

Another Way

Beyond the Status Quo

by William Arthur Holmes

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A Manifesto

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Semmy Speaks

August

It was in Las Cruces that things got weird. Dobromir "Dobie" Pokorny was well into his anti-corporate "speaking truth to power" tour in support of his latest book – his manifesto – *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo*.

After Kentucky and Indiana, he took a detour and headed southwest. He would soon wish he had kept heading north, but eventually made it to New Mexico, with stops in Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas along the way.

He was feeling pretty good about things by that point, despite a rough start, doing exactly what he wanted: staying sober and saying what needed to be said. Selling more books online, in stores, and in person, he felt he was winning the war against those who would shut him up. He spouted off for a living now, and there were plenty of people who did not like what he had to say.

Despite this, word was spreading. Crowds were growing with each passing week. He was filling up those previously half-empty hotel conference rooms, even the occasional small concert venue, as he shared his plans to save the world.

He was no savior and refused to pretend otherwise. He was a reluctant hero, and said so, repeatedly, after more than one person suggested he take himself more seriously, be more respectable, act like a proper leader. This always came after one of his more humorous presentations, and always from a woman, for some reason.

He knew he had no business giving lectures and solving the world's problems, but the world had gone crazy and nobody seemed to be doing anything about it. Nobody he

trusted to get it right, anyway. *Someone* had to inject some no-longer-common sense and decency into the conversation. Why not him?

"The fatal flaw of most would-be saviors," he said, "is to take themselves *way* too seriously. Take your principles, perceptions, intuition and beliefs seriously, sure. Not yourself. This isn't about me, it's about getting people to think for themselves and stop being such followers. I'm the leader who doesn't want any followers. We all need to be responsible individuals!"

He hated corporations, of course. Doesn't everyone? Especially marketing companies hell-bent on convincing people to buy things they don't need. Before getting fired from his last corporate job and starting this tour, he put copies of his *magnum opus* in strategic locations around the office. He hoped his co-workers would read it, like it, tell their friends, and everyone would buy a copy. He likened his approach to Johnny Appleseed. It was as close to corporate marketing as he would allow himself. The process had to be organic.

The book laid out who and/or what was running things on this planet. He tried to focus on the *who* over the *what*, but there were times he had to wonder if there was not *something* out there, unseen, manipulating things.

There was nothing much new in the book for anyone well-versed in the prevailing conspiracy theories – international banker scams, staged terror attacks, CIA/military drug-running and mind-control, etc. – but *Another Way* had solutions. From better toilet seat design to new forms of government and everything in between – assuming there *was* an in-between – he had some real answers.

"Best of all," he was proud to say, "none of my solutions require anyone's assassination!"

In Las Cruces, he and his latest girlfriend, Kaylie – a dark-haired, blue-eyed beauty – had shared a dream about a little blue alien. Neither of them was into aliens or science fiction – or drugs – so it was a bit of a mystery where it came from.

"How is it even possible," he asked afterward as they lay in bed, "for two people to have the same dream at the same time... unless it wasn't a dream?"

In this dream/hallucination/episode, they were joined by a smiling, big-eared, blue-eyed little alien humanoid with blue skin and matching hair sitting in a wide, beige, over-stuffed wing-back chair directly in front of them. And his audience, Dobie and Kaylie, were in theater seats with the alien up on stage.

Its smiling face was that of an effeminate male or masculine female. Delicate and unassuming, but those big blue eyes saw right through whoever they focused on.

With its bare feet planted firmly on the ground, it sat like a king or queen on its throne wearing a simple beige robe that blended in with the seat. Its legs were also bare from the knees down, giving it a disembodied look, with its head hovering above detached legs and feet.

Its voice, like a man and woman talking at the same time, spoke English in a Hindi-British accent in the royal we. There was a laughing melody to it, Dobie thought. Harmony. He loved to sing, personally – in the shower and around the house, mostly, but also at karaoke bars – but could never harmonize, which he assumed was a character flaw. Because of that, he found this alien's voice especially pleasing.

Kindness was another word that came to mind. He wasn't sure if it was the kindness in the voice that gave it a

feminine quality, or its femininity implied a certain kindness. Either way, it was soothing. He could listen to it all day long.

"Our name is Sematalanthoyop, but you can call us 'Semmy.' We are from beyond the Pleiades, in the eighth dimension... when we're not slumming it down here in the third and fourth dimensions. Most of you spend most of your time in the third dimension, influenced more than you know by the fourth, only occasionally reaching the fifth. Point being, we are exponentially better than you! Just kidding. Don't let the term 'higher dimension' fool you. For one thing, it's more of an outer dimension. Almost everything is spherical. And, to assume that higher-dimensionals are better than you is like assuming someone who can swim while you cannot is better just because you were never taught, or someone who was told the answer is smarter than those not told. Never confuse better-informed or -trained with just plain better. No human is innately better than any other, it's just that some of you have gone off the rails worse than others.

"Do not be frightened. We're the good guys!"

Semmy was happy with how things were working out. Kaylie and Dobie had stopped in Las Cruces, as planned. Getting them back together was not his *main* purpose for visiting Earth, but it was a plus. He had been following these two crazy kids – off and on, planet to planet, from one incarnation to the next – for eons now.

"Who doesn't love a good 'separated, seeking, reunited' story?"

He wished he could have been more helpful in Missouri – other than messing with billboards and people's work schedules – but had to let things play out, as difficult as it was.

"It's not all fun and games. We've got work to do. We just hope it all works out in the end.

~

Awake now but still in bed, Dobie was leaning on one elbow, looking at Kaylie, wondering how he ever got so lucky. Referring to her as his latest girlfriend was a defense mechanism to keep things in perspective. It was a constant struggle for him to *not* get too carried away and take things too far. *Like this whole book and tour thing!* he thought.

As to Kaylie, it was too late. He was in love. His average height, passable physique, sandy brown hair, friendly brown eyes, wit and charm gave him a chance with most women, but he knew better than to expect to date beauty

queens like Kaylie. And yet, here they were, sharing this adventure.

Still shaken after their ordeal in Missouri a few weeks prior, she looked up at him warmly, not wanting to lift her head off the pillow. She simply smiled and said, "I don't know, Dobe."

~

Major Randall Watson, Air Force Special Ops, retired, was sitting in a hard, plastic chair in a small, cramped room within a secret military location nearby. A more cynical person might think it was a little too convenient Dobe just happened to pass through Las Cruces within striking distance of this base, but Watson didn't give it a second thought. *He* wasn't the conspiracy theorist, Pokorny was.

The two airmen – one of them female – sat next to Watson in much more comfortable chairs, but they all wore military-grade virtual reality helmets plugged into the same broadcast that Dobe and Kaylie were seeing. These "space nerds" as they called themselves were well-trained in projecting dreams and images into people's heads, but swore this Semmy Speaks broadcast was real. Nobody knew where it came from or how they captured it – other than entirely by accident – but they had it and everyone who watched was blown away. Even their aliens-in-residence were unfamiliar with this blue race from beyond the Pleiades.

Major Watson assumed the nerds were lying. Half of everything labeled top secret was a lie, designed to throw people off the scent of the other half that was legitimate. "Either way," Watson said, "I'm gonna have some fun with this!"

Nothing else he had tried had worked on Dobie. Hiring people to rough him up, put dents in his car and chase him out of parking lots only made Pokorny that much more determined. The two men were alike in that respect, but Watson had no clue how to shut Dobie down.

Earlier that year

Air Force Colonel Reginald P. Charonne, retired, now CEO of SaynCorp, was almost never physically at the office. He much preferred the cooler climes of northern Michigan over the oppressive heat of The South and took his meetings from afar, online. Pressing issues, however – one of which was a power struggle between two senior executives, a favorite spectator sport of his – required his presence.

"Sometimes you have to actually be there," he said, "and kick some ass!"

There was also the matter of the surveillance tapes. The entire office was bugged, and he regularly had the transcripts emailed to him. When he read in the transcripts that someone in the break room had referred to him as a Neanderthal, he smiled to himself and requested the audio and video tapes. Someone was about to get fired, another hobby of his.

Video surveillance was provided by the building and its management company, so Charonne never bothered to install his own. When told that the footage for the time frame in question had been recorded-over before he could see it, he became furious and scheduled another security company to augment the existing system with his own.

When he first arrived at the office that morning, as he passed through the break room, he noticed Dobie's book on the counter. The word manifesto – in red – jumped out at him as he passed, and he picked it up. Reading it between meetings – he was a speed reader – he had it finished before the end of day. He had to admit – but, only to himself – that Dobie had some good ideas, but nothing very practical or even possible in the real world. Still, he thought people might be dumb enough to fall for it.

He was already in the mood for kicking somebody's ass, so he decided to add this manifesto to his list of things to deal with, and nip it in the bud. At her desk in the anteroom in front of his office sat his secretary, Crissie. A very attractive young woman with hazel eyes and dirty-blonde hair, he didn't bother to say hello. It was not necessary. She had come down from Michigan with him on his private plane.

“Go ahead and call Norwich into my office,” he said casually as he thumbed through the letters, bills and adverts from the previous day's mail, “as discussed. Tell him it's urgent, of course. This should be fun!”

It was not urgent. It was almost never urgent, but standard procedure was to pretend otherwise. Also standard was to have Norwich wait exactly seven minutes in the anteroom before being called into Charonne's actual office. He had done his own studies – he considered himself a bit of a sociologist – and found this to be the perfect length of time for putting underlings properly on edge.

Charonne timed it so that Dobie's book was still in the air just before hitting the trashcan when HR Director Kenneth Norwich entered. Dobie would have been happy to know his book was flying across at least one corporate executive's office, but Norwich was terrified. He was rela-

tively new and had only met the Colonel a few times in person. It was scary every time.

Charonne also thought of himself – he was almost constantly thinking of himself – as a modern day Clark Gable. There was a very, *very* slight resemblance. More importantly, he was a brilliant businessman, charming when necessary, and so driven that even his friends found him difficult to deal with. People tended to just say "yes, sir," and get out of his way.

"What's the point," he now asked Norwich in his deep, resonant, yet still somehow nasal voice, "in discussing impossible theories?"

Norwich's fear had escalated to full-on terror by the time he came through the big boss's door. He looked for something to hold onto, something to lean on as he entered, and nearly crapped his pants when he turned to his left and came face-to-face with a black bear staring at him, glassy-eyed and baring its fangs. He instinctively raised his arms to protect himself before realizing the poor beast was long-dead, stuffed, and preserved for all eternity to entertain people like the Colonel.

Charonne laughed so hard, he almost fell over getting out of his chair. "Oh, my God, that was funny! Thank you! Best laugh I've had all week!"

"You needed me, sir?" Norwich eventually managed.

"This is a 'right to work' state," Charonne returned to the point at hand as he regained his composure, buttoned his jacket, and came around the desk to shake Norwich's hand.

"Yes, sir." Norwich felt like a schoolboy unprepared for a pop quiz.

Vigorously, almost violently shaking his junior executive's hand, Charonne said, "We can fire people without cause."

"Ah, well...." Norwich began to argue as the two were now face to face. Actually, Norwich's eyes were level with the knot of Charonne's necktie. He had to look up at an uncomfortable to meet his boss's intimidating gaze.

At Norwich's words, Charonne merely raised an eyebrow, and that was all it took for the director to stop himself and melt into the plush leather seat in front of the desk.

Halfway through any sentence, the Colonel could usually determine where the speaker's argument was going. Norwich was obviously about to argue against firing employees without cause, so Charonne saw no point letting him continue.

The Colonel turned and sat along the front edge of his desk. His left leg was planted on the floor, revealing his red-on-black argyle socks.

"Yes, sir," Norwich said in a much more subservient tone now that Charonne's crotch was directly in front of him. Like a motorist passing a horrible accident on the highway, he couldn't help but look.

"Have it your way," Charonne winked and smiled, knowing his crotch was on full display. He liked to show it off every chance he got, he was so proud. "To be safe, then," he stood and returned to his desk chair, "we'll wait for this Portnoy complainer to give us an excuse, no matter how flimsy. *Then* we fire his ass! Got it?"

"Yes, sir." Norwich was relieved for two reasons: Charonne's crotch was no longer in his face; and, someone other than himself was being fired. Up until that moment, he had no idea who they were talking about.

He knew Portnoy was not Dobie's last name but did not dare correct the Colonel. It would be just like the man to purposely mispronounce it so Norwich would correct him. The Colonel would then verbally attack and belittle him, which everyone knew was one of Charonne's favorite hobbies.

Never much of a reader – other than blog posts and corporate literature – Norwich had no clue the name Portnoy was in reference to a popular novel from the same year as the Woodstock festival.

The Colonel assumed firing Dobie would break his spirit and send him on a downward spiral of job applications and failed interviews. He remembered how disheartening it was that one time he had to interview for a job, only to be rejected, all those years ago. Charonnes don't *get* rejected, and his daddy pulled some strings to get him into officer training school.

His subsequent military success was all his – rising to the impressive rank of Colonel – but he was then simply handed the reins of SaynCorp, the family business. He would argue strenuously with anyone accusing him of benefiting from nepotism, being "born on third base thinking he'd hit a triple," but they were right and he knew it. Was it his fault he took advantage of life's gifts? Anyone else would have done the same. His accusers, he decided, were simply jealous of his good fortune, good looks and overall brilliance.

He smiled at the thought of Dobie flipping burgers or digging ditches for a living, and had hoped pulling his corporate job security out from under him would end Pokorny's lofty aspirations and obvious messiah complex. He thought for sure Dobie would succumb like millions before him and beg for the next soul-sucking corporate job just to

pay the bills. He expected Dobie to fall in line and take his rightful place as a mere cog in the wheel of modern, now digitally-dependent, industrial/corporate society.

"I don't want," Charonne barked, "this *Communist Manifesto* 2.0 giving my people any ideas!"

"Of course, sir." Karl Marx's work was also written before Norwich's time, but he had at least heard of that one.

"If I had a fireplace," Charonne was still barking, "it would be burning right now. I need a fireplace, Kenny! Have one installed after I leave."

"Yes, sir. Wood-burning? Gas? Electric? Digital?"

"Digital?! How can I burn books with a digital fireplace?" Shaking his head, he added, "I'd love a wood-burning hearth, but that's probably against city codes. Just get me something that passes codes and burns books."

"Yes, of course. Anything else, sir?"

"I don't even want that book in my trash. Dig it out and take it with you."

"Yes, sir."

As Norwich bent over to extract the book, he could feel Charonne checking him out from behind. He smiled and wondered what might happen next. He never knew the Colonel was so inclined, but did know climbing the corporate ladder went much faster for those willing to climb the boss on their way up.

In the trash, Norwich found a half-eaten container of sliced peaches sticking to the book. Watching its syrup drip slowly down the sides, it reminded him of something else sticky, and he became aroused. He looked for a towel or tissue to wipe off the book.

Charonne was no help. He simply smirked and adjusted himself.

Norwich took a knee and used the edge of the trash can to scrape the syrup off as he pulled the book out. He minced, almost tip-toed, toward the door as he carried the soiled book like a dead rat out of the office.

"One more thing," Charonne asked in a conspiratorial tone. Norwich stopped and turned, hoping he was about to be asked out on a date. "Have you heard anyone talking about Neanderthals?"

Norwich thought that was a strange question. "Um, no, sir."

"Alright, then," Charonne nodded and gave a sarcastic wave goodbye.

Major Watson was the Colonel's ground force in this little war that had popped up "like a delightful summer shower," as Charonne put it. He loved a good war and ordered his junior officer to make sure Dobie didn't turn into "some sort of charismatic leader like Fidel Castro or Mahatma Gandhi. At the very least, get this dimwit, Dobie – Pokorny, is it? – talking about something other than capitalism and conspiracy theories!"

Watson figured Dobie must be onto something and hit a nerve to get the Colonel so worked up, but it didn't matter. The Major had his orders and dutifully came up with a plan to wear Dobie down with agents planted in his audiences bombarding him with questions, heckling him, and creating overall negativity. Your basic harassment.

Phase Two was to set him up with beautiful women so far out of his league that, in his eagerness to impress them, Dobie would speak out of turn and reveal his secrets. A side benefit for Watson was to first date the women and make sure they were up to the task.

Charonne complimented his junior officer using women "as God intended. Pillow talk! Spy Craft 101!"

When none of that kept Dobie from touring, Charonne had Watson talk to the business owners Dobie was dealing with and warn them not to allow him on their premises to speak.

"Do your usual research," said the Colonel, "and I'll talk to some of my friends but, if a bookstore owner or hotel managers is gay, tell them Dobie is homophobic. If they're Jewish, say Dobie is anti-Semitic. If Black, he's racist, and so on.

"People used to let that crap roll off their backs, but now everyone is so easily offended. We'll use that to our advantage. Let's push people's buttons!"

Watson did just that, and it worked – especially with the corporate outlets but not as well with the independents. It became much more difficult for Dobie to book speaking gigs, but he powered forward.

Watson tried the same tactic with hotels and conference room providers, but it was not as successful with them. Seminars by charismatic leaders – corporate or otherwise – were a good chunk of their income.

~

Once Dobie figured out someone was playing dirty tricks on him, he told his audiences, "Most people avoid conflict and controversy. Merchants, especially. The fear of offending anyone about anything – because it might hurt sales – is a powerful thing. Political-correctness, run amok, takes care of the rest. I guess I'm supposed to stop the crazy talk like saying voters are stupid to vote along party lines. It's those parties and their leaders that are the problem. You

can't expect a politician to be anything but a weasel. No offense to actual weasels.

"And, I'm supposed to stop asking the FDA to do its job and require that vaccines be free of nerve-damaging adjuvants like aluminum and mercury, and our food be free of similarly-damaging preservatives and other mystery ingredients. Big Pharma and Big Food are just two spokes of the Ferris Wheel we call Corporate America, though, and that wheel has broken away from its mooring and will stop at nothing as it rolls over people like me to keep us addicted to and buying their products."

~

"If all else fails," Charonne told Watson, "we can always kill him. Wouldn't be the first time."

Watson was not going to kill an innocent man, and hoped this Semmy Speaks thing did the trick. If it did, but Charonne still wanted Pokorny dead, Watson was out. Done. Finished. He would, for the first time, not follow a direct order.

He might even start that pot farm in Colorado he'd been dreaming of. Being a connoisseur of the stuff, it only made sense to grow it himself.

August

Dobie and Kaylie's episode eventually split into two versions, but before that, Semmy said to both of them...

"Your solar system used to be at the center of the galaxy - just off center, actually, where the alpha waves are at their most righteous, to use a

surfer dude term. It was *the* most happening solar system where all the cool kids hung out, until it was flung third- and fourth-dimensionally into this part of the galaxy.

"Unfortunately, this area was already inhabited by a particularly nasty race of beings, if you want to call them that. They are not fully corporeal but are obsessed with all things carnal, like almost everyone on Earth, actually - but we digress!

"This section of the Milky Way was originally designed as a negative counterbalance to the galaxy's otherwise positive nature. A cosmic septic tank, if you will. That's why it's so hard to get anything done around here. It's like slogging through knee-deep sewer mud! Only those with the best hip-waders make any real progress.

"It was never meant for highly complex, sentient, sensitive beings like yourselves. It was meant for those of a more primitive and sinister nature, a dark force that has cast its pall over your way of life. No one wants to talk about it, but we tend to speak the unspeakable. It's what we do. Like a public service. You're welcome!

"Still, despite all this, or perhaps because of it, brave souls have been coming here to test their mettle. Give it a go against all odds, and all that. The rallying cry for those of us from beyond the Pleiades is 'Lighten up! Play it by ear!' Bit of an inside joke.

"Others have been dumped here, incarcerated for criminal acts, or because they were irredeemably insane and Mother Earth has been identified as a very good therapy planet. Seriously, go outside sometime, stand barefoot, and just feel the Earth beneath your feet!

"This dark force has manifested in a variety of ways throughout your history. Been anthropomorphized - a childish habit of Earthlings - countless times; given names like Necuratu, Beelzebub, Satan, The Dark Prince, The Adversary and, last but not least, the High Priest of Gray Areas, the scariest of them all to anyone insisting that everything is strictly black or white!

"Okay, that last one was a joke. It makes us laugh to think of a High Priest of anything. Humans aren't the only ones with a sense of humor, you know. Seriously, though, do not be

frightened but don't relax too much, either. The negative force/urge/ thought is real. They call themselves Ceytons. Get it? Satan? Ceyton? But, we call them stupidity incarnate.

"For eons, they have influenced political, religious and financial leaders, social clubs, supposed charities, group-think tanks, designated villains, novelists, songwriters, the entire news and entertainment industries, really. Anyone or anything with influence.

"Directly and indirectly through their minions, Ceytons have been manipulating humans for thousands of years. Their *m.o.* is quite simple: They float ideas, sending out the stupidest, most destructive thoughts they can come up with, mainly because stupidity and destruction is all they do. Like fishing, they wait for an idiot to come along and take the bait, grab the idea and claim it as their own without thinking things through. Works like a charm, no pun intended."

~

Kaylie's version became interactive. Semmy's voice and color changed as he spoke. He maintained his blue center but alternated around the edges between all the Earth human skin tones.

In the real world, Major Watson was smiling. The nerds had shown him how to take control of a dream. It wasn't working exactly as promised, but close enough. He was now in a position to plant whatever ideas he wanted.

The first thing the now-multi-colored alien/Watson said to Kaylie was to suggest she get pregnant. In her dream state, it sounded like a good idea, though she did at least ask why.

"So we can be born into a physical body! We want to explore your world as a physical human!"

"Okay, sure," Kaylie agreed. She wouldn't normally be so cavalier about who she slept with, let alone who she had a baby with, but it was just a dream. She felt like a character in a cartoon and was just playing along. "You won't be blue, though."

"We'll adapt. Skin color is not such a big deal for us, but you need to mate with Watson, not Pokorny."

"Who's Watson?"

"That tall, very dark and handsome gentleman following you around? Major Randall Watson."

"Him?" she was surprised. "Not really my type, but if you say so..."

"Yes, please. He is a truly amazing man. Much more interesting than Pokorny. You should dump *that guy* right away."

"Okay."

As Kaylie awoke, Dobie said simply, "Little blue alien?"

"Yes!" she said, wide-eyed. "You, too?"

Dobie nodded. "Think any of it was true?"

"Just a dream, I guess, but, are all aliens blue?"

"Don't know," he had to think about that one. "That was my first."

"After you left the dream, Semmy said I should get pregnant."

"I never left the dream. I thought *you* did. Anyway, what?"

"Yeah. What do you think?" She wanted to see how he reacted to the idea of her being pregnant. Her own father had left her and her mother years ago. And, now that she was leaving her mom behind, it felt like the right time to start her own family.

"Of you being pregnant?" Dobie was uncomfortable with the subject. Last time he had this conversation was with his high school girlfriend. He had to put college on hold and get a job. His friends said he should dump her. The kid probably wasn't his. But he wanted to do the right thing. His friends were right, and she ran off with the baby and actual father after Dobie (and his parents) had conveniently paid all pregnancy expenses.

The experience soured Dobie on women for years afterward. It was a hard lesson on betrayal, and he got into the habit of one-night stands. Women became nothing more than sex objects to him. Kaylie was helping him grow out of that, but he was not quite there yet.

"I, uh, I'll have to... um," he stammered now. "Hey, isn't there some kind of military or government research facility

around here? Supposedly top secret, but more like an open secret in conspiracy circles. Somebody's just messing with us."

I could've told you that last part, Kaylie thought but said nothing.

Dobie knew a lot of the New Age types who were into incense, seances, crystals, alien visitations and such would assume they had been touched by the other side, or whatever. Not Dobie. He liked to keep an open mind, but could not accept that this experience was anything more than an induced hallucination. It could not have been real. His cosmology had to remain within the realm of probability. That was kind of his thing.

Sure, aliens were probably out there somewhere – given the odds – but he tried not to be one of those tin-foil hat types who jumped to the craziest conclusions.

"They have military-grade sound cannons," he explained to an only mildly interested Kaylie. "LRADs. Long Range Acoustic Devices. Basically, a ray gun that emits sounds and vibrations. They can even tailor it based on your sex."

She wondered if he would ever answer the pregnancy question.

"I'm serious!" he mistook her look as one of questioning his sanity. Most people did, lately. "I've read about these weapons. They're not just for crowd control. They can *cause* riots, too. "

Kaylie was shaking her head. Now that the idea had been planted, having a baby sounded better all the time. She still wanted to know how Dobie felt about it, and would prefer him as the father, but she was now determined to have a baby. Details like fatherhood could be hammered out later.

Gone Missing

A few days later, in Taos, they slept in before walking, hand-in-hand, to breakfast at a restaurant across from the hotel. Holding hands was something Kaylie insisted on, and Dobie was happy to oblige. Their hotel had the usual free breakfast bar, but Dobie wanted something better. He could afford it now.

After breakfast, still mid-morning, they made their way to a small outside courtyard near the center of town. It was not long before they found themselves surrounded by a surprisingly large crowd, both seated and standing. His talk was about to start, but he liked to mingle with the crowd first. Say hello. Shake a few hands.

Something about crowds brought out another side of Dobie. Not quite an alternate personality, he assured himself, just another aspect of himself.

Smiling, he stepped onto the stage, which was simply an area three bricks higher than the rest. He imagined this was where the band played, whoever that might be on any given night. All of it was in the shade of a beautiful, twisting, old walnut tree. With it being August in New Mexico, that shade was much appreciated.

Kaylie took a seat in a fold-up chair behind him, and he smiled back at her. This had become his routine prior to every speech, a smile for good luck.

"Screw 'economies of scale!'" he began. He liked to do that for dramatic effect, and laughed now to see the surprised looks from audience members.

"It's better economics," he continued, "for *all* businesses to be *small* businesses, limited to just a couple hundred employees each. But I don't have a degree in economics, or business, or anything else. Most importantly, I don't

put a gun to anyone's head, so nobody in a position of power listens to me."

He was about to continue along that vein when the alien, Semmy, returned. The "blue dude," as Dobie called him in his head, was in that same wing-back chair from before and was right there in the front row. That's how it looked to Dobie, anyway.

Was it a mirage? A heat-induced hallucination? Dobie shook his head to break the spell, but it didn't work. He turned to Kaylie again, looking for any sign that she was seeing Semmy, too. She smiled back, not seeing the alien but now wondering what the problem was. Several in the audience gave sidelong glances, apparently wondering the same thing.

After that abrupt start, Dobie was now clearly off. And, if there's one thing an audience hates, it's a speaker who isn't up to the task. Dobie learned that the hard way over the past few months.

It was a group dynamic thing, he figured, probably dating back thousands of years to hunter-gatherer days. Being led on a hunt – or even a gather – by a bumbling idiot, after all, might get the entire tribe killed.

Kaylie thought she might have to step in for him. She had been itching to get up in front of the crowd herself, anyway. She had heard all of his speeches by that point and was ready for the spotlight. Not sure exactly what she might say, and doubting she could improvise as well as he did, she was nonetheless confident she could do it if called upon.

She used to be a much more confident person. And, not so long ago, either. But, ever since Taylorville, she had leaned on Dobie more than with any other man before. Holding his hand and sitting up front at his appearances

was part of it, and based on her assumption that no one would try to kidnap her while holding his hand or in front of an audience. Hopefully.

She also wanted – through osmosis from Dobie if nothing else – to see how it felt to be in front of a crowd and listened to, not just ogled for her beauty. That would be something new. Adoration was nice, but she wanted more from life.

Dobie then spotted Watson leaning up against another walnut tree at the back of the crowd. The man was no longer even bothering to hide. Idly wondering now if they were in what used to be a walnut orchard, Dobie turned to Kaylie for a third time. Out the corner of his mouth and gesturing with his eyes in Watson's direction, he said, "It's that Watson guy again."

Kaylie leaped to her feet and said, "I'll talk to him!" Dobie was surprised, but something inside her clicked at the mention of Watson's name. Seeing the *tall, very dark and handsome man* in person at the back of the crowd, her heart skipped a beat, like a celebrity crush. He was such an *amazing man*. Very interesting and incredibly attractive. She would later be unable to explain why but, for now, she was compelled to hurry up and meet him.

Dobie watched, helpless, as she met Watson at the back of the audience. She was being awfully friendly, he thought, but that was Kaylie. She had every man wrapped around her little finger within seconds. She said something that made him smile, and they slipped through the door into an adjacent building.

Dobie wondered what that was all about but couldn't chase after her. He had an audience to entertain, though her disappearance put him in a mood for anything but his usual political talk. Funny, he thought, how the threat of

lost love puts politics and manifestos into proper perspective.

He couldn't talk about his girl problems in front of everyone, so he talked about the Semmy dream. He knew it wouldn't help his credibility, but he had to talk about something. He could laugh it off later as someone slipping him peyote.

"So, I dreamt about an alien the other night," he began. "Probably no big surprise in these parts, eh? Anyway, his name was Semmy. Actually, he said his full name was – let me see if I can say it – Sematalanthoyop. Ever heard of him?"

He was not expecting an answer, but a spindly, thirty-something, mostly-bald white guy with long blonde hair around the edges nodded his head, raised his hand and said, "I know Semmy. He comes to me in my dreams all the time!"

"Really?" Dobie was incredulous.

"All the time!"

"What does he look and sound like?" Dobie tested him.

"Oh, uh," the man hesitated, "he's, um, about seven feet tall, with blonde hair... and looks and speaks Norwegian. I speak many languages in my dreams."

"Maybe it is the same guy with a different appearance and name," Dobie offered, but didn't really believe that. "I don't know, but my alien was about five foot nothing. I guess. He never stood up, but he had blue skin, blue hair, and sounded like an Indian couple with a Hindi accent speaking at the same time. So..."

"Oh, you said Semmy!" the man tried to save face. "I thought you said Svenny!"

"Uh huh," Dobie smiled politely but was careful not to shake his head or roll his eyes. He was still trying to get

the hang of not pissing people off. It had been a while since any audience members had accosted him, and he'd like to keep it that way.

"Anyway, he said our solar system used to be closer to the center of the galaxy where all the cool kids hung out. I like the sound of that! Does that remind you of anyone?" he gestured toward his audience.

He knew flattery worked, and often used it, but it was not disingenuous. He honestly believed those who attended his talks were the cool kids.

He interjected clarification as needed as he retold Semmy's story...

"Rumor has it a team of scientists was responsible for your solar system's accidental relocation. Arrogant, overpaid eggheads on a government contract lacking even the foresight to give themselves the excuse of being drunk. They were completely sober and playing with matches - and by matches we mean subatomic particles - energy fields, actually, but we won't get into the physics - when there was a **BIG BANG** and the bulk of your solar system ended up over here near the galactic edge.

"What passes for intelligence, like with these scientists, often turns out to be nothing more than arrogance and delusion masquerading as higher IQ.

The little mishap with the solar system can stand as Exhibit A.

"One of your solar system's planets didn't quite make it with the rest of them. It had the bad luck of being, at the moment of the accident, in the middle of a geo-spatial rebalancing. Everyone knows how delicate those are. You never want to interrupt one. Anyway, That's how that planet ended up in an extremely long, 3600-year orbit around your sun. It was lucky to be in *any* orbit after that, frankly.

"Two of the planets, sadly, collided upon arrival and came to be known as your asteroid belt. And don't believe all of the talk about Pluto not being a planet. It is. Arguments to the contrary are nothing more than discrimination against the size-disadvantaged, which we happen to take personally.

"So, your solar system currently has ten planets, if you count the straggler, which is why most of you evolved to have ten fingers and toes. It is also why the decimal system won out over the 12-based system because, before calculators, computers, or even pencil and paper had been invented - rediscovered, actually - how else is a person supposed to count? You use your fin-

gers and toes, right? And that's why the dominant species of a planet always, always, always has to have the same number of digits as the number of planets in that solar system - and use that as their counting system - except when they simply refuse, but that's another argument altogether. The most important numbers should be divisible by 4, of course. With your own number of digits and planets being off, it throws everything else off.

"It should be fairly obvious how much better twelve would have been. We personally prefer eighths or sixteenths, but nobody asked us. Do you think it is a coincidence there are 12 months in a year, 12 signs of the Zodiac, 12 inches in a foot, 12 donuts in a dozen, 12 hours on the clock and 24 hours in a day? Sure, coincidence happens, but not nearly as often as scientists would have us think. It does happen more often than some of your religious types think, though. As usual, the truth lies somewhere in between.

"You used to have thirty-six days in each month... before the accident, and people should have been more concerned about the number of days. The lunar cycle is an important component

of the cycles-within-cycles that we call life. When the catastrophe happened, though, the least of anyone's worries was the number of days per month. They thought nothing of it, except as an excuse for why there's never enough time for anything.

"Speaking of the moon, it is a complete fabrication. Sure, technically, everything in the physical universe is a fabrication, but it is actually a spaceship built to the exact size and positioned at the perfect distance to block out all but the sun's corona during a total eclipse when viewed from Earth. And, it never shows you its far side. Doesn't that strike you as odd? Your scientists just shrug, but most of your scientists are idiots. Don't get us started!

"Don't worry, it stopped functioning as a spaceship and subliminal broadcast station years ago when its last crew member died from - what else? - lunacy. Technically, he died from asphyxiation, but it was sheer lunacy that made him want to sing *Paper Moon* while out for a walk on the dark side without a spacesuit. It had an artificial atmosphere inside, but not on the surface.

Dobie sang the first few lines of that song. "Pardon my singing, but Semmy sang it, so here goes..."

*It's only a paper moon
Sailing over a cardboard sea
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me*

He laughed and took a bow when several in the audience applauded.

"You would be amazed how manipulated everyone is down here in this dimension. Most of you are just a bunch of puppets on a string for this or that higher-dimensional group. They convinced you long ago to do something, and your agreement is that string.

"You're not all idiots, of course, except for your politicians and news media. Some of you are straight-up geniuses! As to this reverence y'all seem to have for scientists - we love that contraction 'y'all' - we can only guess it's because you know, deep down, we're all participating in the biggest science experiment, ever. In *this* universe.

"Not to be negative - and sorry for all the sharp turns throughout our presentation, but there is just so much to cover and so little time. The proverbial shit is about to hit the fan.

"We must tell you, life's biggest lies work through endless repetition of bald-faced lies mixed in with half-truths and feigned acceptance from others who really wish the liar would just shut up and go away. The closer to the truth, the better, so long as it ultimately leads away from deeper truths.

"Speaking of liars, these Ceytons are idiots. But, remember what they say about arguing with an idiot: They will drag you down to their level and beat you with experience! So, don't do it. You just step around them like dog crap on the sidewalk. You know they're there, but you avoid them.

"It has been argued this is no better than pretending they're not there, but you're not ignoring them. You're not engaging with them, either. They want you to focus on them, hate and despise them. They know their negativity and your fear will swallow you whole if you let it.

"But you are not afraid. You are strong. Just be yourself. That's the most important thing.

"Earth herself prefers humans over Ceytons because you're willing to inhabit organic bodies. Ceytons think

they're too good for that. They have no idea how stupid they are. Yes, we keep saying that, but it bears repeating. They're fiendishly clever in a mathematical, binary, computer sort of way, but completely uncreative, unimaginative, and unable to think outside the box. The only advantage they have is that they think long-term. *Really* long-term, like thousands, even millions of years at a time. Humans, with your habit of reincarnating and losing your memories can't easily compete with that.

"Don't get me wrong. This memory wipe thing y'all do between lives is exceedingly clever. Who doesn't love a fresh start? Brilliant! Your creativity, spirit and emotions are a definite advantage, but the latter is often what Ceytons use against you. It's a struggle, we know.

"People go on and on about their 'real world' accomplishments, their life's achievements, but if they can simply maintain - if not strengthen - their sanity, humanity and personal integrity after an entire lifetime in this outdoor insane asylum, *that* will be their greatest accomplishment. It's

like diving into shark-infested waters and living to tell the tale!

"The Ceytons have - through your 'elites' - been slowly ruining your planet's environment with unnecessarily crude and destructive industrialization. Industry is fine, but not how they do it.

"Don't worry, this won't be an environmentalist rant - though we find it odd the word environmentalist could ever be considered derogatory. Who doesn't love the environment? Oh, right, Ceytons. But, these 'elites' - who shall forever remain within quotation marks - believe they will survive the destruction because of their underground bunkers and sophisticated gadgetry. They won't.

"Speaking of which, don't be scared when you feel that *you* are about to die. You're not frightened when you wake up in the morning, are you? Pretty much the same thing. *Life is but a dream!* Just be glad for the ride, like when you get off a roller-coaster! And, when you turn in your scorecard at the end of this round of golf we call life, don't forget to return that little pencil along with it!

"Ha! Just a little afterlife humor!
Mixed metaphors, our favorite kind!"

Dobie thought that would cheer him up – and it did a little – but he was now so distracted by Kaylie sneaking off with Watson, he made distraction itself the subject of his talk. Others might have said screw it, quit the talk, and gone looking for her – and he was tempted – but he never liked to leave people feeling cheated.

She left of her own accord, he told himself. She should be fine. *You said the same thing in Taylorville*, the thought occurred to him, but he was able to suppress such fears.

"One of the most powerful forces in the universe," he powered through, "is distraction. It is quite possibly the purpose behind almost every electronic device, keeping us occupied. Distracted. Harmless. It's no big deal until it distracts you from your purpose.

"And what is the greatest distraction of all? It used to be television, then computers, now it's the so-called smart-phone. I don't include radio here because we were, as a society, so new to technology when it came out, we get a pass. As to smartphones, granted, they can be useful and are almost exactly what Douglas Adams described as *The Guide* itself in his book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which came out, what, 40 years ago now? The man was a genius!

"And, no, all that stuff about Semmy was not me channeling the good Mr. Adams. Maybe *he* was channeling Semmy? That's what I'm going with. I don't believe in channeling. I mean, it happens, I just don't think it's wise unless you're on equal footing with whoever or whatever you're summoning.

"Smartphones are destructive to the mental, emotional and spiritual health of humans. But, don't panic!" He added that last bit with a laugh in honor of *Hitchhiker's* catch phrase, though only a few in the audience seemed to get the reference.

"Electronic devices are a crutch. They make us lazy. They entertain us when we should be entertaining each other and ourselves. You know, human interaction and imagination. They do things for us like long-distance communication and remote viewing that we were once able to do ourselves psychically, if you believe in past and/or pre-Earthly lives.

"On a more mundane level, those GPS mapping programs obviate the need for our innate sense of direction (and the ability to read street signs), and calendar reminders have the same destructive effect upon our sense of time. Even if we wanted to develop our psychic, mental and common-sense abilities – recapture them, really – we now have these convenient smartphones to render such abilities unnecessary, moot and, ultimately, lost."

There was no response from the audience. Crickets. He thought he had chosen a subject more attuned to this crowd. They were paying attention to Semmy's story moments earlier, but the mere mention of smartphones had everyone now staring at theirs.

Dobie had always heard Taos was a mystical, almost magical place. Or, was that Sedona? Now he wasn't sure. Whatever the case, even here people were addicted to their phones.

He was deflated. He didn't even stick around long enough to sign more than a few books before loading everything into his car.

He needed to find Kaylie. Was this how she would leave him, he wondered? It had to happen sooner or later. He reminded himself of the old saying, "If you love someone, set them free," blah, blah; i.e., you have to be willing to lose them. That doesn't mean you just sit back and watch it happen, though.

With the refrain *Free, free, set them free* from that 80s pop song now running through his head, he ran into Major Watson in the parking lot just outside the hotel's back door. Trying to sound casual, exchanging monosyllabic grunts, Dobie ignored the smell of marijuana. "Oh, hey, have you seen Kaylie?"

Watson smiled knowingly, hiding the roach behind his back. He could never remember in which states it was legal, so he erred on the side of caution. "Just left her a minute ago. That's why I'm down here enjoying this. You know... after."

"After what?" Dobie's smile slipped away. He knew what Watson was implying.

"It's best to hear it from the woman herself, my brother," Watson smirked, took a long drag and exhaled in Dobie's direction just to irritate him. He could guess a Boy Scout like Dobie did not imbibe.

"I will, *my brother*," Dobie spat. He was tempted to punch this smug bastard in the face but kept his cool. Watson was just another distraction. Dobie needed to find Kaylie. After that, maybe, depending on how he felt, he would deal with Watson.

"One more thing," Watson scratched his chest with the thumb of his roach hand. "You need to leave the country."

"Come again?"

"It's not safe for you and Kaylie here," Watson explained. "Remember Colonel Charonne?"

"My old boss who had me fired? How could I forget?"

"He's got a thing for you. Hates you. Keeps going on about stamping out The Red Menace, or some such. I've seen it before. Kaylie will be safe, as long as I'm around, but you need to go away if you know what's good for you."

Dobie gave him a long look before saying, "Ha! Had me going there for a second! We'll take our chances, thanks."

He pushed past Watson into the hotel and up the two flights of stairs. The smell of marijuana dissipated as he climbed higher.

Watson shook his head. He kept trying, but Dobie never took the hint.

Missouri

June

Some of Dobie's best ideas – epiphanies, even – came to him while behind the wheel. The open road is perfect for wrapping one's head around things. The rhythmic hum of the wheels on the asphalt often brings a sense of calm. Not this night.

A couple months prior to Taos, he was headed south through Missouri, somewhere. The rain was coming down in sheets as he drove *Sabina* – a refurbished 1977 Ford LTD Landau – to his next book signing. The darkness, solitude and treacherous driving conditions only heightened his anxiety. *Probably should have skipped that last coffee*, he thought.

He had been checking his rear-view mirror the past hundred miles or so. No one seemed to be following him anymore, but he was still trying to get over that last crowd.

It was so stupid. Cops and security guards kept him safe while he packed up his display, but once he was alone in the parking lot three or four guys – he wasn't counting – came out of nowhere, shouting "Go back to Michigan!"

It didn't make sense. He was in Missouri and his car had Tennessee plates. He *was* from Michigan, originally, but how would they know that? Whoever and however, they put a dent in *Sabina's* rear panel as he escaped.

Just prior to that, setup in front of a bookstore in a shopping mall somewhere on the outskirts of St. Louis, he had a particularly combative audience. People were standing up from their fold-up chairs and arguing with him throughout. Passersby kept stopping and joining in. It was exhausting.

Maybe that was why he held onto the pen. A young brunette woman wanted him to sign her copy of his book but, wisely concerned for her own safety, didn't want to stick around any longer than necessary. He signed the book, but kept the pen in his hand, perhaps subconsciously as a weapon, obsessively twirling and turning it round and round between his fingers as he spoke.

The melee started innocently enough – he thought – when he announced proudly, "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo!*"

It always cheered him up to say his book's title aloud. Every time he thought about its contents, even the title, it brought a smile to his face. That's how he knew it was worth whatever trouble it might get him into.

"You said that already," a young man shouted, "and it's boring!"

"I guess I did," Dobie admitted. After each problem, he would mention one of his solutions. And, after each solu-

tion, he would, with dramatic flair, give that little intro to his book.

"But it's anything but boring!" he continued. "It's a road map for generations to come! It'll be a must-have reference someday, right up there with the dictionary and Bible! At least *my* book has just one author, me, unlike *those* books."

He defended his work a bit too passionately, he knew, perhaps a tad too angrily, and leaning toward delusions of grandeur. When several in the audience gave him that "you've gone too far" look, he conceded, "Okay, it'll probably never be as important as those. The *dictionary* will always be the most useful."

He pointed toward the bookstore where its manager stood in the doorway with his arms crossed, smiling and hoping Dobie had inspired a few people to buy a dictionary, Bible, or both.

A large Black woman in her thirties was aghast. She was still standing after her previous outburst when Dobie said people should contribute to society as much, if not more, than they take. That clearly did not work for her, or her White girlfriend next to her.

"The dictionary?" she said. "The Bible is the most important book, ever!"

Dobie anticipated this and had an answer. It didn't seem especially controversial to him. He gave the Good Book credit for including *some* useful information, didn't he? What was the harm in critiquing it? Civilized people should be able to do that.

Then again, this was Middle America. They take their religion seriously, and there was nothing wrong with that. Dobie thought it gave them a certain wholesomeness,

which he personally could use more of and found attractive in others. These were good salt-of-the-Earth people.

Maybe a little too salty, though. What happened next taught him to tone down his arrogance and choose his words more carefully. He should have known better, but got so excited whenever launching into a speech. There was an energy that came with these talks. Not always, but he sometimes felt like he was nothing more than an interpreter, taking thought forms out of the air and translating them into words.

"The dictionary is the book that tells you the meaning of things," he said, "and those words are the foundation of our understanding. I am personally fascinated by the derivation of words, where they come from. Etymology. And, I am jealous of *anyone* who can speak more than one language!"

He spotted an Hispanic man and said, "*Hola! Como estas!*" The man smiled and waved. Dobie realized, too late as usual, the man might not speak Spanish. Either way, he was happy to not be accused of cultural appropriation for speaking someone else's language. These days, you never knew.

"The Bible, on the other hand," he continued, "the greatest *story* ever told, creates more questions than answers. I do recommend everyone become familiar with it, but then I recommend reading software license agreements, though no one ever does. At least *those* can be used in a court of law. The Bible cannot." Putting his hand to the side of his mouth, he added, "But don't tell that to settlers using it to justify the theft of other people's land!"

"Almost everything's a parable or analogy, with nothing said directly and unequivocally. Some of it is just plain psychotic."

"Psychotic?!" the same woman, who had sat down, got back up and shouted. "You're the only psycho I see 'round here!" Several people laughed.

The friend next to her, also on the hefty side, rocked her chair so hard, something popped. She stood up quickly before it collapsed.

"For *example*," Dobie continued with a smile, "there's the saying, '...bundle the weeds and burn them,' which means kill your enemies. And then there's '...seize their infants and dash them against the rocks,' which means take your revenge upon your oppressors, including their children. And let's not forget 'an eye for an eye.' These are all in the Old Testament, of course, but as a whole it's not exactly a sane, reliable resource."

"Not exactly...?" the woman shook her head, "Are you crazy?"

"I thought that was well-established," he tried and failed to diffuse the situation.

"We're talking about The Holy Bible!" she was not laughing. "The word of God!"

"Hey, don't get me wrong. There's a lot of good advice in there, not including what I just quoted. I like most Christians – especially Mormons, they're so helpful – and I like a lot of what Jesus supposedly said, but the Bible is *not* the word of God..."

Even the non-Christians in the audience gasped at that one. The woman whose book he signed earlier had not yet left. She was lingering, listening, holding his book in both arms like a textbook. At this last comment, she turned and hurried off.

"...it's the word of *men* who *think* they've been talking to God," Dobie continued. "Maybe they *were* talking to God. I don't know. Who am I to say? But, the problem with men

– just ask any woman – is that we make mistakes. We misinterpret. Overall, the Bible is a self-contradictory, hodge-podge of mistranslated, misunderstood, misquoted information, misinformation and disinformation. Maybe that's where cognitive dissonance got its start? At least Hindu, Buddhist and Zoroastrian texts are relatively consistent."

Several people clearly took offense. The woman he'd been arguing with, still standing, was now fuming and ready to tear him from limb to limb. She was as tall as Dobie and outweighed him by a good thirty pounds.

He could see the rage in her eyes. When her friend stood to join her, Dobie felt like an eight-point buck with these two being a couple of hungry mountain lions. He didn't want to make any sudden moves, but started looking around for a security guard.

Then disaster struck. The pen he'd been twiddling slipped out of his hand. He bent over to pick it up – too sudden, apparently – and the women attacked. They were on him within seconds, easily knocking him to the ground with their combined weight. This triggered several others into action who smashed his display and kicked him while he was down.

Instinctively curling into the fetal position and covering his face, he was prepared to pay the price for his indiscretion until the cops showed up. He *hoped* they showed up, anyway.

When he saw people running off with copies of his book, his attitude changed completely. *You hate what I'm saying*, he thought, *but you're stealing the books in which I say it?*

People were grabbing books from the neighboring bookstore and throwing them at Dobie. Others, having no idea who the object of their hate was supposed to be, sim-

ply destroyed property at random, on principle. The bookstore manager tried to intercede and recover his tossed books, but was not having much success.

Still on the ground, suffering the occasional boot in his rib cage, Dobie was finally able to slide out from under the women, and he forced out a laugh. It was difficult at first, but he instinctively felt this was the perfect response to confuse the angry mob. Aside from the pain, it was all just so ridiculously, unbelievably comical to him, and he kept forcing out laughs. Maybe that woman was right, he *was* crazy, but laughter seemed like a good idea at the time.

Once he saw it beginning to have its desired effect – people looking around, wondering if he was laughing because they were on hidden camera, being pranked – the laughter was no longer forced. He was honestly cracking up now. This made several people, including the bookstore manager, even angrier.

A pair of cops whose regular beat was the shopping mall finally did arrive to break it up. Although one of them was careful not to drop his double-scoop ice cream cone in the process – he had just stood in line and bought it, after all – they eventually dispersed the crowd and escorted Dobie to the parking lot.

Dobie normally would have demanded restitution for the damage and injury inflicted, but felt lucky to escape with his life. He let it go.

Further south but still in Missouri, Dobie came upon a little town called Taylorville. Not to be confused with its namesake in Illinois – a metropolis by comparison – this one was not much more than a wide spot in the road.

The lights on a billboard up ahead flickered off. Dobie barely noticed. A car in the fast lane came up from behind

and passed him. He looked over to see who it was. He didn't expect to know them, but had gotten into the habit of making eye contact with anyone who sidled up next to him. He couldn't make out the driver. All he could say for sure was that the car was a dark, late-model Cadillac Escalade.

As it cruised past, that billboard – now directly to his left – came back to life, bright as a full moon. It was blinding.

He slammed on his brakes and came to a complete stop on the Interstate. He sat there a moment, like an idiot, staring at the billboard. It was done in retro Americana style depicting a rosy-cheeked, smiling blonde woman in a blue apron; one hand on her hip; steaming hot cobbler in the other. "Come see us at The Blue Spoon Diner!" she said in the cartoon bubble. "Next exit!"

The tagline proclaimed that they were "Serving up the best blueberry pie this side of the berry patch!"

To anyone else, there was nothing special about that over-sized ad, but Dobie got an overpowering feeling of belonging. Home. *Déjà vu*. He was 99% sure he had never been there or seen that billboard before but suddenly knew this was where he needed to be. It would go down as the most important billboard, ever. There is not a lot of competition in that area for most people, but this was the second one to have a profound effect on him.

The first was a government PSA along the Interstate saying something like "~~Someone~~ I should do something!" His manifesto was simply following that advice, and he hoped his ideas resonated with people.

His friend Bucky was in the car at the time and wanted to know, "You always take advice from billboards?"

"When they make sense, sure. It doesn't matter who says what, so long as it's true."

Dobie was now in the slow lane of the Interstate, still not moving, when a big rig came up from behind blowing its horn. It swerved and barely missed him. The powerful draft from the truck as it blew past snapped Dobie back to reality, and he took the next exit. He hadn't planned on stopping in this town, but the feeling of home could not be denied. He just hoped it had a hotel with a conference room for him to give one of his talks.

He was not exactly on a mission from God, but it was important to him, if no one else, that he get his message out. Besides, with no other income – he had declined unemployment insurance benefits, on principle – he had nothing else going for him other than his books. He considered stand-up comedy as a career, but had yet to find a venue willing to let him anywhere near the stage.

Going into politics occurred to him, too. It made sense. The only problem was that he strongly believed politicians are supposed to represent their constituents, not themselves, and he seriously doubted he could find many such constituents.

~

The off-ramp curved around and dumped him at a stop sign down in a hollow. The billboard on the highway flickered off again, leaving the streetlight across the road as the only source of light. To Dobie's right, the asphalt disappeared into darkness under the overpass. The hotel and diner were on opposite sides of a cul-de-sac to his left, with the diner sitting several dozen yards off the curb at the edge of the woods, ensconced in front of towering old pine,

dogwood, red bud and beech trees. The diner was so well-hidden, no one but a local would know it was there if not for that billboard.

Safely within his hotel room on the fourth floor – he was surprised such a small town had a four-story hotel, but then, it *was* the only one for miles – Dobie looked down on the diner. He was tempted to check it out, and almost did, but in the end decided to get a good night's sleep. He was exhausted. It could wait until tomorrow.

With one last glance out the window, he spotted a black Escalade slowly entering the hotel parking lot below. Just as slowly, it then eased down the aisles. Dobie might have ignored it if not for its deliberate movements. Also, he had been seeing a lot of Escalades lately. Or, maybe just the one, repeatedly?

He had not yet met Major Watson by this point, but was resigned to the possibility someone might be following him. If they attended his talks, he thought, maybe they'd learn something. If they were there to break into or steal *Sabina*, he could not stop them. She was locked but had no alarm. If they were going to confront him, he would deal with it. Preferably with much better results than last time.

Either way – as he had learned from the Serenity Prayer pinned to so many cubicle walls in every corporate job he ever had – it did no good worrying about it.

One last thing he needed to do before collapsing into much-needed sleep was to fill out the generic Will he had found online the last time he was at the library. Given the recent altercations, assaults, murder attempts – call them what you will – from audience members in towns large and small throughout the tour, it seemed prudent.

"I, Dobromir Sean Riley Pokorny," he filled in the blanks, "being of sound mind, do hereby declare my Last

Will and Testament." He considered adding "as sound of mind as can be expected" but didn't want to undermine his own credibility on an official document. He did enough of that in the real world. What he couldn't resist adding after "testament" was "...before I can be killed or suicided for revealing too many truths. You're only allowed a few truths in this life before they assassinate you like they did to Gandhi, JFK, MLK and John Lennon."

Paranoid? Yes, but as the bumper sticker on the back of his car said, "Just because I'm paranoid, it doesn't mean they're *not* out to get me!"

He was simply getting his affairs in order. All he needed now was something to bequeath and someone to bequeath it to. The only thing he owned and cared about at that point was his beloved *Sabina*.

~

The next day – after his regimen of stretching and breathing exercises, followed by the hotel's complimentary breakfast and coffee – Dobie paid a visit to the local grocery store. This was how he ensured, before anyone could chase him out of town, that he at least had a few snacks.

He walked to the store since it was just a few hundred yards. Last night's rain had passed, and he felt like a stroll. Along the way, a middle-aged woman in a minivan drove by, did a double-take, and started videoing him with her phone camera. He laughed and assumed this was just small town paranoia. He had no idea she was Kaylie's mom.

Returning to his room and stocking its small refrigerator, he showered, shaved, and splashed on some home-made essential oil cologne. A couple hours later, after going over a few research notes, he donned his dark green

business suit. He liked to wear suits that were not black or dark blue. No tie. Never a tie.

He then made his way down to his assigned conference room. That this hotel even had a conference room was a surprise. Even more surprising was the size of the crowd that showed up. Some of his biggest crowds were at these out-of-the-way locales, for some reason.

There were ten or twelve people – quite a few, given how last-minute it was – ranging in age from eight to eighty, who had come in response to the fliers hastily put up around town last night and that morning.

Holding his "Don't Shoot the Messenger!" coffee cup as he entered, he ran his free hand through his hair and surveyed his audience.

The beige textured, wallpapered walls were adorned with faded, gold-framed, mostly hunting-related lithographs and the occasional still-life fruit bowl.

"I feel like I should apologize in advance," he introduced himself with a smile, "for probably not living up to the hype on my fliers!" Several people smiled. "But, I like the food-related artwork on the walls," he pointed at it. "It makes sense, being next to the kitchen, and all."

He then began in earnest and spoke of the people at the very top of the food chain rigging things in their favor. "The one percent of the one percent," he said, "going way back, have been pulling the strings and ruling the world, with people like you and me as their unwitting victims. They are the so-called 'hidden hand' that has been jerking us around for far too long.

"That's right," he smiled as if caught, "I'm a conspiracy theorist. Sure, some scoff at the mere thought of conspiracy, but ask any detective, lawyer or judge – if you can find an honest one – and they'll tell you conspiracies happen all

the time. From conspiracy to commit fraud to conspiracy to rig an election. From petty theft all the way up to global conquest. *Pinky and the Brain* are not the only ones trying to take over the world!"

When no one but a couple of kids seemed to get that reference, he added, "You know, that cartoon with the two laboratory mice...? I love that one! I've got the T-shirt. Anyway, but seriously, there's the inevitable obfuscation of facts, conspiracy of silence to cover their tracks, ridicule – even murder – of their accusers.

"Coincidence and synchronicity happens, sure, but if you're not at least a little bit of a conspiracy theorist these days, you're just not paying attention. George Carlin summed it up nicely when he said, 'Do I believe powerful people ever get together and plan for certain outcomes? Naw!'

"He was being sarcastic, of course. Call it collusion if you like that word better. Same thing. Something else he said that always makes me laugh is, 'People compliment my honesty, until I'm honest with *them*. Then I'm a jerk.' He used a different word, but there are women and children..."

"Asshole!" the youngest in the audience, an eight-year-old boy, shouted out. When Dobie glared at him, thinking the kid was heckling him, the kid explained himself, "He probably said asshole."

He then shrugged his shoulders and slumped down into his chair. His mother, next to him, was horrified, but everyone else, including Dobie eventually, laughed.

"Kids these days!" Dobie continued. "Anyway, I also like alternative historians like the one who said the Great Sphinx is thousands of years older than mainstream academia would have us believe. Like him, I never blindly

accept anything espoused by anyone claiming to be an authority, past or present.

"Question everything! That's the scientific method, although too many scientists are not very scientific. They'll come to whichever conclusion their bosses want, like the corporate accountant or election pollster who asks ahead of time what the result should be before they perform their algorithmic sleight-of-hand.

"And too many scientists who *are* scientific think the physical sciences alone explain everything, leaving no room for things that defy logic. For example, they explain the beginning of the universe with a theory called 'The Big Bang.' Give me a break. I had to laugh when even the great Stephen Hawking promoted this. Who or what created the conditions and raw materials for this Big Bang, hmmm? To this, they say 'Never mind the man behind the curtain!'

"People say I have authority issues, and I'm okay with that, though I'd argue it's more of a short-sighted-idiot-in-power issue. We should all have such issues! I do believe in some sort of Creator and intelligent design, but I'm not getting into that now.

"Throughout history, those with too much power and no sense of decency have engaged in collusion, conspiracy, or simple cooperation – like I said, whichever word you prefer – to keep the rest of us like mushrooms: in the dark and fed a steady diet of bull..."

He stopped and smiled at the boy in the audience.

Thinking this was his cue, the boy shouted, "Bullshit!" He and everyone but his mother again cracked up. She yanked him up roughly by one arm and dragged him out of the room. "Ow, that hurts!"

Shaking his head, trying not to laugh, Dobie continued. "Poor kid. I feel like I set him up. Anyway, where was I?"

Oh, yeah, history is written by the victors, and they will always portray themselves as right and just, no matter who or what they destroy.

"But I don't sit at the computer in my underwear in my parents' basement, complaining about it online. People who complain but don't provide solutions are just whiners. Oh... and, I wear pants! Usually. And hanging in my closet are my Big Boy Pants. I put those on one day and put a few solutions to the world's problems in a book... for those who still read books. It lays the groundwork for a completely new society.

"Corporations are the biggest problem. We don't live in a democracy, or even a republic. It's a corporatocracy, and corporations today are founded on three principles: lying, cheating and stealing. Throw in collusion if you want, but don't get me started on home and auto insurance. You can require someone to be financially responsible, sure, but to *require* us to buy insurance from a private company is, by definition, fascism! But, people just go along with it because it's too hard to fight The System.

"But, we don't need that system! Or corporations! The hard part will be transitioning from the old to the new – and I've got some ideas on that – but, if nothing else, companies should be limited to just a couple hundred employees each and forced to implement profit-sharing. The Free Marketeers hate me, but profit-sharing is win-win. The smaller company size will leave room for more mom-and-pop businesses like the Blue Spoon Diner," he pointed across the street.

"All the necessities of life can be provided by organized, qualified volunteers available for any task, as long as we have access to training and the required machinery. We just need to come together like family members – healthy

families, anyway – and help each other out. Like the Amish or Mennonites, I guess, only without the religion and that beard-but-no-mustache thing the men do."

He looked around to make sure nobody in the audience matched that description. Seeing none, he continued. "My system is not Communism..." He started adding this immediately after the previous comments because audiences tended, like Pavlov's dogs, to jump up and accuse him of being a Communist.

"...or even a cashless society. Those are traps. I'm saying there will be no money at all, but I don't want anyone getting anything for free. It has to come as a reward for individual effort. Everyone still has to work for a living. That's very important. You don't want people getting lazy and greedy, like those at the top of the socioeconomic strata. Everyone's time, attention and energy – our greatest gifts – will be the only currency.

"A huge bonus is that there would be no salesmen. Just think about that. No salesmen or telemarketers! That should win me a Nobel Prize right there!"

He spoke for another several minutes before stopping, taking a sip of coffee, and leaning against the lectern. The talks themselves were never long. It was the question-and-answer period that took most of the time.

"And now," he said with a smile, "it's time for questions."

An attractive thirty-something blonde woman in tight blue jeans and a white silk blouse raised her hand. Instinctively, Dobie checked her ring finger. It was bare, which usually meant she was single. Some guys didn't care about that – even *preferred* married women – but he was not one of them. He and his father disagreed on a lot of things, but they did agree on that.

He nodded and, again unconsciously, ran his hands through his hair.

The woman smiled, stood to speak, and introduced herself as Audrey. She tossed back her honey-blonde hair and undid the top button on her blouse. Dobie guessed she was only trying to cool off – it was stuffy in that conference room – but she now had his full attention. There was a twinkle in her hazel eyes, a pout to her full lips.

I love this job, he thought as he smiled back at her. He noticed Watson – not knowing who he was – standing at the back of the room. Other than sensing his military air, Dobie thought nothing of him. They were both focused on this captivating woman.

A combative sneer then broke the spell that Audrey had over Dobie, and she launched into her attack. "How dare you question the authority of history's greatest professors, scientists, political and business leaders?!" she said, indignant. "Did you study for years before graduating, getting your masters, then doctorate from any of the prestigious schools these great men and women did?"

Dobie sighed, smiled, and calmly said, "Well, for one thing, politicians are not our leaders. They're our representatives. At least, they're supposed to be. But, as they say, politics is the last refuge of scoundrels. I know the saying originally referred to false patriotism, but I've broadened its meaning. I don't think Samuel Johnson, the great man of letters, would mind. Believe it or not, though, I actually hate arguing."

"Because you never win?" she snorted, building up steam.

"You wouldn't know it to listen to me, I know," he ignored her jibe, "but I *much* prefer friendly conversation.

I'm not confrontational by nature but, sometimes, you just need to call b.s. That's what this tour is all about, really."

He paused, looked around and said, "Notice I didn't curse. I don't want that boy's mom dragging me off, too!"

Everyone laughed.

"Anyway, I am doing as Gandhi suggested and being the change I want to see in the world. Creating the reality I want to live in. Unlike ol' Mahatma, though, I won't be leading any marches or starving myself in protest. I might starve, but it won't be in protest. When I get to the Pearly Gates, I simply want to be able to honestly say I tried. At a minimum, I want to document for posterity my own answers to life's questions.

"As to how I dare question authority, I trust my own judgment. Not to brag, but my 144 IQ is well above average and, like any man with anything bigger than average, I'm quite proud of that!"

Those who got the joke laughed. Audrey was not among them.

"I've always liked the symmetry of the number 144. Twelve squared. Maybe not technically a genius, depending on the scale, but high enough to feel good about myself. Low enough to keep me humble. Okay, maybe not so humble, but the name Pokorny does mean humble according to those websites about the meaning of names. And, if it's on the Internet, it must be true, right?"

"Sarcasm again. And, I don't put much stock in IQ tests. Give me real world experience over IQ any day. EQ, however – emotional quotient – now we're talking!"

"To answer your question, though, yes, I *have* studied for years and years on my own, reading books and articles all by myself without an authority telling me what to read and what to think of it. So, no, I don't have a *curriculum vi-*

tae to back me up. No *bona fides*. At least, nothing official. If the only thing you respect is a diploma or certificate, then, no, I have no credibility. But, if you only listen to those with credentials and fail to recognize common sense when you hear it, you are doing yourself a great disservice.

"Studying a subject in school doesn't make you an expert when your course materials are tainted by corporate interests, as is the case at most major universities. I know, it can be difficult knowing who to trust, but you can eliminate anyone with a financial interest in the subject. Follow the money! That's the underlying force corrupting pretty much everything. But, I make my own observations, consult my intuition, and come to my own conclusions. I think this makes me quite brave, actually. Again, not to brag."

Audrey scoffed and sat back down, but not before looking around the room. She was curious to see what others thought of her performance – and it was a performance – but she saw nothing but glares and frowns in her direction.

She rolled her eyes. She didn't value these people's opinions, anyway.

"I didn't graduate from *any* college," Dobie carried on, "let alone a prestigious one. I was accepted into a few, but would have to pay my own tuition. My parents never had much money but weren't quite poor enough to get a hand-out, either, not that they'd accept one. And with me not being a star athlete" – he put his hands out to his sides and looked down upon his less-than-impressive physique – "obviously, I didn't qualify for any athletic scholarships."

There was more sympathetic laughter from the crowd. Several people were nodding but Dobie didn't know if they were agreeing he was not athletic, had no credibility, or that using one's own judgment was good enough for them, too.

Two middle-aged women passing by in the hallway paused, saw Dobie through the open doorway, smiled at each other, and joined the audience. He waved them in.

"How can we be sure," a well-dressed older woman in beige Capri pants and powder-blue blouse stood to ask, "what you say is true? I'm not calling you a liar..."

"I am!" the old man next to her, presumably her husband, said loudly with a derisive laugh. Dressed in a white polo shirt, khakis and deck shoes, no socks, he looked ready to go sailing.

Dobie bit his tongue.

"...but how do we know what you're saying is true?" the woman finished her thought. "I don't recall reading any of this in the Bible or Quran or even the Vedic Hymns."

"Wow, citing the Quran and Vedic Hymns. I'm impressed! Brave. Anyway, no, we can't be sure. And, no, I'm not lying. This is all just my own take on things after reading all of the above references, meditating, thinking things through over the years, and intuiting on my own. That last one, intuition – which literally means internal learning, teaching yourself – takes precedence over all the rest. Never underestimate your intuition, your sense of knowing.

"Anyway, I laugh when employment ads say they require a college degree for jobs that I know from experience do not require a degree. Half a brain, sure. College degree? No. And half of them don't even say exactly which degree is required. They just want proof you were gullible enough to invest four years of your life in The System and accumulate enough student debt to make yourself a virtual indentured servant!"

Another extremely attractive woman, younger than the previous two, with dark-brown hair, bright blue eyes, and

dressed in a two-tone blue, loose-fitting, checkered jumper, then stood to speak. "Is my entire audience," Dobie asked, "made up of beauty pageant contestants who stumbled into the wrong conference room?"

Another older woman, probably in her 80s and sitting in the front row, nodded and raised her hand. Everyone laughed.

"Just so you know," Dobie continued with a chuckle, "there is no conspiracy theory portion of the pageant."

There was another smattering of audience laughter. Dobie hoped this young dark-haired beauty now standing before him was friendlier than that Audrey woman.

"I agree with you," she began. "Some of the smartest people I ever knew never went to college. They had to work for a living right away. Daddy was 15 when he dropped out of school to work at the factory."

Dobie sighed in relief. She *was* friendly. He was happy to see he had the blue-collar vote. Others might have viewed him as an intellectual – or assumed *he* thought he was – but he thought of himself as just an average guy. Okay, maybe slightly better than average, but his fellow commoners were, until recently, the only people whose opinion he cared about. If he was going to change the world, though, he knew he had to get down in the gutter with the people in suits.

"Thank you, Miss...?"

"Daniels," she introduced herself with a smile and slight curtsy. "Kaylie Daniels."

Her clothes were modest by today's standards, and Dobie appreciated that. The world could do with more modesty. She had nothing to do with her current attire, but he didn't know that.

The woman Audrey glared at her, to which Kaylie smiled sweetly back. Dobie was impressed she had curt-sied. Who does that anymore?

She felt familiar somehow, but he shrugged it off. Pretty girls always seem somehow familiar.

"Well," she said finally, "I've got to get back to work, but I'm right next door at The Blue Spoon Diner. Come see us!"

He felt stupid for not realizing she was wearing a uniform but, now smitten and watching her leave, he wanted to shout, "Don't go!" It was a good thing she never asked him any questions. Under her spell, he was not sure how intelligently he might have answered.

He liked to tell himself looks were not as important to him as they were to others. "Just give me someone presentable," he would say, "not too dumb, and with a personality." In reality, he was a sucker for a pretty face. He knew it, and hated that about himself. He could feel his brain stop at the sight of a beautiful woman. It was a serious character flaw.

He considered himself a thinker – so long as no beautiful women were around – forever theorizing and trying to find the underlying cause of things. Constantly asking why this, why that? Where did this concept of beauty come from, anyway? The usual explanations – an indicator of good health, cultural preference, subconscious reminder of his mother – all made at least a little bit of sense but did not entirely explain it for him.

How and why were certain bodily and facial shapes, contours and combinations more attractive than others? Like so many other things, Dobie wanted to know the underlying source of its power. That and countless other mysteries floated around in his head waiting to be solved.

The alien, Semmy, could have solved that riddle for him, but he was trying not to meddle in these lower-level humans' lives any more than absolutely necessary.

With one last alluring smile over her shoulder, Kaylie disappeared out the back of the conference room. A gray-haired woman sitting next to her the entire time – though Dobie never noticed – now stood and joined Kaylie on her way out. He might have gotten a better look at the older woman's face if not so focused on Kaylie.

When there were no more questions from the audience, Dobie took a seat in his fold-up metal chair behind his fold-up faux-wood table upon which sat a fold-up cardboard display surrounded by his books like gifts around a Christmas tree.

"I'll be signing copies for anyone who wants to ruin an otherwise good book!" he said with typical good cheer and self-deprecation.

He hoped Kaylie would come back. Instead, it was Audrey now standing in front of him, wanting his autograph.

Seeing the sour look on his face, she gave a half-hearted apology. "I get worked up when I argue."

"No worries," he smiled. "So do I." With apologies all around, he hoped she would take her signed book and be on her merry way.

Instead, she asked, "Would you, um, like to go for a drink later?"

"To hurl insults at each other? No, thanks. I'm good." It was Kaylie he hoped to hook up with later, not College-Professor-Dating Barbie here.

"I thought we might have dinner," she persisted. "A glass of wine, then... who knows? No insults or arguing, I promise."

She was a beautiful woman – he had to give her that – and beautiful women were Dobie's weakness. Besides, it was The Code of every red-blooded American male to seek out and date as many beautiful women as possible. Who was he to break The Code?

She was also suspiciously eager – and couldn't hold a candle to Kaylie – but, with the latter nowhere around, the old saying "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" popped into his head.

Tired old sayings were forever popping into his head these days. Some of them rang true. Others made him wonder how it ever became a saying.

Audrey smiled and took a seat in the front row of chairs to wait patiently for him. Watson was still hovering nearby, but Dobie assumed he was just another autograph-seeker. He never noticed the glances back and forth between him and Audrey. It was only when Watson disappeared without an autograph that Dobie became suspicious.

March

Another Way had started as an assignment for an online creative writing course that his more artistic singer-song-writer ex-girlfriend suggested.

Dobie personally considered fiction to be the fine art of never getting to the point, but when the instructor implored his students to "write your manifesto," Dobie was all in. And, he dutifully wrote what became the culmination of pretty much everything he had ever heard, read or thought about life, politics or religion. Several hundred pages of everything you're not supposed to talk about in polite company. He never knew he had so many ideas waiting to get out, so much pent-up frustration inside him.

It was also, he learned, a great way to stop drinking. He was completely surprised. Finally putting into words what had only been nebulous thoughts up to that point gave him the same sense of calm and comfort he used to get from alcohol. He didn't know if this was true for anyone else, but it worked for him. The need for mental clarity while writing it all down put an unexpected end to his excessive boozing.

It was a *Eureka!* moment. Who knew?

He was so proud of himself and his work that he kept some of the best ideas out of the version turned in for course credit. He didn't want his instructor stealing or selling his best ideas before he could get it published and be given proper credit. After that, people were free to steal his ideas.

Good ideas that would benefit humanity or the environment, he believed, should be spread however and whenever possible, as long as people were properly recognized and compensated for their contribution to society. Some of the details, though, had to be kept secret. He didn't want to show his hand to the Charonnes of the world.

Reading other famous manifestos for research prior to writing his own, he found *The Communist Manifesto* completely unreadable. Marx and Engels could have used a writing course. *Mein Kampf* was better-written, but they both had at least one fatal flaw: they blamed others for their problems, promoting an "us versus them" mentality. Dobie firmly believed there was no "them." It was just us, no matter how hard that was to believe sometimes.

When faced on a daily basis with fight or flight, love or hate, truth or lie, he reminded himself to always choose the former over the latter. Thinking big picture, he hoped his own work might spark a revolution of responsible, peace-

ful coexistence with all of God's creatures. He just had to remain focused on the goal, not the obstacles.

He made a mental note to sing *Revolution* by The Beatles next time he did karaoke, and maybe that song *Big Yellow Taxi* with the line, *Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you got 'til it's gone?*

All of his parents' favorite songs were coming back to him now. It was a bit disturbing.

~

At lunch several months earlier in a shared courtyard surrounded by several office buildings – one of which was SaynCorp – Dobie's best friend Bucky, who worked in a neighboring building, stopped by his table. Bucky was an inch or two taller than Dobie, but with a much lighter, bird-like frame. His hair was darker and he kept it longer than Dobie's. To stand the two side by side, most people would have chosen Dobie over Bucky – with his semi-permanent three-day beard – as the more straight-laced, corporate type, but in fact the opposite was true.

Holding *Another Way* in his hand – he had an advance copy, and knew he would find Dobie here during lunch – Bucky asked, "What the hell is this?"

"My manifesto," Dobie replied, as if everyone writes one. Reaching out and touching the book, he added with a smile, "See? Right there on the cover underneath the title, it says '*A Manifesto*.'"

"Well, it sucks. Put in some jokes!"

"Jokes are easy," Dobie said soberly. "This book is important. Who knows? It might even save the world."

"Now *that's* funny!" Bucky laughed, "But you need to get over yourself."

Martha, sharing Dobie's table, nodded in agreement.

Dobie laughed, leaned back in his chair, put his hands behind his head, elbows out, and spoke with the most sage and wise look he could muster. "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor."

"That sounds familiar," Bucky looked off into the distance, where people keep their slightly familiar quotes and just-out-of-reach thoughts.

"It's from the Bible," said Martha. "*Book of Mark*, if I'm not mistaken."

Dobie nodded. He wasn't sure, either, but that sounded right.

"Wow," Bucky was shocked. "You've changed, man."

"No, I haven't," Dobie argued, bringing his hands down and grabbing the arm rests on his chair. "I'm just saying out loud what has always been in my head. And, I like to give credit where credit is due. I always thought Jesus was cool. Buddha and Zoroaster, too. It's organized religion that I have a problem with. Anything hierarchical, really, with permanent – or even semi-permanent – members. Every organization ever created should have term limits!

"I agree there are right and wrong, healthy and unhealthy, ways to live our lives. I don't subscribe to this 'anything goes' attitude promoted by pop culture. Remember Sodom and Gomorrah?

"But, we have to remember to hate the sin, not the sinner." He gave a nod to Martha – the one who first said the same to him – and she smiled. "I hate self-righteousness, though – especially my own – and don't go around thinking I'm the smartest guy in the room. Definitely not the holiest. I'm okay thinking I'm one of the stupidest, actually, until proven otherwise.

"I'm just trying to be helpful, but I'm not a fan of taking someone else's word as gospel. I mean, just because some-

body said something two or three thousand years ago, what makes their judgment and conclusions any better than mine? Not a fan of worship, either, unless you're worshipping health, hope, consideration, decency and life itself."

Dobie noticed several people had looked up from their sandwiches to hear what he had to say. Some were nodding, others were shaking their heads.

"There was a time," Bucky was one of those shaking his head, "when you woulda just said, 'Whatever, dude,' and not given me a lecture."

"I guess so," Dobie had to laugh. "Too much?"

"Just a little, yeah."

Dobie knew his friend had a point about getting over himself, but that was not going to stop him from speaking his mind.

The Blue Spoon Diner

June

The Blue Spoon Diner was a long, narrow, mostly-white building with blue trim now faded and cracked, and lots of windows, topped off with an attached sign – like a dorsal fin, ten feet high – over the entrance with its name painted in a blue cursive font. It sat quite a bit off the curb and maybe sixty yards from the neighboring hotel. Those two buildings were the only inhabitants of that cul-de-sac.

The twilight shadows of the trees surrounding the diner reminded Dobie of a scene from a horror movie. He half expected an ax-murderer hiding in the hedge that ran the length of the diner under its front plate-glass windows. Or, maybe an ogre lurking behind a sign that read "None dare enter here!"

The place was not nearly as charming or inviting as promised on the billboard, but he was hungry and had been meaning to check the place out since he arrived. Best of all, he now knew that girl Kaylie worked here, so he forged bravely ahead.

He never would have brought Audrey with him, but then he remembered something his father once said. To his teenage son's rolling eyes, the senior mister Pokorny said, "If you want to get a girl, all you have to do is flirt with *another* girl in front of her. Then the one you actually want will get jealous and she'll be all yours. Of course, she has to be amenable to dating you in the first place but, assuming that, it works like a charm. Trust me!"

Dobie was surprised to get such advice from his dad at the time. Sure, it might be useful information. Everyone manipulates everyone else to varying degrees. But, aren't dads supposed to teach their sons honor, respect, chivalry and all that? Manipulation? Not so much.

It wasn't until years later that his mother explained his father was concerned by his son's lack of girlfriends. He was worried Dobie might be "turning queer" and wanted to keep that from happening. "He wanted to help you, and I quote, 'get over the hump.'" They shared a laugh at his father's expense over that.

Dobie's unexpected date, Audrey, now stopped on the sidewalk. "Where are you going?! I thought we were going to your car."

"I'm hungry," he said. "Gonna give this diner a shot. It looks... um, quaint, don't you think?"

"No!" she was aghast. "It looks like a good place to be murdered. Doesn't the hotel have a restaurant?"

"Come on," he almost hoped she would abandon him. "How bad can it be? That girl Kaylie works here."

That last point was the real reason Audrey wanted to go elsewhere. She knew she would never get anywhere with Dobie if Kaylie – with her good looks and how she took his side earlier – was anywhere around.

The parking lots of the hotel and diner were adjoining, but the diner's was much older and mostly gravel. Just a few spaces closest to its front door were paved. Dobie figured whoever built the place didn't have enough asphalt at the time, then never got around to paving the rest of it. That was how his mind worked: see something as mundane as a parking lot and wonder how it came to be. He never outgrew his childhood propensity for asking why.

The air was now damp with impending rain, so he whipped out his old blue Milwaukee Brewers baseball cap – the one with the ball-in-glove logo from his childhood, before some marketing genius changed its design – and pulled it down over his head. After a few steps, he turned to Audrey and said, "Well, I'm headed for that diner."

Once the rain began in earnest, she grudgingly followed. The front door chimed as she entered the restaurant. Dobie was already inside, standing with his hat in hand, running his hands through his hair while trying to decide if he should wait for a hostess or just seat himself.

The first thing most people noticed upon entering the diner was a miniature version of that "best pie" highway billboard on the wall behind the cashier. Dobie was no different, and it brought a smile to his face, like a reminder that this really was where he belonged, though he was still unsure why.

Then he saw the drawings of various types of pie, framed and hung on the walls, over each booth with its own unique color scheme. None of the booths matched. There was a blue-and-yellow one, a red-and-black one, an-

other one was blue-and-beige. There was even a booth in a hideous baby-puke green. Then it hit him: each booth matched the drawing of the pie hanging above it... sort of.

There was nothing corporate about this diner, Dobie decided, and he liked that. Even the room temperature was comfortable, not barely above freezing like so many franchises kept theirs. He came up with a conspiracy theory on the spot: corporate-run restaurants keep their franchises cold because studies have shown that people order more food if it's just a little too cold inside. He had no idea if this was true, but it seemed plausible.

This place was just a quaint little mom-and-pop-owned diner. Its mismatched multi-colored booths were probably considered cool or "bitchin'" when it was first built, back in the day. Now, it was well past its prime.

Young Miss Kaylie then came flying around the corner to greet them, and Dobie's eyes lit up. Tying her apron strings behind her back, she smiled warmly and said, "Welcome to the Blue Spoon! Sit anywhere you like!"

The place was almost entirely empty, with just one table toward the back occupied by a middle-aged couple Dobie recognized from his earlier audience. He generally avoided audience members after speaking engagements unless they had already established themselves as friendly. Such encounters almost never went well.

He chose the blue-and-yellow striped booth along the window, halfway between the aforementioned couple and the front door.

"Excellent choice!" Kaylie smiled again, lighting up the room. "That's my favorite!"

Audrey rolled her eyes.

Kaylie saw a tinge of paranoia – maybe exasperation – in Dobie's eyes and decided she should not be surprised,

given who he was with. *What was he doing with her, anyway?* After their argument during his talk, she would have thought Audrey would be the *last* person he'd want to hang out with. Maybe he lost a bet or was taking pity and buying Audrey dinner?

It was a mystery but, either way, she decided to rescue him from this date like she did earlier at his talk. Who knows, he might even be "the one" to take her away from all this like in one of her favorite romance novels.

It should be an interesting evening.

Audrey slid into the booth first, closest to the window and facing away from the front door. She was surprised when Dobie slid in beside rather than across from her.

Seeing the look on her face, he asked, "Did you want me to sit across from you?"

"No, no, that's fine."

"I always like to face away from the front door," he explained, "so anyone who enters doesn't immediately recognize me."

Mentally, she was rolling her eyes. To his face, she gave the sweetest smile she could muster.

Kaylie handed them each a menu and walked away to give them time to look it over. Rather than focus on the menu, Dobie watched Kaylie. He couldn't help it, she was so familiar, and not merely from his talk.

From where?

She seemed too young and pretty to be working in a place like this. In his experience, waitresses at run-down hole-in-the-wall diners were bitter, tough old chain-smoking broads with bad skin and a few missing teeth, ready to break a beer bottle over anyone's head. Kaylie was nothing of the sort.

Dobie normally wanted to be left alone by servers and their incessant interruptions every few minutes asking, "How ya doin'? How is everything? How many times can I catch you with a mouthful of food?!"

With Kaylie, every time she walked away, he wished she would hurry back. She gave a knowing smile over her shoulder before turning her attention to her other patrons.

From the moment she introduced herself at his talk, Dobie felt like he knew Kaylie. And, she was getting the same feeling about him, but knew he was not from around there. With her jobs as a cashier at the only grocery store in town and waitress at the most popular diner, she knew everyone.

A few minutes later, she returned to their table to take their order. She did it without writing anything down, which always impressed Dobie. He hoped her memory and listening skills were better than his own.

She walked over to the little pass-through window into the kitchen and relayed Dobie and Audrey's order to the small, scruffy, salt-and-pepper-haired man within. Blount. He was at least twice Kaylie's age, but his eyes never rose above her ample bosom. She never knew or cared what his first name was. Everyone just called him Blount. Either way, his constant lecherous smile, almost drooling, was becoming a concern.

As soon as she could, she escaped to a blue padded stool at the counter. *Why did I agree to work today?* she asked herself. *Oh, right, I need the money.* After the regular girl called in sick, Kaylie reluctantly agreed to cover her shift. The pay from the grocery cashier job wasn't cutting it, and no one else in her life had any money, so here she was.

Ignoring Blount as best she could, she picked up the remote control and pointed it at the television. There was nothing but static on every channel. It was working just fine before Dobie and Audrey walked in. *Strange.*

Dobie watched her every move. Seeing the problems she was having with the television, he had to wonder – crazy as it sounded – if he had anything to do with that. More and more, lately, he could not come anywhere close to an electronic device without it somehow going haywire. Having such an effect from this distance, though, would be a first.

Audrey rolled her eyes as Dobie continued to watch Kaylie. Normally, she would storm out in a huff for being ignored like this, but these were not normal circumstances. She swallowed her pride, turned on the charm and reached out. Gently grabbing his chin, she turned his head to face her and, with a practiced smile, said, "Earth to Dobie. Is it true love?"

"I'm sorry," he smiled sheepishly. "I don't mean to be rude. I just... can't take my eyes off her. She's so familiar, but I don't know from where..."

"Your dreams?"

"Yes... actually." He was surprised by his own answer. "That's it, but how is that possible?"

Audrey bit her tongue and turned away, trying to hold it together.

The Ogre

By the time the cook, Blount, shouted "order up," Kaylie had given up on the TV and was wiping down tables at the other end of the restaurant while chatting with the older couple in the corner. Taking a moment to collect herself,

she smiled sadly at them, draped the damp rag across her shoulder and said "duty calls" as she walked toward the kitchen.

Dobie's grilled-cheese sandwich and Audrey's Cobb salad – each on its own blue ceramic plate – sat waiting at the base of that pass-through window. Kaylie set the coffee pot down, deftly placed the two plates between the thumb, forefinger and middle finger of her left hand, then picked up the pot with her right.

Taking advantage of her hands being occupied, Blount then stroked her forearm and giggled gleefully.

"Don't touch me, creep!" she snapped, then glanced, embarrassed, at her customers.

He cackled with delight as if enjoying being caught more than the act of touching her. Kaylie then realized in horror that while Blount's left hand was stroking her arm, his right hand was hidden under his apron. His shoulder was making a jerking motion. It was all she could do to not drop the plates.

Watching all of this play out – though he couldn't see what Blount's right hand was doing – Dobie realized there was an ogre in their midst, after all: this cook.

Kaylie moved quickly toward their booth, cheerful despite it all, and set their plates down in front of them. "Here you go!" she said, adding with a nod in the cook's direction, "Sorry about that."

"No worries," Dobie commiserated. "I know all about obnoxious co-workers. I used to *be* one, in fact." When she gave him a concerned look, he quickly added, "But nothing like that!"

His date, Audrey, forced another smile as she dug into her salad. She was hungrier than she realized.

A movement outside the window then caught Dobie's eye, and he was suddenly more interested in what might be lurking out there. It was dark out, but he caught a glimpse of a man in a hat and trench coat standing in the rain. Then the man was gone.

In the window's reflection he saw Kaylie watching him, following his gaze outside, only to return her attention to him. She never saw anything but the rain beating down on a dark, mostly empty parking lot.

It's Blount in here that I'm worried about, she thought, but said nothing.

Audrey could guess it was Watson out there but remained focused on her salad. Occasionally glancing at her phone on the table, she too said nothing.

As Dobie picked up his fork and aimed it the small dab of potato salad next to the sandwich, Kaylie gently placed her hand upon his shoulder. Leaving the food untouched, he looked up.

"So, what's your name, again?" she asked. "I know it was on your sign at your talk, but I've got a terrible memory for names. It's no fair I have to wear this name tag, but my customers don't! We should make a new rule! Everyone who walks through the door has to write their name on one of those sticky labels!"

Noticing Kaylie touching Dobie every chance she got – oldest trick in the book – Audrey gave a mocking laugh as a reminder that she was still there, sitting next to him, stupidly believing they were on a date.

"My given name is Dobromir, but friends call me Dobie."

"Oh, right," Kaylie pretended to finally remember, though she had known all along.

"But I've said too much!" he added playfully, looking around, feigning nervousness.

"A man of mystery!" she gushed, then released the most beautiful laugh. There was so much joy and infectious energy in that laugh, it was almost musical. Dobie had to sit back and appreciate it a moment. When he didn't stop staring after the appropriate few seconds, she smiled and asked, "What?"

"Sorry, bad habit. I'm a people watcher but gotta remember to look away before it goes from watching to staring to restraining order."

Kaylie giggled and nodded knowingly. She was used to men staring at her. When he reached for his grilled-cheese sandwich, she again touched his wrist to keep him from taking hold of it.

Audrey cringed. This was all just too much.

Refilling Dobie's coffee, Kaylie leaned in close. He stupidly hoped she might kiss him. Instead, she whispered, "I wouldn't eat anything on that plate if I were you."

He gave her a questioning look while trying not to stare at her cleavage now so close to his face.

"Trust me," she said. "I'll order you a new one. Coffee should be okay. And," she nodded in Audrey's direction, "your date's, um, salad dressing shouldn't have anything in it she's never swallowed before." With a devilish smile, she then wandered off.

As if only now remembering Audrey next to him, Dobie turned to her and said, "So, where were we?"

"Nowhere," Audrey snarled between bites of salad. "I realize our waitress is cute, Dobie, but forget about her. She's just a hillbilly girl. You and I have much more in common. So much more to talk about. Or not talk at all. I've got a French maid's outfit if you're into uniforms. Or, I could steal that bitch Kaylie's uniform."

He laughed, assuming that last suggestion was a joke. Like a dog distracted by a treat, he then admitted, "That does sound good."

"I think you and I..." she began in her sexiest bedroom voice.

"Sorry to interrupt," Kaylie reappeared. "I know you're, like, a complete stranger, and all," she spoke to Dobie while pointedly ignoring Audrey, "but my ride was supposed to pick me up, like, an hour ago. I guess that worked out, though, 'cause that's why I went to the hotel, looking for him, but found you instead! Anyway, you seem, like... I'm saying 'like' too much, aren't I?" she giggled. "But you seem... respectable. And, if Blount the Boob Whisperer back there paws at me one more time..."

"Boob Whisperer!" Dobie laughed. "Good one!"

"Yeah, just a little nickname I came up with. Anyway, d'ya think you could give me a ride home?"

"Sure!" he agreed too eagerly.

Audrey audibly gasped, saying "Am I invisible here?!" as she swallowed her food and sank into the back of the booth.

"Pretty much, yeah," Kaylie arched an eyebrow.

Dobie tried not to smile.

Patting his shoulder, Audrey said, "Let me out. I need to pee."

Charming, he thought. *Whatever happened to 'powder my nose?'*

Blount came around the corner from behind Audrey just as she was getting out of the booth. He was pleased with his own good timing. Watching a woman walk away – especially an attractive one like Audrey in tight jeans – was one of his favorite things. He particularly enjoyed them in

yoga pants, showing every curve. He was so glad that was a trend these days. Better still, this time of year, Blount could usually be found by the hotel pool, drooling over the bikini-clad girls.

Dobie was climbing out of the booth after her when a large, bearded man – obviously drunk – staggered in. The man barely fit through the front door, he was so big, but did not look like the same man spotted earlier outside in the rain. For one, there was no hat or trench coat, but Dobie could not be sure.

"Honey, I'm home!" the man said to the room loudly, with a laugh. To Kaylie directly, he snapped, "Get in the car! Let's go!"

Blount giggled. He knew this newcomer well and often wished he could trade places with him. Just one night with Kaylie, Blount fantasized, and he could die a happy man.

"No, JD," Kaylie spoke as if to a misbehaving child. "You're drunk. This nice man here, Dobie, is giving me a ride." She smiled reassuringly at the latter.

Dobie gave a little wave. Clearing his throat, he said, "Yep, she's coming with me. Like she said, you're drunk. Maybe I should give you both a ride home?"

Kaylie stopped smiling. Being anywhere near JD when he was drunk was not what she had in mind.

"You don't want to violate your parole," Dobie added, "with another DUI, do you?"

"Naw, man... wait, how in the hell did you know I was out on parole?"

"Wild guess."

"Nobody's that good a guesser!"

"I am, actually," said Dobie. "Always have been." He could hardly believe what he was about to say, but speak-

ing the truth, come what may, was his new *m.o.* "Belligerent, drunken redneck like you? It figures you'd be an ex-con with multiple DUIs, doesn't it?"

JD was stunned. No one ever talked to him like that, especially an older, relatively puny guy like this Dobie dude.

"Ah, I see what's going on," JD finally managed to speak. "You think you and Kaylie..." He shook his head and laughed. "She's just using you, dude. That's what she does. An old guy like you doesn't have a chance with her. This one here," he pointed at Audrey, "looks more your speed."

Audrey was offended.

"Come on, time to go!" JD ordered, looking directly at Dobie while grabbing Kaylie's petite shoulder in his catcher's-mitt-sized hand. "Let's go!"

If there was one thing Dobie hated, it was abusive, belligerent people. Bullies. Anyone taking advantage of anyone else, really. It was, on a much larger scale, the founding principle of his latest book.

Either way, JD fit the bill. *And who is he calling 'old'? Ten years older makes me 'old' now?*

Kaylie pulled away from the big man, and Dobie – with "old guy" still ringing in his ears – stepped in between the two of them.

JD smiled and said, "Oh, you wanna play?" And he threw a drunken, off-balance left hook aimed at Dobie's chin.

Kaylie watched with a mixture of horror and delight. *Two men are fighting over me!*

Audrey watched with absolute glee. *Dobie's about to get his ass kicked!*

Blount giggled like a fiend.

Dobie surprised himself by dodging JD's swing. He was not a fighter – normally, physically – but the recent attacks on his book tour had honed his reflexes. Now inspired by Kaylie and Audrey's presence – because even intelligent men will do the stupidest things to impress a woman – Dobie took a step forward and threw a right jab.

Kaylie gasped in surprise. She didn't know he had it in him.

JD easily parried the thrust and threw his own wild, roundhouse right in Dobie's direction.

Dobie dodged to one side, stuck out his foot, and let the big man's momentum send him crashing into the nearest table, where he hit his head and fell to the floor, unconscious. The fight, if it qualified as such, was over within seconds.

Audrey was surprised Dobie had fought back, but disappointed to see him win.

Like a predator hoping for a straggler to be separated from the herd, Blount waited to see which woman Dobie chose. He would grab whoever was left behind. In all the excitement, he had maneuvered himself next to Audrey, assuming she would be the one left unclaimed. He was self-aware enough to know at his age with his looks he had to be satisfied with leftovers. This Audrey woman would still make for a "tasty morsel," as he would say in his own inimitably creepy way.

It was only then that Audrey noticed his hand on her ass. She thought she had been leaning up against the table. She had to laugh, despite herself. At least someone in this diner was responding to her in a manner to which she had become accustomed.

She swatted Blount's hand away and stepped over JD's prostrate body on her way toward the front door. Kaylie disappeared around a corner and into the kitchen area.

Seeing both women vanish so quickly, Dobie was left wondering what happened. He was relieved to see Kaylie a few seconds later with her purse. She then led him by the hand out the front door, behind Audrey.

Kaylie realized at the last moment she had forgotten her jacket, but she left it. It was old, worn out – with empty pockets – and nothing special, anyway. Dobie could buy her a new one. She did not consider herself a user of men as JD had implied but did allow herself to take advantage occasionally. A girl's prerogative. Guys liked buying her things, anyway, so it was win-win.

Either way, she wanted to be long gone before JD regained consciousness.

Once outside in the parking lot, she laughed with relief. Holding onto her purse with one arm while reaching up to the sky with the other, she soaked in the rain.

Her exuberance alone told Dobie he had made the right choice in picking her over the dour, bitter Audrey just a few steps ahead of them. He could be dour and bitter all by himself. He needed someone like Kaylie to balance him out.

Major Watson was in his Escalade in the hotel parking lot, watching with disappointment as Dobie came out of the diner accompanied by Kaylie instead of Audrey. He was so upset with Audrey's failure, he considered letting her walk in the rain to the nearest bus stop, and find her way home from there. But, he knew Charonne would do something like that, and he liked to think he was better than the Colonel.

He rolled down his window and barked at her, "Get in!"

Dobie noticed her getting into the Escalade, but didn't immediately make the connection. Its windows were entirely opaque, giving no indication of who was inside. He did, however, find it interesting it was an Escalade.

Kaylie guessed correctly Dobie's car was the one with the "Question Authority Everything" and "Just because I'm paranoid..." bumper stickers. What she never would have guessed was that it had a name, *Sabina*, in honor of one of Carl Jung's alleged mistresses.

Most teenage boys have famous athletes or musicians as heroes – and Dobie had a few of those – but, mostly, for him it was Jung, Kierkegaard, Gandhi, George Carlin and, later, Bill Hicks. It struck him as odd at the time that Jung, being a noted intellectual, would have a mistress, alleged or not. He thought the two were mutually exclusive until he got older and realized Jung was just a man, with the same weaknesses as everyone else.

It occurred to him Freud might have frowned upon this "mistress" reference to his car, but Dobie never liked Freud. The man was entirely overrated. Aside from a few ideas on repressed memories and the "narcissism of small differences," the smartest thing Freud ever said was, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

But that was all neither here nor there. Several decades after coming off the factory floor, *Sabina* was the most reliable vehicle Dobie had ever owned. "Because she's American-made," he would tell anyone who asked. Growing up in Michigan, he valued anything made in America. Too many friends' parents had lost their jobs to near-slave-wage labor in Mexico and China. It was that cold-blooded "profits

over people" attitude, in fact, that first made Dobie hate corporations.

He would have preferred *Sabina* in a color other than the factory-original "dark jade" but, after spending so much just getting her roadworthy, only to lose his job at SaynCorp, he couldn't immediately afford to do anything about it. He could afford it now, but it was no longer a priority. Besides, the color was starting to grow on him.

She had no remote control, just this thing called a key that you had to insert into the door lock. Old school. He used it now and held the door for Kaylie, his damsel in distress, as she climbed in, smiling, amazed to have someone holding the door for her.

This was all the proof she needed that chivalry was not dead. Soaking wet from the rain as she took her seat, she was happier now than she had been in a very long time. This Dobie dude was cool, even if he did drive such an old car. There was just something about him she couldn't quite figure out, and that was saying something. She had been figuring guys out since at least the age of twelve. With her looks, it was a survival skill.

A Night To Remember

Once Dobie was in behind the wheel with the doors closed, Kaylie slapped the glove box and shouted through her laughter, "Go, go, go! He's right behind us!"

"Who's right behind us?"

"Nobody," she admitted. "I've just always wanted to do that! Next time, I'll slide across the hood and jump in through the window like they do on TV!"

Dobie was laughing as the skies opened up, pouring again, as *Sabina* pulled into the street. This girl was crazy. The good kind.

Once on the highway, Kaylie pulled out her phone to make a call. "That's weird," she said, holding it up, "I usually get a good signal around here, but now, nothing." Dobie could guess he was the problem, but kept quiet.

As they got onto the Interstate, she said, "We're not far. Second star to the right, and straight on 'til... Exit 109," she paraphrased *Peter Pan* with a laugh.

He wondered who she meant by "we." Himself and Kaylie? Herself and JD? She and her fellow lunatics back at the asylum? He would find out soon enough.

~

Meanwhile, inside the diner, JD was picking himself up off the floor. Shaking his head and collapsing into one of the booths, he said to Blount, "Well, that didn't go as planned. Time for Plan B." Blount had no idea there was *any* plan, A or B.

~

Driving Kaylie home, Dobie was amazed by his recent good luck with women. He did alright before but ever since leaving Corporate America, women seemed drawn to him. There was Crissie and Martha from work; a few women he had met along the tour; then Audrey; and now Kaylie. *Unprecedented!*

He guessed there was something about standing up in front of an audience that turned women on, but he didn't want to over-think or jinx it. Of course, Crissie and Audrey had been *hired* to get friendly with him, but Dobie didn't know that. Either way, no matter the machinations behind it, his manufactured "good luck" with women ignited a le-

gitimately successful trend in that area. Confidence breeds confidence. What had started out as fake was now genuine with Kaylie. He hoped.

In addition to fixing his other character flaws, he wanted to stop the one-night stands. He needed to find someone worth sticking with. It was time. He was not one to pine away for a soulmate, and knew it was unwise to get his hopes up. That's just asking to be lonely. If Kaylie could be that someone special, though, that'd be great.

Approaching the latter's Interstate exit, she instructed him to get off there. He had to stifle a joke about "getting off." *Be cool!* he told himself.

Out of the blue, she offered to guess his age and weight. He wondered where this was coming from. *Nerves*, he guessed. Some people get chatty. He hoped for her sake it was not normal for her to be jumping into strange men's cars.

When he gave an incredulous look, she explained how a woman at a carnival had guessed her age and weight so accurately one time, even though everyone else thought she was younger. She was inspired to try her own luck.

"I might add it to my résumé if I'm any good at it. You never know when you might need to run off and be a carnny! Anyway, I'd say you are 43 years old, 192 pounds and Sagittarius, Leo rising."

She wasn't entirely sure what "Leo rising" meant, but it sounded like something an actual astrologer might say, so she rolled with it.

"Forty-three?!" he was insulted. "Try *thirty-three!*"

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Okay, 35," he conceded, hoping this wasn't still too old. He guessed she was 26 but didn't dare ask. "And last time I

stepped on a scale I think I was 173 pounds. Otherwise, you were close!"

"Pfft, all that's left is your sign!"

"Well, you got the 'Leo rising' part right," he lied. "And some people say that's the most important part." He had no clue if that was true.

His actual vital stats – if astrology could be included with anything vital – were: 36, one year older than admitted; at least 5 pounds heavier than acknowledged; and Pisces, with nothing "rising" that he was aware of.

By the time they entered Kaylie's house, Dobie was feeling pretty good about things, but also a little nervous. This woman was so perfect – on the surface, at least, but that's all he had to go on – and he was so... not. He never let that stop him before, of course. "Lucky for us men," he would say, "we don't have to be good-looking, just confident."

He took refuge in social commentary, something in which he was quite confident. He used to use humor to counteract nerves until several women told him it was a turn-off. "Nobody wants to sleep with a giggling idiot," one of them said.

He laughed at himself now, thinking how far he had come – on so many levels – since leaving his corporate job. As he surveyed Kaylie's small, cramped, cluttered house, he said, "Money is the root of all evil."

"Well, I must be extra good, then," she quipped, "because I ain't got none!"

"Good one!" he laughed, "but it needs to be abolished."

"What, money, or good comebacks?" she gave a smile while pulling a small suitcase out of the hall closet.

Smart-ass, he thought with a smile as she wrestled with her luggage. "Here, let me help you with that."

"No, I got it."

"Anyway," he continued, "I was referring to money. There's no greed or corruption with my proposed system because there's no profit motive. It's the profit motive that ruins everything! Think about it, almost every one of society's ills goes back to money at its core. That, and people trying to get ahead. Healthy people don't need to feel like they're ahead of anyone. Any society with sayings like 'Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing' and 'Nice guys finish last' is one screwed-up culture. Friendly competition is great, but people take it too far."

She looked at him askance as she disappeared into the bedroom. She had not brought him home for a political debate but, to be polite and now speaking loud enough to be heard from the bedroom, she asked, "How does getting rid of money solve all the world's problems? Seems to me it'd make things worse."

"That's what they want you to think!" he shouted back before stopping himself. He was alone with a beautiful woman... in her house... at night. This was no time for debate.

"I'm gonna take a quick shower," she said from somewhere in the bedroom. "Make yourself at home."

Awfully trusting, he thought, but dutifully went in search of a place to sit. He settled for the kitchen table when he saw the living room couch and chair piled up with clothing. *Laundry night?*

When Kaylie reappeared, Dobie was mesmerized by her wet hair, freshly-scrubbed smiling face, and absolutely perfect figure bursting out of her gray yoga pants and orange V-neck T-shirt. He had admired the modesty of her clothing earlier but was not going to hold this new look against her.

From her smile and blushing look away, he realized he must have been gawking. To keep from drooling, he cleared his throat and resumed the political discussion.

"You know what Gandhi said about Western civilization, don't you?" She shook her head and he attempted an Indian accent for the punch line, "'I think it would be a good idea!'"

It took a second before she laughed that beautiful laugh. "A laugh to launch a thousand ships," as he would call it. If he had a "smartphone" he would record it and sell it as a ring tone. He'd be rich... in the current system. But then everyone would have it, and he wanted her all to himself. Selfish, he knew, but he forgave himself in this case.

"Okay, let's go," she said as she set the suitcase down and pulled a black leather jacket off the coat rack by the front door.

"Where are we going?"

"The hotel," she said. "JD has a key to the house. So, unless you want him in bed with us, we need to go. Now. I just hope he's not still over there and sees us coming back to the hotel."

"Good point," he agreed, though he was now focused on her assumption that they would soon be in bed together.

Reaching for the front doorknob, trying to be a gentleman, he took a step back when a middle-aged woman smelling of alcohol and cigarettes emerged through the door.

She was a handsome woman, or would have been if not for the smell. She was slightly familiar, too, but not the *déjà vu* he felt with Kaylie. The woman was barely twenty years Kaylie's senior, but looked like a gray-haired version of her, at least thirty years on. Hard living had added a dozen years.

"Oh, hey, Mom," Kaylie was clearly surprised to see her. "You're home early."

"Yeah, they let us off..." the older woman's raspy voice trailed off. Her right hand was buried in her purse as she eyed Dobie warily. "Who's this?" she asked as if he was not even there. She knew exactly who he was but wanted to hear what Kaylie had to say.

"Oh, this is Dobie, um, Pokanorny," Kaylie flubbed his last name. "You know, from that talk we sat in on at the hotel? Dobie, this is my mom, Claire Ra..."

"He don't need to know my last name!" she cut her off. "Tell him my social security number while you're at it! Don't never tell a man nothing he don't need to know!"

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," he smiled cautiously, trying to be diplomatic, ignoring her double-negatives. "Good advice. Keep everyone on a need-to-know basis. My last name is Pokorny. There's no point hiding it since it's on the fliers, and all."

Claire gave him a dirty look, and it hit him that she was well on her way to becoming that "tough old chain-smoking broad ready to crack some skulls" that he had imagined working at The Blue Spoon Diner. He was trying to remember if she was the one who had joined Kaylie on her way out of the conference room at the end of his talk, and Kaylie now confirmed it.

When he extended his hand, she looked at it like it was a dead squirrel. It then occurred to him, in her case, squirrel might be what's for dinner any given night. And, it was all he could do to keep from laughing out loud.

Claire saw the laughter in his eyes and gave him another dirty look. Recognizing the animosity in her mother's eyes, Kaylie said in her most cheerful waitress

voice, "Well, gotta go!" And, she once again led Dobie by the hand out the door.

From the front porch, Claire's eyes burned holes through Dobie's back as her precious only child followed him to his car. It was not a coincidence she showed up when she did. She did not like how this "smooth-talking stranger" waltzed into town and swept her daughter off her feet, right under her and JD's noses. *Nobody* got away with that, but it put a smile on her face to think what JD would do to him.

Dobie was all Claire heard about as she and Kaylie walked back to the Blue Spoon after his talk, and he wasn't even especially good-looking. *It makes no sense!* she thought.

She pulled her phone out to make a call.

~

Back out on the road, Dobie said, "So... your mom is... interesting."

Kaylie laughed. "My mom's okay. Used to be a lot of fun, actually. I just wish she had more..."

Class? Dobie thought.

"...class, I guess," she said with a guilty laugh. "But, yeah, she takes some gettin' used to. Still, you shouldn't have laughed at her."

"I didn't laugh at her!"

"Your eyes did. She hates that... and so do I. If you can't laugh at yourself, you're not allowed to laugh at anyone else."

"I laugh at myself all the time! You kiddin' me? Anyways, sorry. I just had a funny thought when I went to shake her hand, and you know how hard it is to not laugh

when you know you you're not supposed to. I thought I did well to keep it in."

"What was so funny?"

"Nothing. It sounded funnier in my head."

"Well, I don't know what's worse," she changed the subject, "her liking you or *not* liking you. She's my dates before! I mean, no big deal, really. Both times it was just some dude I'd just met, and we'd been acting like a couple of teenagers scheming over a boy, but who *does* that to their own daughter?"

"I don't see that happening with me."

"Count yourself lucky."

"You're like a flower," it occurred to him, "surrounded by... fertilizer."

"Um... no one's ever said that before. I'm not sure how to take it."

"It just popped into my head, so I said it. I do that... a lot. No offense."

"No," she smiled, enjoying the sentiment, awkward as it was. She appreciated his honesty and lack of filter. "That's okay."

When the conversation then hit a lull, he filled the void with more rhetoric. It gave him something to talk about besides their impending tryst. He *hoped* there was an impending tryst, and she wasn't simply leading him on as JD had said.

"The world doesn't need so many widgets and what-sits," he began.

"You sound like Doctor Seuss!"

He laughed and continued. "They just end up in landfills and that 'great garbage patch' in the ocean. My system, for most of us, would mean less work. A *lot* less because,

when it comes right down to it, all we really need is food, shelter and something to do."

"I thought all we need is love," she quoted the Beatles. "Turn here."

"I was referring to physical needs."

"So was I," she smiled suggestively.

"...but my ideas," he tried to focus, "are too radical for them."

"'Them' who?"

"The keepers of the status quo. Those who like things just the way they are."

"Come on," she argued. "Things ain't so bad, but I like what you said about saving mom-and-pop businesses." Pointing straight ahead, she said, "The Interstate's just up there."

"They *want* you to think things aren't so bad," he argued. "But they could be a lot better, so why not try?"

"Better how?"

"Well, everyone's a wage slave, spending most of their time and energy commuting to and from and working at some j.o.b. If you want a professional degree, you need a student loan. If you want a home, you take out a home loan. New or almost new car? You need a loan. With home appliances, we can save up and buy it with our own money, but an awful lot of people finance those, too.

"And how do we make payments on all those loans? You have to get a job. Yes, a lot of us start our own businesses and do well, but those are the minority."

"What if we just don't get all those loans? Only buy what we can afford?"

"Well, yeah, if people had self-discipline and patience, that works. But you still need some sort of income. I want to get rid of money altogether."

"I've got an idea how to make things better," she said with a smile as he got *Sabina* up to speed on the Interstate.

"Yeah? What's that?" It was his turn to be a little slow on the uptake until she slid up against him. Their legs made contact and created an actual spark. His foot involuntarily pressed down on the gas, and he swerved into the fast lane. When she placed her hand on his thigh, he got it up to 90 miles an hour before he knew it. *Sabina* had great acceleration.

"Where *is* that hotel?!" he said aloud for both of them.

El Lobo Solo

Kaylie had never dated a public speaker before. She admired anyone who could do anything she could not. Sure, she could talk all day long, but not in front of an audience, and not about the things Dobie talked about.

During his earlier talk she was thoroughly enjoying herself until that woman Audrey stood up and started arguing. Kaylie only did what came naturally when she stood to defend him, despite her mom trying to pull her back into her seat. When Dobie stood up for her against JD at the diner, that clinched it. It was as if they were meant to be together.

She felt a complete lack of apprehension with him, which usually meant the guy was boring, but not this time. He might be too opinionated – and older than other boyfriends – but he was doing something with his life, making something of himself, and that made him more attractive than anyone else in town.

The fact that her mom didn't like him helped. He was either her ticket out of there or her next mistake... though she usually had a good sense of where a relationship might take her. Up until now, unfortunately, that had been exactly nowhere, and she was ready for an upgrade.

They were both very happy to get to the hotel. There was a lot of panting and petting as Dobie fumbled with the key card to get into the room. It was taking so long, Kaylie almost suggested they just do it in the hallway, but didn't want him to think she was some sort of freak, so she said nothing.

He might have been okay with the hallway himself if not for the security cameras recording everything. He could never run the risk of someone finding and using such evidence against him. The ubiquitous camera surveillance of the modern world was a favorite complaint during his talks, but he was not going to mention that now.

In their haste to pull into the hotel parking lot, they failed to notice the cook, Blount, out front, smoking a cigarette and taking note of where they parked.

Half an hour later, Dobie and Kaylie were lying in bed and catching their breath. Dobie was smiling as he looked up at the ceiling. There was nothing quite like the first time with somebody, except maybe the second, third, fourth and fifth time.

Kaylie was lying on her side, watching him. She suggested they sneak out of town in the middle of the night. She still wanted to get as far away from JD as possible. "Tonight was a slice of heaven," she said, "but I don't feel safe here."

"I've already paid for the conference room in the morning," he argued. "People are expecting me. I'm trying to

practice what I preach and be a responsible person. We're perfectly safe."

~

In the morning, still in bed, Kaylie once again broached the idea of her joining him on the road. "We can be like Bonnie and Clyde," she giggled nervously, "until you get sick of me, anyway."

There was a pregnant pause from Dobie. "I'm more of a one-man band," he began cautiously. When he saw the dejected look on her face, he softened the blow with an uncomfortable laugh. "A lone wolf. *El lobo solo.*"

"You're just making up words!" she smiled uncertainly.

"That really was Spanish, I think, but I do usually work alone. Old habits die hard, and all that."

"What about me?!" She assumed last night would have sealed the deal. It usually did. "It's just wham-bam, thank you ma'am?!" She was kicking herself for jumping into bed too soon once again.

"No," he fumbled for a plausible excuse, "I'm just explaining why I hesitated. You gave me that hurt look. I'm saying yes. Definitely, yes. I thought you were just messing with me. I had to be sure."

In truth, she had nailed it. He *was* hoping for a little wham-bam, no strings attached. But now, looking at her, recognizing her sincerity, there was no way he could treat her like that. There was something truly special about her. He had felt it the moment he first laid eyes on her. He tried to deny it, even to himself, out of habit, but there was no denying it now.

"Oh," she smiled and snuggled close. "Well, alrighty then."

And they picked up where they left off last night.

~

Dobie was late for his own talk. It was Saturday and he had scheduled a mid-morning appearance. It took serious effort to leave Kaylie, but he eventually managed to get dressed and down to his assigned conference room on the ground floor.

Kaylie went back to sleep.

Taking the stairs down, Dobie walked with a new spring in his step as he reached the kitchen area where he went in search of the hotel's complimentary coffee. Upon entering the conference room, he surveyed its padded metal chairs scattered throughout. Half-full, he thought with a smile, not half-empty. That middle-aged couple from the previous night was back, and he took it as a compliment.

An attendee he never expected to see was the cook, Blount, in the back row. Dobie supposed he should take that as a compliment, too.

Taking another sip of coffee before setting it down on the lectern's interior shelf, Dobie introduced himself to his audience and launched into one of his favorite and typically better-received speeches.

"No one ever accused me of being ambitious," he said with a self-deprecating grin, "but I've always had an overriding need for the truth. Some might call that ambition. I call it compulsion. I don't know. What I do know is people don't always appreciate or give credence to someone else's version of the truth unless that someone has an impressive title and wears the right clothes – usually flowing robes, with amulets and talismans in all the right shapes and symbols. His or Her Wannabe Eminence must perform the proper rituals, too, of course, preferably in front of a microphone with enough reverb to give their voice that word of

God, spoken from on high sound. If they have a secret handshake and say thy, thou and thee a lot, it helps. Lacking all of the above, people want to discount it as myth, folklore, superstition or mere opinion."

People dressed in everything from shorts and flip-flops to bathing suits to pajamas to full business suits wandered in and out of the conference room – or stopped in the doorway – on their way to and from their complimentary breakfast in the adjoining dining room.

Dobie noticed half a dozen chairs from yesterday's talk had been removed, apparently required elsewhere. The talk was going well. The audience was interested, for the most part. Several minutes in, he noticed a woman staring at his crotch, or into space at nothing. He wasn't sure which. Was his fly open? He checked. No, but he made a mental note to get that woman's number.

Wait, no, he reminded himself. I've got Kaylie now.

The thought of Kaylie made him smile, but this woman thought he was smiling at her. From that point forward, he had her rapt attention. *Groupie!* he thought, but tried not to smile.

"The world gives us problems," he continued with a smile, spreading his arms out wide. "I give the world solutions! I'm not pretending to be anyone's guru or savior. I want people to be their own savior, and I'm not here to be idolized. It's not like I'm a rapper, actor, athlete, or any one of those so clearly worthy of your worship.

"Personally, I find gurus annoying. I know I'm up here acting like one but, if you're like me, you don't want someone else's answers. You want to find your own. Most of us only listen to know-it-alls like me for confirmation of what we already know. It's the mystery of life, the lack of answers that keeps us going! So-called gurus don't know any

more than you, really. They're just better at putting it into words. Everyone can teach everyone else something."

And, for that, Dobie received a standing ovation – his first – from a sizable portion of the crowd, at least. His "groupie" up front was the most ecstatic. He looked behind him to make sure no one famous had walked in. Nope. It was all for him.

What surprised him most was that it came after his completely off-the-cuff and unrehearsed remarks. He laughed to think maybe he should speak more often without thinking, or at least start each day in bed with Kaylie. Preferably the latter. Something had inspired him.

"I haven't always been a pseudo-guru," he continued. "Hey, Pseudo Guru can be my stage name from now on!"

He truly believed in his own ideas and point of view, but tried not to take *himself* too seriously. His self-deprecation was his way of staying humble... -ish.

~

Kaylie was blissfully asleep in their room, facing away from the door, only partly under the covers. When she heard the door open behind her, she rolled over to greet Dobie with a smile, only to recoil in horror and pull the sheet to cover herself when she saw who it was.

JD filled the entire doorway with his massive frame. He was not happy. He thought he and Kaylie were still a couple.

"Mornin', sunshine!" his mouth formed a greasy smile, but his eyes were deadly as he slipped halfway into the room.

"How did you...?" she looked around. More than just startled, she was downright frightened. She knew what JD was capable of when betrayed, having witnessed him sav-

agely beat a former friend of his, caught stealing. The guy would have ended up in the morgue, she felt sure, if the police had not broken it up.

His almost palpable brutality was what first attracted her to him. At first, he was exciting, but she now realized now how stupid it was to ever get involved with him. She was scared, but not one to scream and run at the first sign of trouble. Her father taught her to always stop and think. There was always time for that, he said, and almost always a way out of any predicament. "You might be able to talk your way out of it."

She was doing her best to follow that advice, but nothing was coming to mind. She thought she might have to physically submit to JD, then escape while he slept it off – as he always did – but that would be her last resort. The thought of him touching her again sent a cold chill down her back.

Still wearing that greasy smile, he held the door ajar. She didn't know if he was keeping it open for his own quick exit or, worse, to let someone lurking behind him into the room.

"Jimmy's working the front desk," he answered her unfinished question. "Loaned me a master key and told me what room you were in."

"Well, that was mighty nice of him," Kaylie was sarcastic, "but the manager of this hotel is one of my best customers at the diner. Remember, the one who's always 'joking' about leaving his wife and taking me away from all this? I'll make sure your little friend Jimmy gets fired."

"You mean the manager I put in the hospital," JD asked, "'cuz he wouldn't stop hitting on you even though I asked him real nice? Yeah, I remember him."

This was news to Kaylie. It also explained why she hadn't seen the man in a while. Typical JD. Any man stupid enough to make eyes at Kaylie with JD around usually, like the hotel manager, ended up in the hospital.

"Anyway, you need to get outta here before I scream and someone calls the cops! You know how loud I can scream."

Her own words reminded her to look for her phone. She spotted it on the small table in the opposite corner of the room, out of reach. She'd never get to it before JD stopped her.

She crawled out from under the sheets, more annoyed than frightened now – she was going to talk her way out of this – and slid off the far side of the bed. No matter what, though, she would at least be dressed.

She had just gotten her bra and panties on when Blount the Boob Whisperer came through the door. When he saw her half naked, he squealed in anticipation and rushed in to get a better look.

Now outnumbered, she thought talking her way out of it might not be an option. Maybe she could hit JD with something, then escape past the older and presumably slower Blount. She looked around for something to throw, but there was nothing. And, no matter how hard she might swing the nightstand alarm clock at JD, it would not hurt. The reading lamps were bolted to the wall. There was nothing.

That's when she screamed at the top of her lungs. Down the hall, a small, middle-aged Asian-American cleaning woman by the name of Doris heard it, dropped everything, and called the front desk. A few other hotel guests stuck their heads out. Some of them made the same call as Doris. At least one called 911. Some did nothing, prefer-

ring discretion over valor. One enterprising young man, 15 or so, captured a few seconds of video of JD, Blount and Kaylie from behind as they escaped down the hall. Being a teenage boy, however, he zoomed in on Kaylie. It wasn't until half an hour later that his father noticed his son's obsession with the video and asked to see for himself. It was then forwarded to the police.

From the angle of the kid's footage, it was impossible to say with any certainty that it was JD and Kaylie, but Blount was careless enough to look behind them just before going out the back door. His ugly mug was caught on camera.

Jimmy took all of the concerned guests' calls but, of course, did nothing about it. JD had anticipated these calls and promised to fix Jimmy's transmission in exchange for running interference like this.

Jimmy asked what it was all about, but JD laughed and said it was just a prank for his YouTube channel. They couldn't let Kaylie in on it because they wanted her to look surprised for the cameras. Jimmy never knew JD had a YouTube channel. It seemed completely out of character, but he let it slide because he'd been asking for JD's help with his transmission for months by that point and it looked like the big man was finally going to come through.

~

Three floors down in the conference room, Dobie was onto the subject of his book, *Be Good*, his initial foray into publishing. He explained to his audience that he had read so many philosophy, self-help, and motivational books over the years, he decided to write one himself.

"How hard could it be? The hardest part was quieting the internal voices telling me to not even try."

Watson's most recently hired agent provocateur, Dobie's "groupie," was standing before him now, asking about it, keeping him occupied. *Be Good*, he explained, was inspired by his own name, Dobromir. According to his research, any word starting with "d-o-b-r" (or their Cyrillic equivalent) roughly means "good" in several Slavic languages. And Dobie was referring to "being good" as in good *at* something, making all the right moves. One's behavior is important, of course – "you shouldn't be greedy and scheming to take advantage of others" – but his book was not a "how to" on being a well-behaved suck-up. Every corporate Employee's Handbook had that covered.

Based on the poor sales of *Be Good* – though he told himself it was not bad for a first attempt – Dobie's greatest fear upon starting this current tour was to end up like Chris Farley on *Saturday Night Live*, "living in his van down by the river." He was pleasantly surprised how well *Another Way* was selling. So well, in fact, it was not long before he was making a better income than when slaving away at SaynCorp. If he had foreseen that – and meeting Kaylie – he would have quit the corporate world years ago. He seemed to be a natural at this public speaking stuff.

"Know that you are good," he now read aloud a few lines from the book. "A good attitude leads to good behavior, which leads to good performance, which leads to good results. So... 'Be good. Be creative. Be yourself.' I've got that on bumper stickers. Five bucks each.

"Coming up with sayings is a favorite pastime. Another one is, 'Mind over matter is all well and good, but heart over mind makes you do what you should.' I've got that on bumper stickers, T-shirts and coffee cups, too. What I'm saying with that one is that the mind is a wonderful thing – and of course 'a terrible thing to waste' – but in a lot of

ways it's just a dumb computer that needs your heart and soul for proper direction.

"Your heart is almost always right. Your mind, only sometimes. There are so many smart people – me included – who are still too stupid sometimes to do the right thing. Point being, don't go around thinking intellect is the end-all, be-all."

He never heard Kaylie scream, but did feel something, an unexplained feeling of dread. He stopped talking, listened for a moment, then shrugged it off and continued.

"Of course, the worst kind of idiot is the one who only *thinks* he's smart. And, no, I'm not talking about myself." That got a laugh from the crowd, and Dobie took that as his cue to take a seat and sign autographs.

As soon as she got to the front of the line, Watson's agent (Dobie's groupie) was asking him out on a date, and he was seriously considering it. He was crazy about Kaylie but had to assume this meant she would not be sticking around. That's how it usually worked. Every time he thought he might want to get serious with a woman, she would dump him or something crazy would happen, and it would be over.

The woman now standing before him could be his backup plan. *All is fair in love and war*, he reminded himself.

Major Watson never asked this woman to date Pokorny. He only caught on now because she was wearing a wire. He had assumed Dobie would never be stupid enough to jeopardize his relationship with Kaylie. Watson never would have. His agent was improvising, going off-script, which left him thinking Dobie might be that charismatic leader Charonne feared, after all.

Dobie never noticed Watson, but did see that Blount was gone. And, there was just something about that creeper's disappearance that convinced Dobie to not ignore this odd feeling he was having. He needed to go check on Kaylie.

He stood up and told the audience, "I'll be right back."

~

Blount let the heavy door slam shut behind him to block out Kaylie's screams. JD pushed him out of the way to get to her first. He tried to cover her mouth, but she slipped out of his grasp and hopped back onto the bed. Her weight shifted from one foot to the other, almost dancing, as she stopped screaming to focus on finding a way past Blount and out the door.

Looking up at her in her sexiest bra and panties – chosen especially for Dobie – Blount stood mesmerized. Using this temporary stupor to her advantage, Kaylie bounced up then down into the bed, leveraging its springs to launch herself toward the door. She assumed she could get past the much older and slower Blount, but he was quicker and stronger than expected.

He pulled her into his arms and held tight. A lifetime of blue-collar jobs had kept him in decent shape. It wasn't until recently that he was forced to be a cook because no one else would hire him.

She was screaming again, so he grabbed her roughly from behind and placed a hand over her mouth. Clutching her, he looked over her shoulder and down upon her breasts, rising and falling with every frightened breath. Giggling like a fiend – this was a highlight of his miserably depraved life – he placed his left hand on her left breast while his right hand remained over her mouth until JD

could drag duct tape across it. JD did so, but only after forcing Blount's left hand down to her waist.

As JD went looking for the rest of her clothes, Blount laid his head on the back of Kaylie's neck and smiled blissfully. Tears came to her eyes and she screamed again but, because of the tape, nothing came out.

She threw an elbow with all her might into Blount's rib cage. He lurched in pain, but held tighter still.

She stomped down hard with her right barefoot heel onto his toes. His work boots kept it from hurting as much as it might have but it was enough to cause him to briefly let go of her.

JD came back around the bed with her pants and shirt in hand. He didn't bother with her shoes. Seeing the two of them struggling as they were, he shook his head, dropped her clothes onto the bed, and pulled a stun gun out of his back pocket.

Blount once again grabbed a hold of Kaylie. "Let me have her, JD," he begged. "Just once, and I can die a happy man!"

JD fired the stun gun. Its terminals hit Blount directly, but the electricity flowed through him and into Kaylie, knocking the legs out from under both of them.

"We're not doing this for you to get your jollies, old man!" JD yelled at Blount, who was now on the floor underneath Kaylie, probably enjoying that, too. "If you're not careful, you *will* die, but you won't be happy!"

With some difficulty, he got Kaylie's clothes back on her. Not out of modesty or good manners, he simply wanted to be less conspicuous as they escaped. He then wrapped her hands and ankles in duct tape, picked her up, and threw her over his shoulder.

With a smile, he said to Blount, "There's yer proof, bubba, all ya need for fixin' anythin' is duct tape!"

His bruised and slightly disoriented partner-in-crime got up and held the door as JD carried their prize catch into the hallway. Watching for witnesses, trying to be nonchalant – as if that was possible – they moved quickly toward the stairs at the far end of the hall.

The same cleaning woman, Doris, came out of a room two doors ahead of them. She saw them, realized Kaylie was the one who had been screaming, and immediately disappeared back inside the room, leaving her cart in the hallway. She was afraid she would be their next victim. The deadbolt could be heard locking from the inside.

JD thought about shooting her through the door but didn't want to draw any more attention than necessary. He just hoped she kept quiet. If not, he knew where to find her.

With Blount taking the lead, the kidnapppers took the stairs two at a time down to the propped-open back door. JD's black, late-model Chrysler 300 with blacked-out windows waited outside with the motor running.

Some New Moves

Dobie climbed the stairs on the opposite side of the building – he always took the stairs – and was walking down the hall toward their room when he heard the downstairs back door slam shut. He didn't think much of it until he spotted one of Kaylie's hairbands on the hallway floor by their room. *Could be anybody's hairband*, he tried to calm his nerves.

Opening their room and calling out but getting no answer, he checked every inch of their room. Nothing. He

was starting to think she finally came to her senses and dumped him. Then he saw her phone on the table on the far side of the room. If she was like most people, she never went anywhere without that thing. The clincher was when he tripped over her Keds, left behind.

With another feeling of dread, he realized she had been taken. He grabbed her phone and shoes, bolted out of the room, and ran down the back stairwell.

A small, mixed-breed, gray-haired dog was sniffing around JD's car. When it saw JD, its tail began to wag. The big man's response was to kick it in the side, sending it yelping away. Blount giggled at the dog's misfortune as he tried to get into the backseat with Kaylie. JD grabbed and threw him into the front passenger seat.

"What'd I tell you, Blount?! Don't touch her! You can have her mom."

"That old bag?" Blount complained.

"She's younger than you, dumb-ass! Play your cards right, and I'll stop banging her and let you have her all to yourself."

Kaylie's eyes went wide. JD saw her reaction in the rear-view mirror and cursed his own big mouth. He had just ruined the mother-daughter combo – though the daughter was unaware – he had been enjoying these past few months.

He liked to imagine himself as Claire's husband and Kaylie's father, during sex, and/or Claire's son and Kaylie's brother. He never mentioned it to Kaylie, of course. She wouldn't understand.

Watson and Audrey had spent the night in the same hotel. He was in the parking lot following through on his lie to

Audrey that he needed to get something out of his car. What he actually needed was to get away from *her* for a minute. She was a little too lovey-dovey lately, and joking about marriage, which he could not abide.

When he saw Dobie come around the corner to confront JD, he smiled and slipped inside his Escalade to watch in comfort whatever might unfold before him. He only wished he had popcorn.

Dobie came out the exit door, around the corner, and planted himself in front of JD's car. It occurred to him too late he should have brought his gun. He kept it in the glove box but was so *not* a "gun guy" he forgot he even had one.

All he had in his hand was her shoes. He couldn't see her in the backseat but assumed she was there or in the trunk.

"Hey!" he shouted.

JD was behind the wheel and about to step on the gas. He could have easily run Dobie over, and probably would have if it was anyone else. Instead, he shook his head, shifted back into Park, and got out to deal with the "old man."

"Time for a rematch!" he said with a smile as he got out. "And this time, you'll be the one on the floor!"

"Ground," Dobie reflexively corrected JD's choice of words. He had no idea why. It just came out.

JD sneered. "Whatever! I'm about to kick your ass, and you're correcting my grammar?"

Dobie shrugged.

"Nice shoes," JD gestured toward the Keds.

He watched a lot of professional wrestling and ultimate fighting, and seriously considered getting into one or both himself. Now was the perfect opportunity to try some of

those new moves he came up with. Shouldn't even break a sweat.

As Dobie set the shoes on the ground, it occurred to him JD smiled a lot, but it was never friendly. It was more like an animal baring its fangs. He then wondered if animals thought humans were baring their fangs when they smiled, but now was not the time for such thoughts.

He remembered he had Kaylie's phone in his pocket, and tried to think of a way to get it inside JD's car. Its screen was locked, but he hoped someone might use one of those tracking apps to track her down. It would be nice to use surveillance state technology to his advantage, for a change.

One flying spin move and punch from JD later, however, Dobie's clever idea was a moot point. It was his turn to hit the ground, unconscious.

JD laughed as he got back into his car. He was right. He hadn't even broken a sweat but did hurt his hand on Dobie's face.

"You still got it," Blount tried to high-five him as he climbed in, but JD only glared at him. High-fiving would have hurt too much.

He checked to make sure Kaylie was still in the back-seat. She was on her back, glaring at him, but still there. He was a bit surprised Blount wasn't back there on top of her.

He finally sped off toward Blount's trailer in the woods on the outskirts of town, burning rubber all the way out of the parking lot. It was not the best way to remain inconspicuous, but that was JD.

~

With JD gone and Dobie lying unconscious, Watson got out of his car and walked over to check on the latter. Looking down, smoking a cigarette, he was disappointed to find Dobie still breathing. Things would be a lot easier if he was dead. That way, when he rescued Kaylie from wherever JD and Blount were taking her, she would be so appreciative that she would happily let him replace Dobie as her new man. It was time to let his current girl Audrey go, but he liked to have a replacement lined up first.

Watson left Dobie lying there. Someone would find him and call for help... eventually. He did take the opportunity to replace the old tracking device planted in *Sabina's* wheel well. The old one had short-circuited, which had never happened before. Those things were rock solid.

Though Watson had not had any trouble following Dobie up to this point, the tracker did allow him to follow farther behind, letting Dobie get beyond visual contact so that Watson might not be so obvious. The same model tracking device had been planted in JD's vehicle, as well, installed the moment that Watson realized JD was Kaylie's ex-boyfriend. Its broadcast signal was now going to lead him to Blount and JD's hideout. There was nothing like a jealous ex-boyfriend to lead him to an ex-girlfriend, in this case Kaylie. Wherever she went, JD was sure to follow.

~

No one ever did come to help Dobie, though the same stray dog that JD had kicked walked up, sniffed him, and peed on his leg. Dobie was oblivious. When he came to, he was alone on the hard pavement. Loose dirt and bits of gravel stuck to his skin. JD and Kaylie were gone. It was a mystery how long he'd been passed out on the ground, but he then caught a whiff of urine.

It wasn't until he stood up and started walking toward *Sabina* – with his jaw throbbing and a rib or two feeling broken – that he felt something damp against his leg. Looking down – which, in itself hurt – he caught that distinctive smell again and realized he had been peed on. He assumed it was JD's doing.

He closed his eyes in exasperation, shook his head, picked up Kaylie's shoes and limped back to his room to change clothes. The back door was still propped open, so he went that way. He and the cleaning woman eyed each other warily as she came down the stairs while he went up. He would have preferred the elevator, but that would require a farther walk and he would rather not.

~

Dobie set about searching for Kaylie, completely forgetting the audience left hanging in the conference room. His first stop was the diner. Someone there might know something.

An older man and woman – presumably, the mom-and-pop owners – were working the day shifts of Blount's and Kaylie's respective jobs. They seemed genuinely shocked and saddened when told what happened to Kaylie, but not surprised to hear Blount was involved.

When Dobie asked if they had any idea where they might have taken her, the man suggested Blount's place. "Him and JD hang out there a lot..." he began.

"... partying with whores from the truck stop," the wife finished his sentence. "He never came in today."

"Where does that creep live?" Dobie asked as a shiver went down his back.

"I'll text you his address," the woman said.

"Can you just tell me? I don't have a phone."

When she gave him the usual surprised look, he forced a good-natured laugh. "I know. Who doesn't have a cell phone these days, right? Long story. Oh, wait, I've got Kaylie's. She left it behind."

The woman texted Blount's address to Kaylie's phone. Not knowing its password, Dobie would try to memorize the address in those few seconds that it was visible on the screen. He then hurried toward the door. On his way out, they assured him that Blount would be fired immediately.

He turned, gave a slight chuckle, and said, "He'll be dead soon, if I have anything to do with it."

"The town would owe you a debt of gratitude," said the man. "But, uh, you wouldn't happen to have experience as a fry cook, would you?"

"I do, actually," Dobie again chuckled, "but no thanks. On his way across the parking lot, he remembered the audience he left waiting. Returning to the now-mostly-empty room, he noticed quite a few of his books were missing. "What else can go wrong?" he wondered aloud.

Things had been going so well for him lately. Up until now. Too well, apparently, he told himself. This is the universe balancing things out.

His groupie was gone. To the few people still hanging around patiently awaiting his return – or simply slower to steal a book and run – he said, "The show is over, folks! Sorry. Something's come up. Take a book on your way out. They're apparently free today."

The stragglers all got up and rushed toward the front of the room to get their free book. Dobie doubted they cared about the book so much as it was just something free, and they didn't want to miss out. Their fellow audience members became their competition, and they pounced like hye-

nas on the carcass of Dobie's presentation to get their share of scraps.

Two male police officers, both white, one a decade older than the other, arrived just as the feeding frenzy began. Dobie assumed they were there to talk about Kaylie, but the frenzy stopped with the officers' arrival.

"It's okay," Dobie said, guessing everyone feared arrest. "Go ahead and take one. But just one!" To the officers, he said, "We can talk while I pack if that's okay. Pack what's left, anyway. I would file a police report about the stolen books but, you know, I just don't care at this point."

"Don't get any ideas about looking for Miss Daniels yourself," the older cop warned. "We'll do that. You just sit tight and let us do our jobs."

"I could say 'yes, sir' like a good little boy," said Dobie, "but I'm not a good little boy. I'm telling you right now, I am not going to sit tight while you do your jobs. You should appreciate the help, actually."

The man shook his head but didn't argue. "Stay out of the way at least?"

The younger one – watching Dobie closely, maintaining eye contact, looking for signs of deception – asked, "So, when did you last see Kaylie?"

The guy looked genuinely concerned for her welfare, and Dobie guessed he was one of many men in town with a crush on her. He made a face at this cop's suspicion but answered the question. "This morning, right before coming down here for my talk."

"Where have you been all morning?" the older one asked.

"I just said, right here, talking. Ask anyone who attended. While you're at it, ask if they plan to pay for the books they stole."

"Did you give your room key to anyone?" the older cop ignored Dobie's request.

"Why would I do that!?"

"Just answer the question, sir," said the younger one.

"No!" Dobie said angrily.

"No, you didn't give your key to anyone? Or, no, you won't answer the question? I've heard about your kind – 'sovereign citizens' you call yourselves – not cooperating with the police."

Dobie scoffed in disbelief. "I didn't give my key to anyone!" he shouted at them. The younger cop put his hand on his gun, so Dobie softened his tone. "Sorry, but I tend to shout when under duress." He wanted to say "When dealing with idiots," but he controlled himself.

He had no faith in these two finding Kaylie but reminded himself they were only trying to help. He had to play nice. *Be good!*

Once the questioning was finished, Dobie expected one of them to give him a business card. When they didn't, he asked for one. When the older cop asked for his number in return, Dobie had to admit to not owning a cell phone. They gave him the usual look.

"Well then," the younger cop wanted to know, "how are you gonna call us if you ain't got a phone?"

Dobie closed his eyes and turned away before saying something he regretted. Turning back, he said, "I'll use a pay phone or the hotel phone or borrow someone else's phone! Hey, actually, I've got her phone," he remembered. "She left it behind, but I don't know the password."

"We'll need that," the older cop spoke immediately, and held out his hand. "For evidence."

Dobie was not comfortable giving it up, though he could not think of a good reason other than Kaylie's privacy. "No, I think I'd better hang onto it."

"There has been a kidnapping, sir," the older one barked at him, "and that phone is evidence! You need to hand it over, right now!"

The younger one took a step back and pulled his gun on Dobie.

"Okay, okay!" Dobie was surprised by this over-reaction, but relented and gave it up.

Both cops gave him a dirty look before walking away, shaking their heads and muttering to each other.

The Barn

At Blount's house, JD drove too fast down the long, gravel driveway while Blount pressed imaginary brakes until they came skidding to a stop in front of the barn. They chose Blount's place as their hideout because the sound of tires coming down the gravel driveway made it unlikely anyone might sneak up on them.

JD pulled Kaylie out of the back seat, still bound and gagged and angrier than he had ever seen her. He hoisted her onto his shoulder and moved quickly toward the dilapidated old barn twenty yards to the right of Blount's double-wide. It reminded him of his high school football days, recovering a fumble and running for a touchdown.

Seeing the large, sliding barn door padlocked, JD snapped, "Shit, Blount, dumb-ass, it's still locked!"

"Hold yer horses, bubba," Blount smiled as he pulled out his keys. He was on his home turf now and feeling more assertive. Opening the padlock slowly, just to irritate JD, he said, "We got time."

Once inside the barn, JD set Kaylie down upon the torn-up, brown leather couch that was up against a stack of old, gray hay bales. "Don't bother trying to run," he warned as he untied her feet. "We'll just chase you down. I might even let Blount here have you, after all."

This brought a smile to Blount's face, though JD had no intention of letting that happen. He was just putting the fear of God into her. And, not wanting to hear what she had to say, he left the duct tape on her mouth. Hands, too. He knew from experience the girl could pack a serious punch.

She shouted at him through the gag, but he ignored her, lit a cigarette to help him think, and tried to figure out his next move. He was realizing this abduction had not been planned as thoroughly as it should have been.

When his phone rang, he dug it out of his front pocket. Checking to see who it was, he answered, "Yeah?"

"Is that how you talk to me now?" Kaylie's mom, Claire, the architect of all this, asked on the other end. "How is it going? You didn't hurt her, did you?"

"No. Still in the middle of it," he hoped he was being cryptic enough so Kaylie wouldn't know what he was talking about.

He wasn't, and she could guess.

"What do you need?" he asked, nodded a few times, listening and taking orders. "Alright, alright."

Hanging up, he announced to the room, "I got something I gotta do. Blount, you stay with Kaylie. I'll be right back."

When he caught the look Blount was giving her, though, he stopped, turned and put both hands on the much smaller man's shoulders. "Blount, I'm only gonna say this once: You touch Kaylie while I'm gone, you die. Got that? If I get back and she says you did *anything* to her – anything

at all – you're dead! *Comprendé?*" He mangled the Spanish word.

"Got it, boss!" Blount reverted to the prisoner's habit of referring to everyone as "boss."

JD then leaned in and whispered, "Remember, we're only using her..." He stopped when he saw Kaylie listening in. She had sneaky-good hearing. Could read lips, too. So, he just stopped talking altogether.

Kaylie could not hear what JD whispered, but did take comfort in his threat to Blount. It provided a path to ridding herself of The Boob Whisperer once and for all. She could simply say Blount touched her and – no questions asked – JD would beat him severely if not kill him. It would not be out of chivalry, she knew that much.

He simply could not abide anyone else touching what he considered to be *his* property. That's all she was to him, like a prize won at the carnival.

She was not the type to knowingly get anyone hurt. Normally. But, if push came to shove, she could easily see herself pushing Blount off the nearest cliff.

"Hey," she tried to shout as JD walked away. "Ungag me!"

JD did not understand a word of it but got the gist. Turning around, he removed the duct tape from her mouth. A chill went down her back as he pulled it off. He had done this before.

"Need something to drink?" he asked, feigning good manners.

She wasn't falling for it but was so desperate for a Coke, water, anything to soothe her parched throat, she said, "Yes!"

The barn had not been a proper barn in years. Upon inheriting the property – after his parents died under questionable circumstances – Blount converted it into a party room complete with kitchenette along a side wall. There were plastic utensils, cups, and paper plates on the shelves above the sink. A portable stove sat to the right of that. Two feet away along the front wall sat a small refrigerator. The focus of the room was the big-screen television.

Despite JD's long-standing friendship with Blount, Kaylie had never set foot on the latter's property before. She always made an excuse to leave whenever Blount tried to tag along. She would not have expected him to afford such a large, new TV, then realized it was most likely stolen.

JD went to the fridge and pulled out a two-liter bottle of SunDrop. Unless Blount had bought a new one, he knew this was spiked with party drugs meant to take advantage of anyone unwary enough to enter their lair.

He filled a cup for Kaylie and handed it to her. "Here you go."

"You didn't put anything in it, did you?"

"You saw me," he feigned innocence. "I just now poured it straight from the bottle!"

She was incredibly thirsty, but suspicious. "You drink first."

He scoffed, said, "I will!" and took a small sip.

"Swallow it!"

"I'm not..." he shook his head, but did as he was told.

Blount was embarrassed to see JD controlled like this, but JD was the same way with Kaylie's mom, Claire. Mom had a way of telling him what to do. He would do it and like it, but never told anyone, of course.

Finally satisfied, Kaylie took a sip and gave it a second to make sure it tasted right. It tasted fine, and she gulped down the rest.

Almost immediately, JD then spit his onto the floor between them. She looked down, appalled. "How did you... I saw you swallow!"

"Fooled ya!" he howled with laughter:

Blount cackled. His hero had redeemed himself.

"I can swallow while keeping what's in my mouth, in my mouth!"

"Genius!" said Blount, while JD nodded and smiled at his obsequious friend.

Kaylie shook her head, beyond angry at herself for being outmaneuvered by idiots.

JD wanted the drugs to keep her docile until it was over. He never meant to treat her like one of his whores from the truck stop but did hope the drugs made her pliable and, most importantly, left her no memory of what happened.

He actually believed they might get back together once this Dobie dude was frightened off, and was counting on her having no recollection. It was a longshot, he knew, but a dumb-ass can dream.

~

Approaching from the west, Dobie spotted JD's car a couple hundred yards ahead as it pulled out of Blount's driveway as he went on his mysterious errand. With JD now directly ahead of him, Dobie continued past the driveway, pretending to be just another car on the road going who-knows-where. There was a dip and turn in the road ahead that Dobie hoped might work in his favor.

As per her instructions, JD was on his way to Claire's house. He was also keeping an eye in his rear-view mirror.

He always made a point of knowing who drove what in the area, so when Dobie's car, unfamiliar to him, failed to reappear after that dip and turn, he guessed what had happened. He scoffed, shook his head, and turned back toward Blount's.

Dobie drove slowly down Blount's driveway – keeping his speed down so the sound of his tires on the gravel would not give him away – all the while looking for a place he might turn around and escape, should that be necessary. He parked pointed toward the road, allowing for a quick exit. Closing its door quietly as he got out, he crept toward the trailer, looking for a window to peek through. He had no idea how ironic it was for someone to be peeping into Blount's windows instead of the other way around.

A man's angry voice, not directed at him, came from inside the barn. He turned and headed that way. It might have been Blount, but it was hard to say. He had never heard the man say anything other than "order up" back at the diner.

He checked both sides of the barn for another way in besides its front entrance. He would have checked the far side of the barn, too, but thick woods, overgrown brush, and rusted-out farm equipment made that too slow-going. It would have to be the front door, which had been left open.

It occurred to him, again too late, he should have brought his gun from the car. And, he kicked himself for such continued stupidity.

The man's voice was louder now. "You're gonna enjoy this, honey. Just you wait!"

There was no time for Dobie to get his gun, so he sneaked into the barn. Blount looked up, hearing something. Not immediately seeing anyone, he returned his at-

tention to Kaylie. He was not going to be distracted from this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity sitting hog-tied before him.

The barn had a small foyer area in front of Blount's make-shift man cave. The two areas were separated by a wall with an open doorway large enough for a tractor. Behind this, Kaylie sat on the torn-up old couch.

Dobie could not see her, but found an empty horse stall on the left, diagonal and opposite from the refrigerator in which to hide. He was trying to find a crack or gap to peek through when he heard Kaylie speak, and his heart leaped into his throat.

"Didn't you hear JD?!" she slurred her speech. "He's going to *kill* you!"

Dobie guessed she had been drugged.

"He said we're only using you," Blount corrected her with a giggle. "This is me using you! Whatever he does to me, it'll be worth it."

He said that last part with a finality that convinced her he was completely serious.

"At least I'll go out with bang!" He laughed uproariously at his own joke and unzipped his pants.

That's when Dobie emerged from the shadows. He'd stayed hidden for fear that others were lurking nearby, but now had to act, not matter how outnumbered he was.

"Hey!" he shouted, and Blount turned to look. Seeing Dobie, he simply scoffed.

JD then entered the barn. Squeezing his large frame through the door, gun in hand, he saw Dobie a few feet ahead of him. A look of surprise crossed his face, and he could have easily shot him, but that was no longer his priority. Blount had not spotted him, and JD wanted to sneak

up on him. He shushed Dobie with a smile and finger to his lips.

He would shoot Dobie next.

Kaylie had used the distraction to wriggle off the couch and across the hay bales toward the back of the barn, away from Blount. With drool literally dripping from his mouth, Blount ignored Dobie to focus on his beautiful half-naked prey in front of him, getting away.

When he finally saw JD, he didn't say a thing. He knew he was a dead man. There was time for just one last giggle.

JD took an extra step forward to keep Kaylie out of the line of fire, and shot Blount three times. Twice in the side, and once through the left ear into his brain.

The ogre was dead.

Still unable to scream – stunned by what had just transpired in front of her – Kaylie stared in shock at JD while trying to find her breath.

He ignored her as he stood over Blount's body. "There you go, Blount! You died a happy man! Well, *almost* happy, dumb-ass." And he gave a sickening laugh.

Taking the opportunity to escape, Dobie bolted out of the barn, jumped into *Sabina* and started her up. JD smiled triumphantly and fired a wayward shot at him.

Kaylie, now sitting up and leaning on one arm on the hay bale, covered her ears at the sound of gunfire. She could not believe Dobie had abandoned her.

Dobie was not going anywhere. He reached into the glove box and pulled out his Astra A70 9mm semi-automatic. It had been years since he last fired it. Even then, it was just for target practice. He hoped he remembered how to use it. He hoped it still worked. Semi-automatics tend to jam.

Seeing that it was not loaded, he cursed himself for the hundredth time and set about loading the damned thing. He had the gun in one hand and its clip in the other when Major Watson appeared out of nowhere at his passenger window.

Startled, Dobie pointed the gun at him, but Watson only smirked and gestured for him to roll the window down. At this point, Watson was only slightly familiar from Dobie's earlier talk. Still, he had no idea what the man was doing there.

Hopefully, he's not with Blount or JD!

As old as *Sabina* was, she did at least have power windows, not the old hand-crank type most cars her age had. Dobie lowered the front passenger window about a third of the way down.

Watson laughed and spoke softly, fully aware that somebody – he didn't know who shot who – was armed and still inside the barn. "Even if it was loaded, it'd be hard to shoot me with the safety on."

"Who are you?" Dobie was confused. "What are you doing here?"

"Keep your voice down," Watson ignored the questions. "Give me that!" he said while grabbing the gun and clip out of Dobie's hands. "I've got this. This is what I do. You stay in the car while I do my thing."

Well, now I'm screwed, Dobie thought. Aloud, he said, "That's basically what the cops told me, but here I am, and where are they?"

Hoping Watson was one of the good guys, Dobie left *Sabina* running, climbed out, and said, "Kaylie's still in there! I'm coming with you!"

"To do what," Watson shook his head, "get you and her both killed? Just stay here!"

When Dobie followed after him, anyway, Watson turned back, shook his head and asked, "Do you at least know how to use this thing?"

Dobie nodded. Watson made sure it was loaded and cocked before handing it back to him with the barrel pointed downward. "Alright," he whispered, "I guess a little back-up never hurts. Just don't shoot me in the ass! Who am I dealing with in there, anyway? Blount or JD?"

"JD."

Watson nodded. Standing to the side of the open barn door, he pointed and said, "I'm going in. You stay here and shoot anyone that comes out before me or the girl. Oh, and," he grinned, "release the safety first."

He was enjoying himself. He hadn't seen live-fire action in years.

Seconds after he slipped into the barn, several shots were fired. A bullet whizzed past Dobie's head, followed by dead silence.

He stood in front of the barn, ready for action, fairly sure this would be his last day on Earth. He was not the action hero type, and knew it. He didn't dare guess who might be coming out.

Watching the door, with his gun locked and loaded, he swallowed hard twice and whispered to himself, "Be good! Don't miss!"

Kaylie stuck her head out and looked around. Dobie's heart leaped with joy, and a huge smile came to his face as he moved toward her. Her eyes softened at the sight of him, but she was not smiling. Just a couple feet away from her, he hesitated a second to make sure she was coming out alone.

She was. He smiled again, relieved that neither of them would be meeting their Maker that day, after all.

He let the gun drop to the ground. Unfortunately, it was still cocked, and both of them ducked for cover when it went off.

Even Watson, battle-hardened veteran that he was, flinched as he came out of the barn a few paces behind her.

The stray bullet put a hole in Blount's trailer but he was no longer around to complain about it. Looking over there, Dobie noticed it was not the trailer's first bullet hole.

Kaylie tried to rush into Dobie's arms, but her legs refused to work. He ran up and she fell into his arms, clinging to him, crying with relief.

Watson holstered his weapon and limped toward them. Seeing the blood on his shirt, Dobie asked, "You alright?"

"Flesh wound," Watson grimaced and shook his head.

Dobie smiled at the tough guy act but said nothing.

County sheriffs arrived after the crisis was over and Dobie had already escorted Kaylie back to *Sabina*. He shook his head at their timing as the three squad cars sped down the long driveway, in full sirens and lights, flinging gravel and stirring up dust along the way. He would not have expected so many deputies to be available, let alone showing up, in such a low-population area. *Must be a slow day.*

Dobie and Kaylie were inside his car, with the engine off, by the time they were interrogated. The deputies ordered them out of the car, but Dobie insisted that Kaylie needed to remain sitting.

"You can interrogate us all you want," he said, "while we sit in the car. Or, not at all." After what they had been through, he was feeling like a bad ass. A little bit like Obi Wan Kenobi, the *Star Wars* character who, through the power of suggestion, convinced the storm troopers to leave him alone.

Call me Dobie Wan! he thought, but was in no mood for his own stupid jokes. With Blount's maniacal laughter still fresh in his mind, he didn't want to do anything – not even laugh – if it reminded him of that guy.

He and Kaylie each had their own deputy at their respective windows, asking questions and taking notes. Dobie was glad they were not the same cops he spoke with at the hotel, but these guys were not messing around. They had positioned one of their cars to block *Sabina* in. He and Kaylie weren't going anywhere until the cops were finished with them.

Watson had been pulled aside to be interviewed separately. He seemed to be having a hard time convincing them he was the good guy – hero, even – in all of this.

"The bad guy," he explained with some aggravation, "is dead on the floor of the barn!"

The officer tasked with interrogating Kaylie soon realized she was too traumatized to be properly interrogated. All he asked was "who did this?" and "where does it hurt?"

"Nothing hurts!" she shouted at him, or thought she shouted. "JD and Blount did this! Leave me alone and go find them!"

"I'm sorry," the cop persisted. "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

She closed her eyes – this guy was not listening – and turned toward Dobie, also being questioned.

"So, tell me what happened," Dobie's interrogator asked.

"JD and Blount kidnapped Kaylie back at the hotel," he replied, more breathless than expected. He had to clear his throat and swallow a couple of times. Situations like this tended to focus a person. Not Dobie. He wondered – if only briefly – how and why in the human evolutionary path

it was deemed necessary for a person to swallow hard like he did now and earlier.

Dismissing his own goofy thought, he continued, "They brought her here, and I followed them. What the hell took *you* so long?"

The man only glared at him.

"Anyway, I found Kaylie with Blount, who was..." he stopped himself. "Then, JD came out of nowhere and shot him."

"And where were you?"

"I was in the barn, hiding, until I came out and tried to stop it. That's when JD showed up and shot Blount. Then I, uh, ran out..." He didn't like how his own retelling made him sound like a sniveling coward, hiding and running out. "... to get my gun. I ran out to get my gun from the car!"

"Okay, where is that gun now?"

Dobie looked around. "I, uh, I don't know. I guess I dropped it."

The cop shook his head and made notes on his notepad.

"That's when that guy," Dobie pointed in Watson's direction, "showed up and said he'd handle it. He seemed like he knew what he was doing, so I let him. Then I heard several shots and..."

"How many is 'several?'"

"Uh, three, I guess. Bam, bam, bam! Then I waited outside the barn door. That's when Kaylie came out, then that guy. Who is he, anyway? I know Blount is dead – he *is* dead, right? – but never saw JD again. Is he dead, too?"

"Okay," the officer did not answer any of Dobie's questions, "I'll need you down at the station until we get this all sorted out. We'll take her to the hospital."

He instructed his partner to put Kaylie in the backseat of his patrol car. When she started screaming and wailing and fighting him off – saying she was not getting into anyone’s backseat without Dobie – they instructed Dobie to take her and follow them for a police escort to the hospital.

"Until then, everyone needs to just *stay put!*"

Dobie noticed the problems Watson was having. The other deputies noticed, too, and quickly came to the aid of the first. Both reached for their guns as they approached.

"This can't be good," Dobie mumbled as he opened his door. To Kaylie, he said, "I'll be right back. Just wanna see what's going on with our new best friend over there. I don't even know his name. Do you?"

Kaylie did not respond.

"He saved our lives, and saved you from... but I have no idea who he is. And these cops think he's guilty."

Kaylie never said a word, only stared into space. She was numb. Dobie knew the police were right, she needed to be checked out as soon as possible, but he couldn't leave without them, and they weren't leaving yet, so he checked on their mysterious savior, Watson.

Heading in that direction, Dobie spotted his own gun on the ground. He left it where it lay. He did not want to be shot while picking it up by one of these trigger-happy cops.

"So, what seems to be the problem, officers?" he asked as he approached.

"None of your concern, sir," said one of them. "Official business. Please remove yourself... Has he been cleared to leave?"

"Negative," said another. "He was told to *stay put*. Please, sir, get back to your car and wait."

Dobie scoffed. "This man saved my life," he pointed at Watson, "and saved Kaylie from a fate worse than death! I'm not gonna stand by while you treat him like a criminal. He has rights. He's a decorated Army veteran!"

"Air Force, Special Ops," Watson corrected him with a smile. "The Army is for wusses."

"Air Force veteran!" Dobie corrected himself. "He's earned the benefit of the doubt!"

"And we thanked him for his service," another officer replied, "...even if it was only in the Air Force." Everyone laughed, including Watson. "But, sir, please, you need to return to your vehicle until we're ready to go, so..." He made a run-along motion with his hand.

"Don't worry about me, my brother," Watson said, shaking his head. "These fellas just can't grasp the concept that a Black man might actually be the good guy. Either way, I've got friends in high places. I might spend a few hours in jail, but that ain't no thang."

"You sure?" Dobie asked. "Anyone I should call?"

Watson shook his head and spit something disagreeable out of his mouth.

Dobie winced and continued, "Well, alright, then. Oh, but, hey, while I've got you... why have you been following me?"

"Just doing my job."

"Your job?" Dobie frowned. "Who *are* you?"

"Major Randall Watson, retired, at your service," he saluted and released. "Your old boss and mine, Colonel Charonne, asked me to keep an eye on you. Make sure you didn't turn into some sort of charismatic leader or what-not."

The rest be found at Amazon, SmashWords, Apple, etc. via [William Arthur Holmes.com](http://WilliamArthurHolmes.com).

About William Arthur Holmes

Originally from Sacramento, California, I have been calling Tennessee home for almost half my life now. I am married, with a young daughter, an old cat, an even older pug, and now a Boston terrier. My available titles are *Temporary Insanity*, *Lottery President*, *Operation Detour*, *Last Train Out*, *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo*, and *The Lazy Pug Cafe*. They can all be found at Amazon, SmashWords, Apple, etc. via [William Arthur Holmes.com](http://WilliamArthurHolmes.com).

