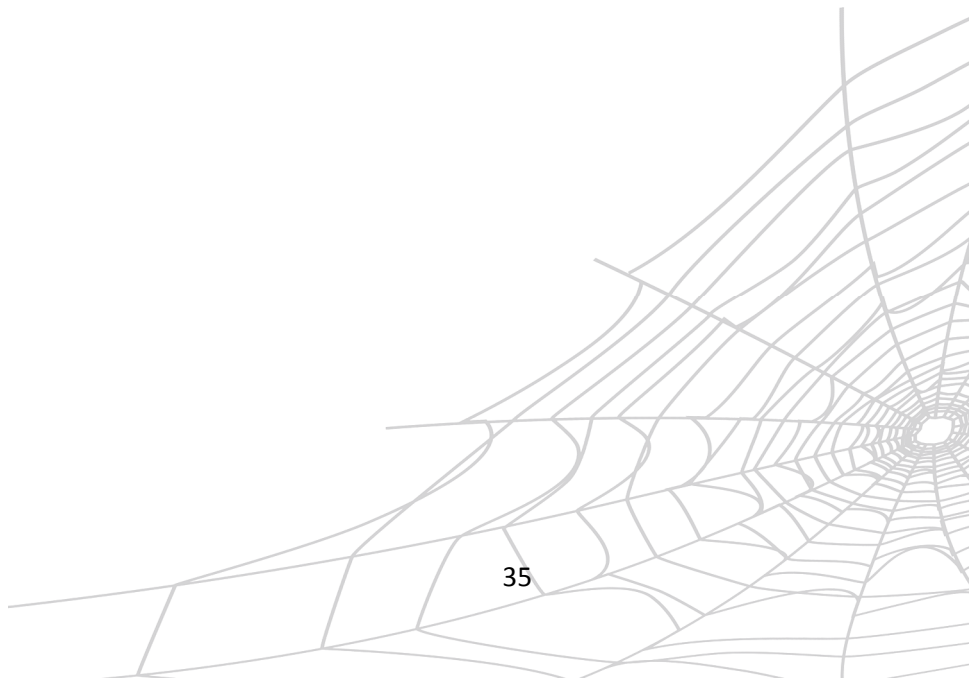
He wondered if the original snapshot was tucked away nicely in someone's photo album. There was no visual record of Russ' childhood frozen in time (only the ones his grandparents may have taken with their trusty Polaroid camera.) His parents had no snapshots, mementos or crayon drawings stuffed in photo albums from Russ' childhood shoved in the bottom of his mother's closet. It was as if his father wanted a clone not a child. He seemed to have no interest in babies or children, only in a grown up Russell.

His mother had done her duty and gave her husband a son, so her part was over. But now that Russ proved he would never be a carbon-copy of his father, the senior St. Cloud returned to his state of lack-of-interest. Perhaps they were planning on replacing him with another baby. He certainly wouldn't let that happen.

Russ reluctantly returned his attention to the cowboy picture. Under his picture was a different image. This child was also wearing a cowboy costume. His name was Alan Knott, the one who died in a horrifying car accident. He was still on Russ' list but now there was a red line crossed through it. There were still others to concentrate on

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and, as his Grandpapa used to say when someone  
crossed him, "There'll be hell to pay!"



## CHAPTER FOUR



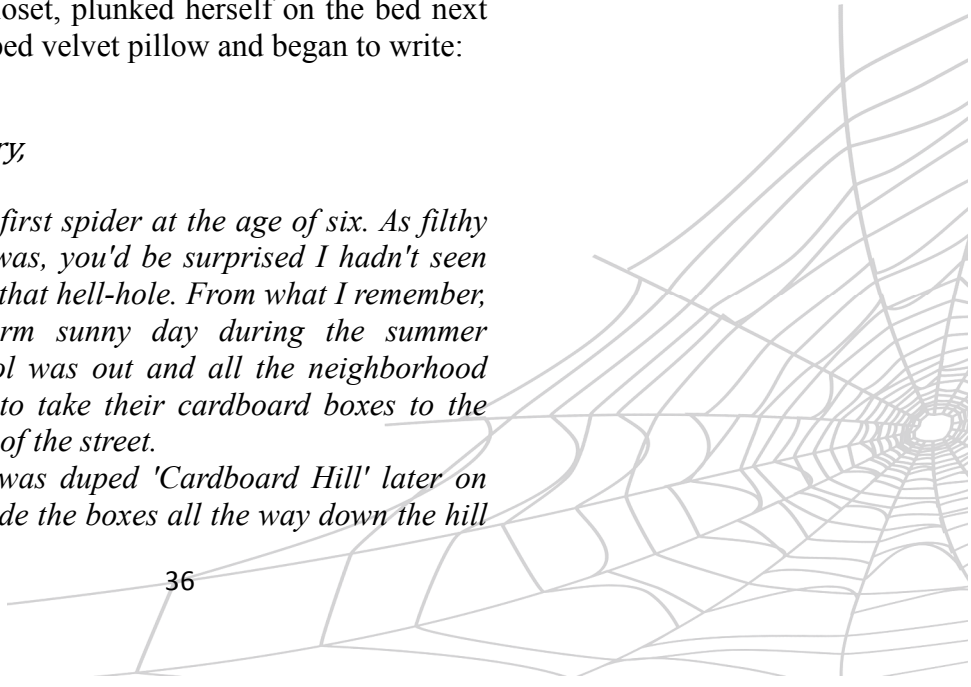
While Michael sat, cross-legged in front of the 42 inch flat screen playing Battle on Common Ground, a war game he often played with his online friends. He wore a ridiculous headset with the microphone dangling inches from his lips. Sara became a Game Console Widow and retreated into the sanctum of the bedroom.

Earlier, while in the carport, she spotted a large black spider crawling on a wooden stanchion. Without giving it a second thought, she removed a shoe and ground the bug into the stained wood. Soon after, when she was inside her apartment, she pulled out one of her journals from their hiding place in the closet, plunked herself on the bed next to a heart-shaped velvet pillow and began to write:

*Dear Diary,*

*I saw my first spider at the age of six. As filthy as my house was, you'd be surprised I hadn't seen one earlier in that hell-hole. From what I remember, it was a warm sunny day during the summer because school was out and all the neighborhood boys decided to take their cardboard boxes to the hill at the end of the street.*

*This hill was duped 'Cardboard Hill' later on because we rode the boxes all the way down the hill*

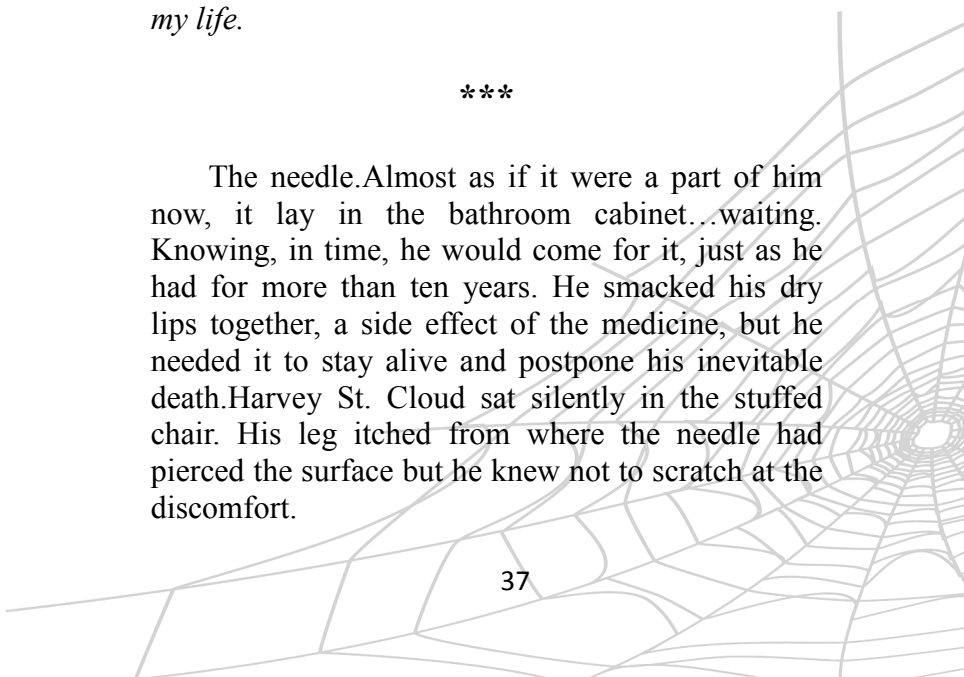


*as if we were on sleds in the snow. After several hours of excitement, I decided to sit halfway up on the hill to rest for a bit while the boys hauled the boxes up to the top for another run. As I sat there catching my breath, I looked down and noticed a spider was sitting on top of my hand. Startled for a moment, I soon realized it wasn't going to hurt me. I don't know how I knew, but I just felt that it was okay and something inside of me told me there was nothing to worry about.*

*There was almost a peaceful feeling across my body when I looked down at that small, white spider. The spider appeared to stare back at me and after several moments, it walked off my hand disappeared into the grass. I felt a connection with that spider because he looked right at me and he didn't bite me. I never told anyone about that encounter because I thought I would be made fun of or no one would believe me. My next experience with spiders, I believe, will haunt me for the rest of my life.*

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The needle. Almost as if it were a part of him now, it lay in the bathroom cabinet...waiting. Knowing, in time, he would come for it, just as he had for more than ten years. He smacked his dry lips together, a side effect of the medicine, but he needed it to stay alive and postpone his inevitable death. Harvey St. Cloud sat silently in the stuffed chair. His leg itched from where the needle had pierced the surface but he knew not to scratch at the discomfort.



To keep his mind off his trouble, as the insulin went to work snaking through his veins, he cupped a hand around an ear in an effort to amplify the sound of the TV. The news blasted out the latest murders, politics, sports, and weather. His demeanor remained unchanged as it alternated the stories between commercials; which he sat through with the usual lack of enthusiasm. He'd seen it all.

No surprises today. The same stories, different names, he thoughtfully concluded as the news ended. As a young man (was it really over fifty years ago?) he hadn't paid attention to politics or the news much as he indulged in the adventures of youth; but that ended with the war. He grew up very fast just as his father said he would. Now, old and tired, with only the past and a black and white television for a companion he sat in his house...alone. Night after night with a sore leg.

I'm just waiting to die! The thought crept into his mind again. Waiting for death to creep up quietly behind him as he slept and shut his eyes forever. Of course, Harvey had a girlfriend now. A pistol named Arlene, she was brash, boisterous but seemed to love him all the same but she was no Laura. To Harvey it seemed his past never took the day off. He knew, since he could no longer get the house that was promised to him, that he was just waiting for his turn to come and he would most likely die in this cheaply rented room. After all, he out lived a wife and two of his friends, didn't he?

Only a matter of time. He spent the night as he spent dozens of others; fitfully and unmercifully in the unfeeling hands of the sandman. Visions of his wife lying on the floor, withering in agony, wetting herself uncontrollably filled his mind. At long last,



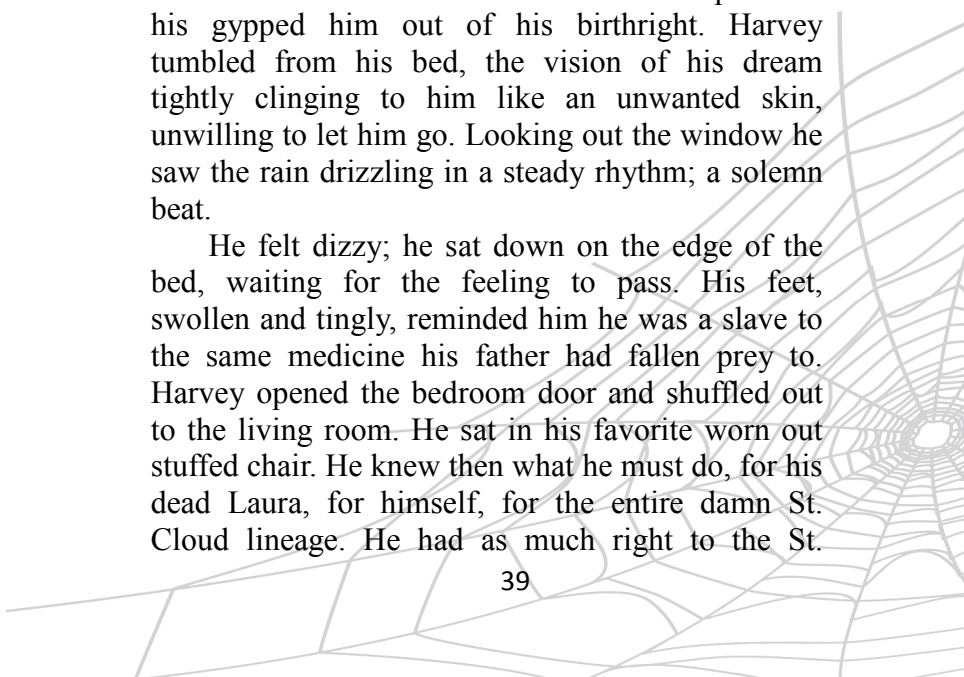
the suffering ended. After taking an overdose of sleeping pills; she finally found the peace that eluded her for over three years. At fifty seven, he had lost his constant companion.

He begged God to give her back. The God with the deaf ears and the cold heart. Harvey suffered along with Laura. In one incident, which he often recalled while sitting alone in front of the television, she asked him to put an end to her torment.

“Help me die. If you love me you'll do this.” She would rest her head close to his as the tears spilled onto his shoulders. The tears that burned through him scared him forever, every time he remembered. He told her no. Every time she asked, he'd shake his head, his eyes wet with tears of his own.

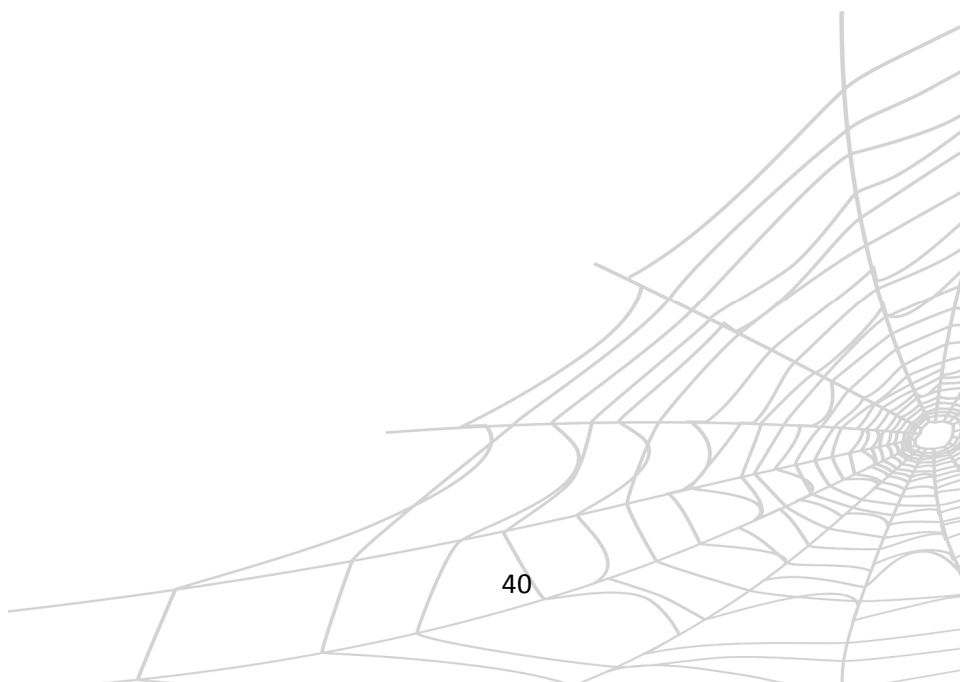
No, Laura! It should have been yes. The dreams. If only they would stop taunting him. He knew if they had just had the house things would have worked out. But that little bastard nephew of his gyped him out of his birthright. Harvey tumbled from his bed, the vision of his dream tightly clinging to him like an unwanted skin, unwilling to let him go. Looking out the window he saw the rain drizzling in a steady rhythm; a solemn beat.

He felt dizzy; he sat down on the edge of the bed, waiting for the feeling to pass. His feet, swollen and tingly, reminded him he was a slave to the same medicine his father had fallen prey to. Harvey opened the bedroom door and shuffled out to the living room. He sat in his favorite worn out stuffed chair. He knew then what he must do, for his dead Laura, for himself, for the entire damn St. Cloud lineage. He had as much right to the St.



Cloud fortune as anyone else in the family. He knew he had to expose his nephew for what he was, what he suspected he was, what he knew deep down inside he was. And he needed to keep everything he knew from Arlene. He needed to keep her safe from all the dark secrets of the family, especially from Russell St. Cloud.

(End of Excerpt)



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Jennifer Patterson has enjoyed writing since she was young but it wasn't until she met David several years ago before her talent became reality. His writing encouraged her to follow her own passion of becoming an author.

Her urge to write stems from the desire to help and inspire others, while bringing them joy as they immerse in her world of make believe. She currently resides in Portland, Oregon, enjoys the outdoors, playing softball, and spending time with her 2 children, 4 dogs, and 3 cats. This is her first novel.

David Rowell Workman has been writing for many years and recently released a collection of prose, stage plays, short stories and several detective novels. He has a passion for a science fiction, which he's written Doctor Who scripts for several independent fan films. David currently resides in Missoula, Montana.

