

Served Cold

“Dispatch, Detective Samuels here. Show me 10-97 at alley between Figueroa and Waylond, right next to Tide-E laundromat. Possible 10-54. Multiple black & whites and an ambulance already on the scene.”

I had just begun to head home to my husband when the call came in. There was a body found. Real ugly scene unfolded in some alley. Stepping out of my car, the whole alley is a racetrack with blue and red lights bouncing off its high walls. I recognize Jeff and Rich as they robotically unload the stretcher from the ambulance. A well-orchestrated symphony of movement carried out with urgency no matter the state of the person in need. Yellow tape has blocked off the end of the alley. As I approach, it slithers in the breeze like a snake. The laundromat had already closed for the night, and across from it is an old, abandoned warehouse. Very little chance for a witness. Many of the alleys in Fredricksville have a homeless person or two. Homeless witnesses usually have a tough time convincing people that they know what they're talking about. Seen it a million times. Unfortunately, the defense will assassinate their characters based purely on circumstances and their back luck.

“Hey Lamar. What do we have here?”

“Justine. We got a real mess here. A lot of blood. One messed up body. Male, Caucasian, blonde hair, medium build, age 25-35. Blood on the warehouse wall here, some on the dumpster. Whatever was gonna happen here, it went O.K. Corral in a hurry.

“Trying to take my job, Lamar?”

“No ma'am. Have at it.”

“Found any weapons? Any witnesses?”

While Lamar brings me up to speed, my flashlight lights up a black backpack a few feet away from the body. I can notice the zipper is not completely zipped shut. A little river of blood connects the bag to the body. The clothes on this guy might as well be black as the blood has had time to dry and blend him in with the surrounding darkness. His body is sitting with his back leaning against the wall. When someone dies a violent death, they don't usually sit neatly upright against a wall like this. His body was placed this way after the fact.

Lamar carefully opens the bookbag to examine its contents. His left pants pocket has what feels like a wallet inside. I'm able to pull out an Illinois driver's license. David Brenner. Age 27. 183 lbs.

"Lamar, we have ID. David Brenner. That name ring a bell?"

Lamar has pulled a magazine out of the backpack. My flashlight answers the question before the thought can enter my mind. We look at each other and know what this means. While we are unfamiliar with David, we know the family name.

"Shit."

"Yeah. That's not good."

"Hey, Jimmy. It's Craig. They didn't show up again. Can you work tonight?"

"Don't worry. I'll be in."

Working as a security guard for a contractor, this is what you quickly understand about the territory. Turnover that is so absurd it would make me laugh if it wasn't screwing over my days off. Coupled with a general hiring practice that if someone meets the requirement of being able to breathe, they are good enough to get hired. It gets just a little frustrating. However, the

job market in Fredricksville is not great by any stretch. I work in a big office building in the west part of town. The town feels like it is slowly bleeding out. Many businesses, some large and some small, have had to close in the last five to ten years. All throughout town, crime has trended upwards as profitability and overall population have trended down.

I know I'll need to let Kayla know that we can't hang out tonight after all. We live next door to each other in the same apartment complex. I'm used to late calls from work, so I need to get dressed and get moving. Kayla and I both work the night shift, which helps us to hang out a lot. She works at the local grocery store. We're really good friends. Our nights off line up similarly too, so we were looking forward to watching movies together tonight. On tap was one of my favorites, John Carpenter's *The Thing*, and her pick, *Step Brothers*. With my blue uniform and matching hat, I close my door and knock on Kayla's to fill her in. Her door makes a rattling sound as I knock, and after a few seconds there she is.

"Hey, Jimmy. I was just about to come over. What's wrong?"

"I'm really sorry. I just got a call from work. They need me to work tonight. Can we try this tomorrow night instead?"

"Sure. Don't sweat it. Just don't let them rope you into working tomorrow night, too. Find your balls and let 'em know you need at least one night off."

Kayla always busts my chops because she knows me, how uncomfortable I am telling someone "no." At least, I'm pretty sure she is joking. I don't have many friends, very few in fact, so her opinion of me matters a great deal. Even more so since I've always had feelings for her. Kayla tries to hide her looks, and usually does a poor job. She answered the door wearing black sweatpants that show off her curves, and an old matching Disturbed shirt that also fails

miserably. Her long blonde hair is usually in a ponytail, and her glasses somehow make her seem more attractive, even though she hates them so much and is very conscious of them. While I walk downstairs and head outside, I think about Kayla's joke and the "what if" scenario where I took it to heart. If I would really find my balls, I'd work up the courage to finally let her know how I feel, assuming she hasn't figured it out yet. Logic dictates that I can't take that chance. Having very few friends, I'm unable to convince myself that this is a chance I should take.

Having low self-esteem and thinking this way, always using my head instead of my heart, can have some big setbacks. Opening the apartment door unleashes the warm and sticky atmosphere of one of those hot Illinois summer nights. Temperatures must be over seventy-five degrees here at 9:42 PM. Gross. I'm serenaded by cicadas on the walk to my truck. My old Silverado has seen a lot of miles. The white paint is slowly being swallowed by rust that started above the wheels, and at the bottom of the driver's side door. Even still, under the full moon, the paint that still has a nice sheen reflects the moonlight and looks newish. Around this time of the night, I'll usually take stock of my life. Contemplate that mentality of playing it safe and not taking chances that landed me in a \$12/hr. security job. Before my parents both died in a car crash, I had plans to go to college. There was ambition back then, a twinkle in my eyes.

That driving force hasn't been there since that night. When they both took that final breath, it was like my potential did as well. I never knew how vital it was to have those close to me that thought I could achieve big things and pushed me to push myself harder. Now, I live in a town that is receding worse than my hairline, with no college experience in a rough job market, without much money saved up, and it feels like playing it safe is the only option I have.

Most nights at work are a blur of mundane tasks. This place is a large four-story building with security gates along the outer perimeter. You must have badge access to get to the parking lots. The front side of the building is mostly windows, and some big companies work here. The biggest company in the building is a heavy machinery company. They are a large supply of the lifeblood of Fredricksville. Rumblings pop up every now and then that they could move to somewhere like Chicago. If that happens, the bubble might finally burst on this town and the local economy will finally flush itself down the drain.

Multiple times each night, there are patrol routes that need to be covered, server rooms to check out, gauges to check, cameras to monitor, cleaning crews to escort to high security rooms, and so on. But from the hours of 10 PM to 6 AM, this place is mostly a ghost town. When 6 AM arrives, I let my supervisor Craig know to please not call me tonight unless it is absolutely an emergency. Kayla would laugh if she heard me standing up to my supervisor. I laid down the law. Driving back towards the Eastern part of town, this place is an eyesore. Shuttered stores and businesses litter streets like I'm looking at an ear of corn. Some of the kernels are still golden yellow, but more and more are turning orange like they are past their prime. In Eastern Fredricksville, a few blocks from the apartment, there is a strip mall that shut down two years ago. A retro game shop, vape shop, shoe store, nail salon, Chinese food place, and an eyeglass retailer all fell one after the other, like dominoes.

Third shift work even if mundane, still exhausts me by the time I get home. I don't know what my parents would've thought about where I'm at in my life, or where I live. My home still comforts me, and I try to keep it looking decent as I can. It's structured as one large room with a couple smaller rooms jutting out from it like pimples on a face. This large open space has

brown carpet that matches the door, but many years of footprints have squashed and flattened it to the point where it doesn't do much good anymore. The bathroom just barely has the size to accommodate a full shower, toilet, and sink. The walls are white to match with the tile floor. The other small room I'm sure is usually used as the bedroom, but it's too small for my liking. Claustrophobia envelops me if I think about putting my bed, end table, and the dresser all together. Instead, my dresser and some storage tubs occupy this room. My bed is in one corner of the main room, and another corner has what I'll call my kitchen, along with the washer and dryer.

I need to catch some sleep before Kayla comes over. Despite my exhaustion from work, sleep is still a lottery. There are some people that seemingly never adjust to third shift. I must be one of them. This morning it comes immediately. I'm transformed into another time and place.

It's that night again. I wasn't there, but I've lived it so many times. I'm standing on the shoulder of a country road. That road. I see myself, Jimmy standing there, right in front of me. Deep ditches flank the road on both sides. I feel as though I'm standing on a mountain. Fields of corn in every direction whisper in the wind. A young fawn peaks its head through the corn and watches Jimmy. All sound leaves now, except for the buzzing of a fly that lands on the fawn's left ear. This fawn is always at the same spot. Sometimes, he holds his ground. This time, he turns and runs back into the corn, startled. Stalks part in his wake.

Mom and dad are coming into view. The gray Honda CRV. Jimmy steps onto the road and begins to frantically wave his arms. He wants their attention more than anything he's ever wanted. From behind, I can tell he's yelling. Nothing but silence. His words can't reach them.

We hear their engine. A second noise is heard behind us. Jeff Schuman. Mom and dad's headlights are nearly blinding us, but neither Jimmy nor myself can look away. Bugs are exploding on their windshield like drops of rain. Schuman's red pickup roars past us. Jimmy is bathed in red from his taillights as his truck veers into the left lane.

I can feel the warmth from his exhaust. Burnt rubber clogs my nostrils as tires squeal from both directions. Mom and dad drive onto the left shoulder, but it doesn't create enough distance. Jeff's bumper clips them near the left rear tire of the CRV. That disgusting sound of steel and aluminum crashing into itself. The CRV is sent across the right side of the road. Jimmy and I are directly in its path. It doesn't hit us though. It drops into the ditch to our right and begins to flip over on its side. We smell the cocktail of gasoline, rubber, and oil. Their CRV continues to roll over again and again.

My ceiling fan is making its patented noise above me. I wake up like I experience a huge jump scare. I slowly begin to catch my breath again. The clock says 2:17 PM. From the minute I wake, the dream is fading. I'm never able to make out anyone's face. But I know who everyone is. I make my way to the bathroom so I can take a shower before meeting up with Kayla. My image in the bathroom mirror doesn't look great these days. I've been losing weight for the past year since I started my third shift lifestyle. I'm not skinny, but it's the closest I've ever been. Dark circles hug the undersides of my eyes, threatening to keep gaining more ground. My black hair is just stubble. It's leaving anyway. I'll need to shave the stubble on my neck and face soon, or else work will bitch at me about it. I once worked twelve consecutive days and the only thing the supervisors told me was that I needed to shave my face to appear more professional.

Kayla had said she would be over by 5, so when 5:30 arrived, I wanted to make sure everything was alright. Kayla answered the door immediately.

“Sorry I’m late. Just finishing up some laundry.”

Her apartment looks a little confused. She has tried to pick up painting, and there is evidence of it in various little corners of her place. A square canvas sits on the couch. A river winds through the frame, but there is nothing else here yet. Clothes are tossed about, partially folded on an end table, a countertop, and on top of the dryer. It doesn’t surprise me though. Kayla will sometimes interrupt her own sentences and take a turn to a completely different topic. The walls are decorated with posters, mostly hard rock, and metal bands. I recognize all the names as we like the same music; Disturbed, Motionless in White, Rammstein, Sevendust, and more. Maybe this shows why we are such good friends. We both benefit the other person. I have a calming demeanor that works to put her mind at ease. She is more spontaneous and makes me feel a little less boring when I’m around her.

We make our way back to the entertainment area of my apartment. This corner is where most of the care and money I have goes. There’s a wooden stand with two levels, and a nice tv sits on top. On the two shelves sit my videogame consoles. In front of the stand is a faded brown couch. The springs creak gently when we sit in it.

“Before we start the movie, I need to talk to you about something. It’s important. I need you to make a promise that you’ll keep this between us.”

“Sure, Kayla. You know me. Whatever it is, who am I gonna tell about it? You care if I work on this while you talk? I promise I’m listening to every word.”

Kayla begins to talk, and I pull out pieces of an ongoing project. It's like Legos, but I never remember the exact name. It's a light gray WWII German Panzer tank. It contains almost twelve hundred pieces. Sometimes, after I've had one of those dreams, working on a project like this helps calm me down.

"Jimmy . . . this really isn't easy to talk about. I'm sure you've noticed that I never seem to have a boyfriend. Well, there's a reason for that. Four years ago, I was at a Disturbed concert over at the NOW Arena. They were awesome. Anyway, I met this guy named David. He was cute and seemed like a nice guy. We started talking to each other in between songs. Seemed like we were really hitting it off. I could tell he had had a few beers. So had I."

Kayla is tugging at her hair and working to put it into a ponytail with a green hair tie. I'm concentrating on the tank treads and clicking pieces together.

"I can't remember all of the details about what happened later. But I know the most horrible ones. We ended up back at his house. We were sitting on his bed, and well . . . things happened. There was kissing for a while. I took some of my clothes off. So did he. I can still feel the weight of his chest pressed against me. I was lying on my back. Then, we were . . ."

I set down the treads and look at Kayla. Her eyes are full. She's trying to keep it together. One tear slips away from her left eye unnoticed. It slowly reaches her cheek and then jumps off the cliff.

"I realized what was happening. I don't know why, but I didn't want this anymore. We were having sex. Next thing I know, I wanted to get up and go home. I told him: "Please, David. I wanna go." He kept on going though. I was telling him again, louder. Eventually, I remember

yelling at him and trying to push him off. It wasn't working. He wouldn't stop. It was only us in the house. There was no one there to help me. To hear me."

This whole time, Kayla has been twisting her hair and working it to death. She is still holding the hair tie, but refuses to finish the final step. I'm holding the tank tread in my hands again, but can't for the life of me tell what the next step is. I read it on the directions, but it won't reach that part of my brain.

"It was consensual at first. Make no mistake, Jimmy. I was raped that night. He didn't finish at least. Somehow, the bastard fell asleep on top of me. Thank god for all that beer he drank. I think I was crying by the time he fell asleep. But I quickly put my clothes back on and ran out of there as fast as I could. Four years ago. You never wondered in all that time why I've been single?"

She put the attention back on me with that question. How the hell do I answer that? I always wondered about that, ultimately wishing to be the answer to that question.

"Uh. . . I have wondered that. But it's not one of those questions you ask somebody. It makes it sound like something's wrong with them. Why are you still single? Huh. What gives? It's none of my business."

None of my business. It's the business that I think about every time I'm around her. It threatens to drown me at times, to cut off my air supply entirely.

"Well, there it is, Jimmy. I was raped. I never told anyone before tonight. Never went to the police. No good would've come from that. We never talked or saw each other again after that night."

My right hand is holding the instruction sheet for the Panzer. Fingerprints are staining the white paper. My brain and the rest of my body is trying to figure out how to react to news like this.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why did you want to tell me this tonight of all nights? For four years, you kept all this to yourself. I can’t imagine having something like that and keeping it in. You could’ve told me so many times.”

“Because I want to kill him. I had thought about it before. He never faced any kind of punishment. He got away and gets to live life like nothing happened. I’ve never been the same. Come on, Jimmy. Don’t play that game with me. You’ve told me about that guy. What was his name again? Jeff? The one that killed your parents. You thought about killing him. Don’t lie and say it never crossed your mind.”

By now, I had placed the instructions back on the end table. I was now holding the long barrel of its main gun. Completely out of sequence. My mind sizzles like a scrambling egg. Kayla has streaks down her face but her sadness is gone along with the tears. Her tone makes me slightly uncomfortable, and it doesn’t feel like I’m talking to my friend now.

“That’s not the same thing. Jeff . . . yeah I hated his guts for a long time. But it’s not the same and you know it. He didn’t commit some type of crime. He was heading home from work and fell asleep at the perfect time to fuck up my world. He wasn’t high or drunk. My parents were dead and he had a broken arm and a few bruises. Yeah, I wanted to kill him. For a while. But, he’s got a family and I—I got over that.”

Loud knocks on my door make me drop the tank gun onto the floor. A few rectangular squares break apart and fly in opposite directions as they hit the carpet. The pizza is here. Right

now, I want out of this conversation so badly that I might try to start one with the pizza boy. Walking to the door and thanking him and exchanging a couple pleasantries feels like it takes two seconds, if that much. The smell of pepperoni is oozing out of the warm and greasy box. I set it down on the kitchen table, and Kayla meets me by the plates.

“You didn’t answer my question. Why tonight?”

“I just found out he’s leaving town for good in a few days. David has been living a few blocks from here for a while. That’s right, Jimmy. I’ve seen him. I make sure he doesn’t see me, but I don’t know if he’d recognize me anyway. He’s moving to Canada, permanently. Four days from now. This is my shot to make him pay. I’m asking for your help.”

The pizza slices are lopsided in the way they were cut. Counting the slices, there are eight like there should be. A few of them are enormous, leaving the one next to it looking like its kid.

“Please, just let me think about this. You’re not asking to borrow a pen or something.”

“You were able to move on. I haven’t. Four years this has been like a weight on me. What if he’s raped other women since? Maybe none of them have done anything about it either. You know that we could make sure he can’t do it again. Show him that he can’t get away with it. Take tonight and think about it. I know this is no small thing. Come on. Let’s relax and watch some movies now.”

The night turns into a blur. Usually, I’m at ease around this girl. *The Thing* is one of my favorite movies. Tonight, it didn’t even feel like I was present on the couch watching it. *Step Brothers* makes me laugh so much. Those kids bullying Brennan and forcing him to lick that white dog turd doesn’t make me laugh for the first time. Our conversation might as well be the

entire dialogue in both movies. By the time Step Brothers reaches the credits and Prestige Worldwide has taken off, a few hours have ticked by on the clock.

“I’ll be right back. What do ya say, Jimmy? Some Mario Kart? Ready to get that ass whipped again? After last time, I never thought—”

“I’ll do it.”

Kayla had been making her way towards the bathroom. She does a one-eighty and runs towards me and gives me a big hug. She kisses me on my right cheek. This used to be a moment that I would’ve loved, the feeling of her body pressed up against mine, the grape-like smell from her shampoo from hours past. Instead, my mind races with questions. I’ve never known Kayla to lie to me before or withhold anything. I can’t shake it. Something worries me about the decision I’ve made. And it’s not just the “kill some guy I’ve never met” part. Jimmy. You better be doing this for the right reasons. You’re helping to dole out justice and bring her peace four years in the making. He’s a rapist. He deserves this. Your best friend asked you for help.

Before Kayla leaves my place, I convince her that we will follow David tomorrow night and try to see where we could do this. According to her, she has seen him the last couple nights walking towards the dollar store that is open all day. He’s been picking up some cardboard boxes and clear plastic totes. He lives in Greenview Apartments. These are much more luxurious and expansive than ours. It’s the only really nice apartment complex in Fredricksville. These locations are all close to each other; the two apartment complexes, and this dollar store is in between.

Later that afternoon, I call my supervisor Craig and tell him I’m not feeling well. Working at this place for one full year has earned me one-week paid vacation. These people are anal

about missing work and have some weird point system. If you're sick and bring a note from a doctor, you'll still get a point against you. These will add up and eventually enough points will get you a suspension. It's a system designed to make you fail if you begin to accrue any points. I tell Craig I'll just use one of my vacation days.

Kayla has more leniency from the grocery store, so she takes the next couple days off work. Around 10 PM, we leave together, both donning dark clothes. It's not unusual to see a few people walking the streets of town at any hour of the night. The walk is only a few blocks to Greenview Apartments, and we're reminded of the kinds of places that can survive around here. Amongst buildings with broken and boarded up windows, a small liquor store is still open. Two older men with shaggy coats and shaggier beards are arguing by the front door. Another one-story brick building that used to be something I can't remember has graffiti covering its walls now. It's a painting of a tombstone in a graveyard. The tombstone reads *Only God can save your soul* and the top of the tombstone is on fire.

Roads in town are littered with potholes. Some of them are so huge I swear one day they'll open up and swallow a car whole. Greenview Apartments is a jewel in this part of the neighborhood. It has a gate surrounding the grounds, so we wait on the sidewalk, hoping that David comes out. Our timing is accurate. 10:18 PM. We're only waiting a few minutes before he comes out of the front gate and starts walking in the direction of the dollar store. I suppose I can see what Kayla saw in him four years ago. David looks a few years older than us, still in his twenties. He's wearing a green polo shirt and khakis that show me he takes pretty good care of himself. For a moment, the moonlight shines brightly off his wrist. That's an expensive looking

watch. He has a full head of blonde hair that is neatly cut, with a couple strands extending down his forehead.

Kayla and I keep a safe distance behind him. If we sense that he is about to look in our direction, we hold hands and act as though we are merry and a little drunk. This will help us fit in with most of the people out this time of night. His trip to the dollar store is uneventful. Before leaving, we see him chatting and laughing with the young man working behind the counter. I've seen him before, but don't know him well enough to try asking about David. We duck into the back alley as David bursts through the door carrying empty cardboard boxes with fragile written in large red letters. Nothing exciting happens on his trip back home. He takes the sidewalk and cuts through a couple alleys to save time.

Part of me wanted to see something else happen. Something to make my blood boil. Curse at a random kid for looking at him. Refuse to assist an old lady across the street. Pass a homeless man on the ground and tell him to get a job like it's that simple. Anything. Once he is inside the apartment complex, Kayla and I start the walk home.

"Well, that's him. Fuckin' asshole. He took the same exact route last night. If he does it tomorrow night, we can do this. When we get home, I need to show you something, Jimmy. I want you to see that I'm serious about this."

Kayla wants us to stop at her apartment. She heads to her closet and starts walking towards me with a small black duffel bag. I see the same painting that just has the river, and another canvas with half a large purple mountain at dusk. My focus snaps back to the bag as I hear a metallic sounding clang. She pulls out one pistol, then produces another. Both have what looks like makeshift suppressors attached at the ends of them. These pistols look like ones I saw

in a Fallout videogame. These suppressors don't match the pistol in color, making the moment here feel more ridiculous.

"Where did you get these?"

"You know it's not hard to find these around town. Now you know I'm serious."

"Look, Kayla. We need some kind of plan before—"

"I gotta run. Don't worry. We can go over this later."

Kayla and I don't see each other again until the next night. We leave our apartment shortly before 10 PM, expecting David to leave his place like he has the previous few nights. I let Kayla know that we should've talked this through in order to come up with any kind of concrete plan. There isn't really a plan. Not a good one anyway. Once we reach David's apartment complex, Kayla hands me the cold metal. I place it in my waistband behind me. We're both dressed in black clothes, so we can blend in with the dark alley where I think this will go down. David leaves right on cue. I'm thrown off as he has a backpack on tonight. We follow safely behind as he makes his way to the dollar store again. We wait outside.

He shakes the hand of the guy behind the counter and seems to show him a magazine. Next, he comes out without the usual boxes or supplies. Kayla pulls me into an alley to hide from his view. Instead of coming back our direction, David instead goes next door into the pharmacy. He's only in there for a couple minutes. David starts walking in our direction now. I think he's heading home.

"I'm going to cut him off behind the laundromat. You'll know when the time is right."

And just like that, Kayla leaves me alone and races ahead. Following David alone now lets that voice creep into my head. That voice that asks me *what the hell are you thinking?* Right

now, I want to start running. Run back to my apartment, shut the door, and pretend like Kayla and I never even contemplated this madness. Before I can start running, we are in the alley between Figueroa and Wayland. I can make out Kayla at the far end, leaning back against the wall. David is walking right towards her. I want to say something to him, but I can't. Kayla steps out of the shadows a few paces in front of David and stops him in his tracks.

"You never thought it'd catch up to you? You remember me?"

Kayla steps out of the shadows and is holding a pistol in her right hand. Her face is visible now, and I barely recognize it. This makes David take a couple steps back.

"Whoa whoa whoa. Take it easy. Should I know you?"

"Four years ago you raped me you fucking prick. Disturbed concert. We headed back to your house. I've lived with it for four years!"

"Kay-Kayla? It's really you? I'm so sorry. So many times I've wanted to see you, to apologize. That's not who I am. I hate myself for what I did. I'm so sorry. But if you just listen. . . I'm not that guy. I've got a lit—"

"Enough! I'm not going to stand here and let you excuse what you did. You don't get to do that."

I realize that I had been standing back and watching this conversation. Now, I realize that I still have the element of surprise. Just get it over with already. I quicken my pace, though it pales in comparison to my heartbeat. Somehow, my gaze gets sidetracked along the way. I see a beautiful yellow cat come walking out from behind a couple garbage bags. It's yellow with orange stripes all down its back and the tail ends in a sharp white point. It's licking its lips and both back legs are stretching as it starts to walk away from me. It lets out a hiss before it begins

to run hastily down the alley. I whip my head around and see David looking in my direction. My right hand reaches for the pistol in my waistband.

Clumsily, I manage to point my pistol at his face. His eyes are enormous, and he begins to back away from me with his hands in the air. Kayla yells at me to finish the job.

“Do it now! Come on! Do it!”

I press the trigger, but all I hear is a loud clicking noise. Again. Same thing. I take my eyes off David long enough to diagnose the problem. In my panicked reach for the pistol, I forgot to take the safety off. The safety is off now. I look up and find that David has closed the distance. He puts his left shoulder into my gut. A gasp escapes as we tumble backwards into a dumpster. Some cardboard and garbage comes tumbling out of the dumpster and lands on us. My wind is trying to come back, but David’s left hand is on my throat. His other fist hammers me in my right cheek, and I feel the shockwave of pain flow throughout the rest of my head.

A second blow hits home, and a third. A hushed gunshot is heard, and David reaches for his back with a distressed yell. David springs to his feet and hits Kayla in the chest with enough force to knock her on her back. I can see the bloody wound as a wet spot is forming on his lower back, right underneath the backpack. Finally able to stagger to my feet, my pistol is nowhere to be seen. I dropped it when I collided with the dumpster. Instead, all I can think of is to get my arm under his chin and apply a sleeper hold. He’s bigger and stronger than I am, and still has a lot of strength left. He backs me into the brick wall, but I don’t relinquish my grip. I’ve got him breathing hard now, as I’m squeezing with everything I have. The back of my head has a warm sensation now and begins to throb.

I'm on my back with David's back resting on my chest. His right elbow is repeatedly striking and digging into my ribs. The pain becomes too much, and I'm forced to let go. His body collapses forward when I do. Now's my chance. While getting back to my feet, I swipe my hands along the garbage on the ground, and I can feel the cold metal. Kayla is barely moving since she got shoved hard to the ground. I turn around and fire off one poorly aimed shot. Noise from the cartridge hitting the ground makes it feel too real. My shot barely hits his left shoulder. David curses and brings a fist into my stomach. Shit. I dropped the gun again.

Both hands clutch my gut as my breath threatens to leave me again. This gives David the chance to reach down and produce a small knife out of his pants pocket. It's a pretty big pocketknife. David looks down for a moment to open it up, and I ball up my right hand. I swing as violently as I can, and luckily, it hits him right on the chin. My momentum makes me crash into his chest, and we both tumble to the ground. David winces as tries to get to his feet. Trying again, we both stand up and I grab his hands as hard as I can. All four of our hands are balled up in one mess. While he is screaming in my face, he is able to push the pile of hands into me. An involuntary yell answers as I feel a sharp pain in my stomach from his blade.

I deliver a headbutt that loosens his grip on his knife. The knife twists out of me, and it feels as though it is trying to pull my insides with it. I've gotten it free and I turn it on David. Before he can react, I slash and stab with all my might. Three times. What a terrible way to discover that nasty sound a blade makes when puncturing a body. Once more, until finally he falls onto his back. Kayla finally comes to, and hurries over to me.

"Jimmy, look at you. Are you alright? We need to get out of here. Come on!"

My left knee is pressed against the cold hard ground. I'm holding my stomach, but it doesn't feel life threatening. Lifting up my shirt confirms that, much to my relief. That warm sensation at the back of my head is blood, but it doesn't seem too critical either. My head hurts like hell. Once I'm standing, I turn to see that Kayla has raced around the corner. Every instinct tells me to follow with hesitation. My curiosity gets the best of me and I decide to take a look inside his backpack. The contents spill out onto the ground. They're hard to make out, so I pull out my phone and turn on my flashlight app. I shine it on the magazine cover and see the headline: *Brenner family opens new children's home in Fredricksville*. There are a few people on the cover, and one of them looks just like David. Kayla never gave me his full name.

Another item that had fallen out of the backpack is a box of medication. A red box that says *Infants' Tylenol* at the top. Hastily, I find myself scrambling to pull his wallet out to confirm his ID. I'm not a genius, but even I can connect these dots. I think back to what David was starting to say before Kayla cut him off. *I've got a lit. . . little girl/boy?* His driver's license reads not to my surprise: David Brenner. This isn't some nobody. Him and his family are clearly well known. Important people. He's got a child, and now I see a wedding ring on his finger that I completely missed during our fight. Why do I suddenly feel like the biggest piece of shit in the world? I killed a husband and a father.

This was supposed to feel gratifying. A rapist getting his comeuppance. This was going to be quick and clean, and I'd win over Kayla. No complications. Not only was this not quick or clean, but I'm also all over this crime scene. Blood. Fingerprints. I didn't even wear gloves because it was supposed to be a quick shot, and then off we went. If I could only go back a couple days in time and tell Kayla no in every possible way. I just want to go home and sleep

this all away. I put my fingers on his neck to feel for a pulse, praying that one will be there.

David and I will stand up and brush ourselves off, both admit we've made some big mistakes, and be on our way. I can't explain why, but I drag his body and place it up against the wall so he's sitting up.

There is a soft but rapid knock on my door. The time is 3:38 PM. I sit up in my bed, wiping my eyes to try and knock the cobwebs loose. This knocking repeats again. Soft but rapid. I throw on a shirt before answering. Upon opening it, there are several police officers standing outside in the hallway.

"Jimmy Parsens? I'm Detective Samuels of the Fredricksville Police Department. Would you mind coming with us down to the station? We have a few questions we'd like to ask you."