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## Dead Dad Project

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Dead Dad Project

Dead Dad Project

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Adrian McBride  
University of Southern California  
Bachelor of Arts in American Literature, 2002

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **ABSTRACT**

A creative work of fiction centered around two friends. The work takes place during their senior year of high school, and investigates how their friendship is changed during the course of that year.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **DEDICATION**

This edition of Dead Dad Project is dedicated to my mother, Patricia Hunter, and my father, Kevin McBride.

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**AUGUST**



## Shaun (Chapter 1)

That summer, Shaun ran the golf course in the morning, trying to complete the front nine before hearing the metallic ping of the day's first foursome teeing off. He preferred running in the fall, though. When it was cool enough for dew to form and dampen the mesh of his shoes at the run's start but still warm enough that they dried by the end. Those mornings, however, were still a month away, and now Shaun settled for a facsimile of that sensation: too much water from the sprinkler system soaking through to his socks and keeping his feet wet the length of the run.

Shaun looked at his watch to discover that he was thirty seconds behind his pace time. The humidity, though, discouraged him from speeding up. He could add an extra five holes to the run at the end and tell Coach Henderson that he had decided to work on distance instead of speed. Henderson wouldn't believe him, of course, but it was better than coming in five or six minutes behind the time coach expected. The extra distance making the sigh of displeasure when they were to meet on Saturday less hostile.

Shaun rounded the twelfth hole and headed to the thirteenth, a 200-yard par-three onto a peninsula green. He hated playing it — he couldn't generate enough spin with his five-iron to get the ball to check-up — but jogging was different. He ran as close to the water's edge as possible, stepping on whatever debris was nearby to disturb the geese, ducks, and pelicans. If that didn't work and he had enough breath, he would bark, hiss, grunt — whatever was needed. This was where his strength faded and watching the birds fly-off like they had heard a shotgun's report energized him.

This morning, however, there was only a single bird in the water and none in the trees or nesting by the side of the pond. Shaun stopped running and instead jogged in place, telling himself that he needed to measure his heart rate and thus ensuring the additional holes at the end

and the danger of balls hooking or slicing into him as he ran aside the fairways. The bird flapped its wings, alighted on a log, and started to peck at it. He stepped closer to the shoreline, just past the red stakes that separated it from the green's fringe. Mud sucked at the soles. The log was oddly formed and appeared waterlogged, staying barely above the pond's surface as the bird feasted on insects that had migrated there to keep from drowning. Boughs extended out from the trunk, but there weren't any twigs or leaves.

Shaun dug a yellow range ball from the mud and threw it toward the log. It hit, but there was no sound or ricochet. Instead, the ball appeared to sink into the bark before rolling off into the water. The wind picked up and Shaun smelled spoiled beef, sulfur, and methane. He picked up another ball and threw it toward the moss the bird had curled in its talons into. This time there was a hollow echo and the ball bounced high before splashing into the pond. The bird flew off, and Shaun saw that a brown sports coat and beige pants covered the branches. He sprinted back toward the clubhouse, hearing the first player of the day tee off. He wondered why he or she had chosen to play an iron even though the first hole was a long, straight par-four.

It felt as though he waited for the police longer than he had run that morning, and there was no urgency when the pair stepped into the clubhouse.

"Morning, Shaun," the older officer said then turned to the teenager at the cash registrar. "Kaelen."

"Jerome," Kaelen said, not looking up from filling zip-lock bags with used golf balls.

The two officers sat across from Shaun at one of the three wire-mesh tables that dotted the clubhouse. In front of him was a can of Fresca and a half-eaten breakfast burrito wrapped in aluminum foil. "You wanna show me the body you think you found?" Jerome asked.

"Floating right in the pond and can't be missed," Shaun said. "I hit his head with a golf ball,

though. That alright?”

“I’m guessing the water did the harm, not you.”

“Thirteenth hole, northeast side of the green.”

“Kaelen, I’m gonna need a cart so we can check this out quickly. You’re also gonna want to call Sue-Ann and tell her you may need to shut-down the course for the morning at least. If it is a body, that is.”

“You don’t believe me?” Shaun asked.

“Just don’t want to jump to conclusions, is all,” Jerome said. “Let’s go.”

Kaelen handed them a key. “Any cart.”

“Officer Dealey here’s gonna stay with you. If there is a body, I’m gonna radio up and you need to blow the siren to get everybody off the course. Got it?”

“Sue-Ann’s not going to be happy with that.”

“Curse of having 150 acres of land that gets abandoned when the sun goes down.”

The sweat-soaked v on his t-shirt stuck to his chest again almost as soon as they were outside.

“I wish they’d let us wear shorts,” Jerome said. “The cops biking around get to.”

“Yeah,” Shaun said and sat on the passenger side of the first cart he saw.

“Just as good as any,” Jerome said. He stayed on the cart-path until the thirteenth hole, then drove along the edge of the pond and rough towards the green. The grass was still wet, and the cart left a trail of muddied, pressed grass behind it.

“Stay off the green, or Sue-Ann will throw you in there with him,” Shaun said.

Jerome stopped the cart and the two stepped out. Shaun pointed to the body, and Jerome radioed to the clubhouse. Weather sirens went off a moment later. Jerome returned to the cart

and pulled out a notebook. “Let’s talk for a few minutes while we wait for everyone to arrive.”

“It was early,” Shaun said. “Still lots of shadows. I really thought it was a log until the bird flew off.”

“Logs are more common in ponds than bodies,” Jerome said.

“I wouldn’t have tossed balls at it otherwise.”

“We’ll keep that between us. What else do you remember?” Shaun repeated the specifics, how usually there were birds nesting along the shore, but not this morning and that made him stop; thinking the hair was moss and the bird was eating bugs; how it wasn’t until the wind blew in that he smelled anything. Jerome made notes and then asked more questions, approaching the same details but from different angles. When the medical examiner arrived, Jerome stepped from the cart. “You can head home,” he said. “I’ll be in touch if I need anything else.”

The clubhouse door was locked, and Shaun found Kaelen sitting on a golf cart near the course’s front entrance. A coke can was in a cup holder, and there was a cooler bag on the seat next to him. Shaun took a Fresca from it.

“Only two more in there for you,” Kaelen said.

“This one’ll do,” Shaun said. “Henderson hates soda as is, and since I didn’t finish my run.”

“You found a fucking body, decent excuse.”

“He’ll just ask me why I didn’t go at dusk to make up the time.”

“How’d Jerome treat you?”

“Fine,” Shaun said. He untied his shoes, took off his socks, and hung his legs over the cart’s front. He stretched his calves by moving his feet away and then towards his shin. “He seems okay.”

“Don’t buy it; he’s a douche.”

“He said he would call if he needed more from me.”

“If my mom’s any indication, you’ll be waiting on that for a while.”

Shaun crushed the can and threw it towards the garbage can. It hit midway up and bounced onto the gravel. “Fuck,” he said. “I’ll pick it up before I leave.”

“Can I get a lift?”

“Sure.” A hatchback pulled in, and Kaelen walked toward the car with his hand outstretched. Shaun watched him, wondering why he had thought it a good idea to throw a golf ball at a corpse. Shit like that caused hauntings. Now, anytime he sliced off that tee and into the water, he was certain he’d hear the hollow echo instead of a splash. Would he even be able to hit off that tee ever again?

Kaelen returned with a lit cigarette and a couple of beers. “Told them they get a free cart next weekend,” he said and tossed one to Shaun.

“It isn’t even nine.”

“And I get the rest of the day off as soon as Sue-Ann gets here. She has no idea what time the cops are gonna let her re-open, and doesn’t want to pay me to sit on my ass.”

“How’s that different than usual?”

“You’ll recover from this yet,” he said, smiling. “Cheers.” He opened Shaun’s can before his own. “Don’t let it go to waste.”

“Are you fucking stupid?” a woman called from across parking lot. Sue-Ann was walking past the eighteenth green. Her voice was hoarse as if she had spent the last hour smoking and yelling.

“Drink quick if you want it,” Kaelen said, then chugged the remainder of his beer. Panicked, Shaun copied him. The beer was watery, but cold. He took a key from his pocket and jammed a

hole in the can's side to speed the process. She was next to the cart by the time he finished.

"You jack-asses want me to lose my license?" she asked. "I got," she looked up and down the parking lot, "three cop cars and a corpse van and you two knuckle-heads are out here chugging beers."

"Hi Sue-Ann," Shaun said. She was wearing running shorts rather than the usual slacks, and he was surprised at how tan her legs were. He had assumed she wore pants everywhere.

"You're excused; you're traumatized." She winked at him. She had a curious way of flashing between being plain and attractive depending on the angle and time-of-day. She was attractive now, but that might have been the beer kicking in.

"The cops are down at the pond," Kaelen said. "And you don't sell this brand."

"Give me the cans," she said. She walked them to the trash, bending down to pick up the Fresca can as well. Shaun stared. Kaelen dropped ice from the cooler bag down the back of his shirt.

"You gonna give me a ride?"

Shaun nodded, and grabbed another Fresca from the bag. He unlocked the maroon station wagon's hatch and put on flip-flops for the drive back. His mother has passed it down to him when he got his license two years ago, and despite steaming all the wagon's upholstery, it still reeked of her menthol cigarettes. Because of this, Kaelen had granted himself tacit permission to smoke in it. Shaun only objected when Kaelen forgot to roll down the window. He idled while waiting for Sue-Ann to finish yelling at Kaelen, and finished the soda. He couldn't drink soda anymore that day, but he was worried about the smell of beer on his breath. He took a can of chew and tapped it down with a wrist-flick. He was unscrewing the lid to a water-bottle half-full with brown spit when Kaelen opened the door. He already had another cigarette lit.

“She’s really pissed. Let’s get out of here.”

He backed out, more cautious than usual, concerned about being pulled over. They sat quiet for a few minutes, except for the periodic deep inhale of a cigarette or spitting of tobacco.

“Wonder if it was anyone we know,” Kaelen said.

“It was a guy, fat, but that could’ve been from the water. Guess’ll just have to watch the news tonight to find out.”

“Fuck that,” Kaelen said. “I’m going out with Alana tonight. Things go well, I’ll be sneaking home at two.

“She was with Derek for six months and never touched his dick; doubt she’s gonna be gunning for yours from the jump.”

Shaun heard Kaelen rustle with his zipper. He glanced over, and Kaelen’s penis was lying limp against the front of his jeans. “Fucking disgusting,” Shaun said.

“Certainly more desirable than Sue-Ann’s broad ass. You can’t see it, but get a microscope and you’ll see lipstick in shades from pink to black for that one emo girl. Alana doesn’t stand a chance.” Kaelen tucked it back inside his pants. “Don’t want you to get any ideas.”

“Fuck you,” Shaun said.

“Don’t think I don’t remember. The handy you gave me was the best one yet. The girls are just so scared of it, like come is acid that’ll burn through their hands. You were more disappointed than relieved when I stopped flowing.”

“Well, you gave shit head.”

“I was young, didn’t know any better. I regret that, I really do, to think if it was better we’d still be getting each other off at sleepovers.”

“Probably not,” Shaun said. “It had more to do with you having a dick than with the quality

of it all if you want the truth.”

“Hold biology against me,” Kaelen said. Shaun felt Kaelen’s hand trawl up his leg and knocked it away. That was how it had started in sixth grade, then seventh, then eight. It had taken him three years to learn that Kaelen didn’t bluff, and he still felt guilt for not warning the other students at the school. He pulled into Kaelen’s driveway.

“You wanna come inside,” Kaelen asked. “Tell me about the body, let me work my magic as a therapist? Comfort you.”

“Not much to tell,” Shaun said. Despite his outward glibness, Kaelen had always been sincere, even as Shaun had grown more apprehensive about the physical elements of their friendship. He didn’t understand how he could reject Kaelen for three years, yet feel more awkward about the flirtation than Kaelen. It was unnerving, having to reject someone’s advances constantly. Maybe it was more the sincerity than the flirting that made it difficult. They talked about homework, family, the gradually closer future of college and beyond, but Shaun wondered if it was all play-acting on his part. He felt like he was the weaker partner in a two-man scramble, trying to play decent enough so that he could believe that he had something to contribute beyond the random shot where he hit flush or the correct read on the putting green. Graduation was the eighteenth hole, and that was still a school year away.



## **Kaelen (Chapter 2)**

He was still angry from being yelled at, and he felt his back tense up when he saw the long lawn in front of the house. He had told Conner to mow on Monday and it was Saturday. He knew he'd do it and grew angrier, his jaw stiffening now. When stressed, he ground his teeth in his sleep. Now his brother made him that aggravated during the day. Kaelen had no idea what Conner did all day, every day in the summer, but he knew he was at the golf course working in the morning and practicing from late afternoon until the buzz of the driving range lights stopped and Sue-Ann drove him home. And back at home, it always seemed like the same dishes lay unwashed in the sink and the same wet laundry sat in the washer. He worked; their mom worked; Conner was the useless one of the three.

Kaelen spied the wound hose, took a bucket from the garage, and filled it with water. Then he was standing over his brother's bed watching the thirteen year old sleeping. Fuck him, Kaelen thought. I'm up. That was the first time he'd seen Conner get out of bed that fast. His brother stood near the wall on the opposite side of the bed, his blond hair sticking over his eyes and against his neck. He was shaking, and Kaelen couldn't tell if he was already crying or if was only the water. "You had a fucking week," he said. "Get breakfast then clean up the kitchen and front rooms. I'll do the lawn."

"You can't tell me what to do," Conner said. He had said that all summer, but things still got done. Slowly, half-assed, but they got done.

"Make it so I don't have to," he said.

He trimmed the lawn against the fence first then the lawn that bordered what had been the front garden. It was grown over with weeds and shrubs. Kaelen gave less of a fuck about the flowers then Conner did about his bedroom. If mom was worried about it, she could weed and

plant. He did care about the lawn though, and he cut it short, in a criss-crossing pattern like he had done for a couple years when he first started volunteering, as they had to classify it since he was so young, at the course. It was the pro's idea to move him into the clubhouse, so he'd have more energy to practice after his shift, and he missed the riding mower; idling fifteen yards away watching as someone with shiny clubs and the body control of a palsy patient tried to hit a straight drive. He liked watching, and knowing they knew he was watching and judging them. He finished mowing the front and back lawns, lit a cigarette, and sat on the porch. It'd been an hour, enough time for Conner to have swallowed his pride and started on the kitchen. Conner had swallowed so much pride that summer that it was surprising he wasn't fatter than he was.

As expected, Conner was at the sink. "I'm gonna tell mom you smoke," he said.

"I'm gonna tell her you jerk off to tranny porn." Kaelen took off his shirt and shorts and put them in the washer. He threw a few other things in there as well and started the load. "And I can prove it."

In the shower, Kaelen planned out the rest of the day. He'd call Sue-Ann around noon, apologize for being presumptive, and beg forgiveness. By then, maybe the course would be re-opened and he could get mom to drive him out there. Sue-Ann had been angrier than he had expected though, and maybe forgiveness was a day or two away. Worse comes to worst, he'd spend the afternoon chipping into a range bucket in the backyard, tearing out grass that no-one cared about except him. Then he'd shower again and go out with Alana. After that, it was a matter of luck.

Conner had finished the dishes and was picking up the front rooms. "Better," Kaelen said. A good brother balanced the stick with the carrot. "Mom up yet?"

"No."

“Good. You’ll finally give her a decent surprise. I’m taking a nap.” He went to his bedroom and locked the door. Conner might be lazy, but he wasn’t dumb. He’d gotten whatever power he had over his brother out of strength, and all that may come boomeranging back at him later. By then, he hoped, he’d be away on scholarship.

He opened the drawer on the nightstand next to his bed, and pulled out the two recruiting packages, both from state schools. He hadn’t expected interest from the major programs, but the only schools that had contacted him didn’t even crack the top 50. They were such a non-option that he hadn’t even told his mother that he had been contacted. He wanted her to think that golf was his best way into college, and that the only colleges that were interested in him were in California, Arizona, Texas, Nevada, and Florida. He’d even use up two years of eligibility playing at some shithole junior college as long as it was in a state without weather. He hated winter: outside hitting balls off of mats while gripping the club as tight as he did his dick or inside putting on carpet. It took a month every spring just to get his grip relaxed again and re-train his eye to read the break, and all because they’d moved to Utah ten years ago. He did the math: he had spent forty months in winter, over three years of practice time lost; a newborn could learn to speak in that amount of time, couples met, got married, and then divorced in less time. No wonder no school outside the mountain west wanted him. From today, he only had five years to get good enough to have a reasonable shot at making a minor tour. He couldn’t afford to spend part of that time snowed-in at Wyoming or Montana.

When he woke, his mom was making a grilled cheese sandwich and Conner was playing video games with some incomprehensible yelling and high-pitched guitar riffs coming from the speakers. Her eyes were swollen from sleep, and her short, brown hair was matted. Cheese had leaked out the side, and was burning in the pan. She didn’t seem to notice until he turned on the

overhead fan to clear out the smoke.

“You’re home?”

“Conner didn’t tell you?”

“He has his games to play.”

“They found a body on the course this morning and had to shut it down. I mowed the lawn.”

“I’m sure it looks nice,” she said. “Conner said he cleaned up. My two boys are so good to their mom.” She cut the sandwich in two with her spatula, then handed him half. “I’m sure you’re hungry.”

Kaelen juggled the sandwich until it had cooled some; his mom had put her half on a plate.

“I got a date tonight,” he said.

“I checked the calendar; I know you want the car.”

“Got,” Kaelen said. “Got the car. That’s why you had me start writing down when I needed it, so we’d stop fighting over who gets it when.”

“Got the car,” she said. “Better?”

Kaelen ate the sandwich, waiting for the tension to pass. He had pissed off one older woman today already. There was no need to repeat it. “Thanks.”

“What you going to do with her?”

“Not sure yet.”

“Oh Kael,” she said. “You’re always sure.” She walked away, toward her bedroom, eating her half. A few minutes later, he heard her turn on the water for a shower.

“Alright Conner, turn down that shit. I gotta make a phone call.” Conner flipped him off from the other room and kept playing. Five years difference, Kaelen thought, and God-knows how many IQ points. His cheeks were still smooth skin, he wasn’t sure if he had ever seen even a

zit on Conner's face. They didn't shower or bathe together anymore — Conner even insisted on changing into his swimsuit in the shower at the gym — but Kaelen doubted there was more than a string or two of hair around his dick. His brother had the build of a starved runner, and Kaelen outweighed him and was significantly stronger. He proved this seemingly every day. Kaelen stood in front of the television, phone in hand, forcing Conner to pause the game. The loud music continued.

“Mute it.”

“Go outside.”

“Mute it.”

Conner turned the volume up louder, so Kaelen turned off the machine. “I hope you saved it.”

Conner attacked, running at him from the couch. He kept his body bent, which made it simple for Kaelen to grab him around his waist and lift him up. He hadn't anticipated his brother's lightness, and almost levered him over his shoulder and into the flatscreen television behind him. Conner's flailing legs saved the monitor, and instead Kaelen held him upside-down around his knees, as if Conner were doing a handstand on air. Conner tried to wrap his legs around Kaelen's neck, as he walked back toward the couch, passing close enough the coffee table that Conner protected his head with his arms. Before the couch, he dropped him. “Get the fuck out of here while I make a call,” he said.

It would have been weakness to carry him or chase him out of the room. In a year, Conner could play his music loud enough that the plaster cracked. Until then, he needed to learn to do what Kaelen asked, when he asked. Conner didn't move from the floor.

“Out dipshit,” he repeated and flinched as if he were going to attack. That did the trick, and

Conner walked around the opposite end of the table and out the room. If he grew any more stubborn, Kaelen might have to follow through with his threats. Rough-housing was one thing, but he outweighed the kid by what seemed a hundred pounds. Conner would get hurt quick.

Sue-Ann picked up on the first ring. “You back open?”

She sighed on the other end, but didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry ‘bout this morning,” Kaelen said. “I didn’t think it’d be a big deal.”

“Well no shit you didn’t. It’s not like I think you did it to try to put me out of business. I pay you fair, right?”

“Yes ma’am,” Kaelen said. “More than, my mom says.”

“Given you free lessons and balls since you moved here.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“So why you wanna fuck all that up and make me regret ten years of you?”

“I don’t,” Kaelen said. “Jerome wouldn’t have done anything.”

“Jesus, Kael. That’s not the point. Your mom didn’t date everybody on the police force. They don’t owe you shit and they were all over my course this morning while you sucked down a Budweiser. People will cut you slack in life, but not if you put them on the spot about it.”

“Won’t happen again.”

“It does and you’re back to paying sixteen bucks for a large bucket and fifty for a half-hour lesson at the muni, you got it?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, call it you’re suspended today — even from the range and putting green. You open tomorrow, no beer.”

“See ya at six.”

“I’ll be sleeping then,” Sue-Ann said and hung up.

“You can play your game again,” he yelled to the house. Conner would sulk in his room until he knew Kaelen was outside. He went to the garage and slammed the door shut behind him loud. He took the range bucket he kept in the corner and an old wedge to the backyard.

Time went fast when he practiced, that was part of why he thought he might make it — if not as a touring pro, as a teaching one. The tediousness of practice never got to him. He didn’t have to psych himself up to hit ten more putts or bribe himself with the promise of candy or a beer when the bucket was emptied. When all the balls were in or near the bucket, he sprayed more sunscreen on his face, neck, arms, and legs, walked to where all the balls were, moved the bucket to where he had been, and repeated the drill with a more open clubface.

His mom’s voice came from the back patio and broke his concentration in his downswing. He topped the ball, sending it on a low trajectory into the fence where it dented the wood.

“Jesus, you couldn’t wait two more seconds?”

“Someone named Grayson says it’s important. I ignored him the first two times, thinking he’d leave a message, but he kept calling back.”

He took the phone from her. She didn’t move, so he walked away. “Bring it inside when you’re done then, Mr. Privacy,” she said.

“Hey,” he said. “Who’s this?”

“This Kaelen?” The voice was older and sounded as if he had a sore throat.

“Who’s this?”

“I’m Alana’s uncle. She told me she was going out with you tonight, so I needed to tell you that she’s not going to be able to make it.”

“I’m supposed to pick her up in three hours,” he said. He was used to people timidly trying to

slow things down, but that was usually after his hands had found a buckle or a bra strap, not before he had even picked them up. “Is this some kind of shitty joke?”

“Watch your language please,” Grayson said. “Something’s come up, and she’s just not going to be able to make it. She’s really sorry, and says she’ll call you in a couple of weeks. Try to explain everything.”

“For real?” Now he really regretted drinking that beer. More lost practice time. “Tell her not to worry about. If she’s gonna stand me up and not even tell me why, I don’t need to hear from her two weeks later.”

“Just talking to you, can’t say she’s losing out there,” Grayson said, then the line went silent. Kaelen went inside and put the phone on the table.

“Car’s yours tonight, mom,” he said and crossed his name off the calendar. Then it was more sunscreen, a glass of water, and back outside to chip some more. He’d call Shaun later, see if he knew anything. See if he maybe wanted to come over, instead.



### **Alana (Chapter 3)**

Alana had been asleep when her mom knocked on the door, seeing if she was hungry for breakfast. “Eggs, cheese, and toast,” she had said, like protein and carbs were worth waking up for. Like they’d run out of each unless she went downstairs immediately. Like she couldn’t cook for herself.

“You gonna try to bribe me with cartoons, next?” Alana asked and rolled over, her back to her mom. Her mom was dense, though, she’d probably interpret that as a sign she wanted a back rub or something.

“How late were you up last night?”

“I don’t check the clock before I fall asleep.”

“Can I ask you something?”

Alana moaned. “Can it wait?”

“It’s about your dad.”

Great, this again. She wanted to lift her quilt over her head and hide under there, but that would probably only encourage her mom to speak louder, make her tone sound like she really regretted bothering her, but it would only take a second, and then she’d be out of her hair, she promised.

“Yes, he loves you. Us, his family and future. Anything else?” Alana had only known her mom for her nearly 16 years of life and was already exhausted by her neediness and insecurity. She couldn’t fathom how dad had lasted 22. She tried to bring it up with him once, jokingly, after she had asked them each three times if they were okay going to dinner at Henrietta’s, like really okay. As if choosing between fried chicken and Mexican food was like deciding on a heart surgeon.

He hadn't been amused at her jest. "I don't see how being considerate is worthy of mockery," he said. "But I'm old and square." He emphasized the last word by drawing a square in the air with his two index fingers.

"Kids these days," Alana said.

"You these days," he said. She left him at the table then, and didn't speak to him at all at dinner and only picked at her chicken. She understood that he couldn't formally take sides, but a hint that her mom was difficult and he'd teach her how to get through it, would have been nice. Instead, she learned how wide the generational divide was, and fuck her dad for putting her and Barry on one side and keeping himself on the other.

That was the first time she remembered truly wanting to leave home, and now that her mom was waking her up seven in the morning to ask if she knew where the man she slept next to every night was, she wanted to leave home again. Two years away from college, and she already knew it would have to be a state away at least.

"Were you up when he came home?"

"I wasn't up then and I'm not up now. Ask Barry."

"Okay, I'll ask him. You're sure about breakfast?"

Alana closed her eyes.

"I'm sure everything's fine. He probably just had to go to work early this morning," her mom said.

Or he spent it at a hotel with a sane woman, Alana thought. She heard the door slide against the carpet.

But now that she was awake, she was up. Her mom knew this about her, yet insisted on asking, and probably didn't even consider asking Barry who stayed up later and wouldn't even

register the conversation in his consciousness. She put on a pair of running shorts and headed to the kitchen. Her mom hadn't even started the coffee, much less pulled out eggs and bread. Alana set to the tasks herself.

The coffee was percolating when her mom came in. She had already changed from her earlier pajamas to jeans and a blouse. Her hair already brushed out, parted in the center, with a faint curl running along either side of her face. It was sometimes unfair, how few features of her Alana had inherited. Her hair was impossible to straighten without chemicals, and the red of an albino's eyes. Her body was still stockier than she'd like, as if whatever baby fat she hadn't managed to lose went into reserve for whenever she'd get pregnant. Despite two pregnancies, she doubted her mom even had stretch-marks. The only thing she had of her mom's was her prickly personality, only where her mom was deferential, Alana was unforgiving.

"Would you like eggs?" she asked.

"Just coffee's fine." Just like her mom, to lure her out of bed with the promise of food and not have any for herself, just another cup of the coffee that kept her thin. "Barry up yet?"

"He probably didn't get to bed until four," Alana said.

"Be nice to him. Your dad's been pressuring him to take the GED and start working soon. If that happens, there won't be many late nights."

Alana gaped at her mother in amazement while hot oil popped in the skillet. "He can't get his ass in gear for school, what makes you think work will be any better?"

"People adjust to their circumstances," her mom said. "This is documented. Starving people in Haiti eat dirt."

"I'm not sure that's the point of those news reports," Alana said. "Besides, you're not going to let him starve. He could come down right now, and you'd have me make him breakfast."

“You’re not put upon.” Her mom checked her cellphone.

“Still nothing?”

“I usually wake up when he climbs out of bed. Or into.”

“Maybe you were just really tired.”

“Maybe it’s me. Try him on your phone.”

“I’m making breakfast.”

“After, dear, after.”

Alana flipped the eggs over in the pan, then slid them over the toast. She liked her yolk runny and ate the opened face sandwich with a fork.

“I’ll call him,” she said, putting her plate in the sink.

“Don’t worry about the dishes, I’ll take care of them.”

She called and got a voicemail. She left a short messaging saying that mom was looking for him, then texted him the same.

“No answer,” she said, back in the kitchen. She put her phone on the counter, “Just in case.”

“I’d wish he’d warn me, when he gets like this, these episodes. He did it when we started dating too, just disappear for two or three days. Say it was to get his head clear. We couldn’t talk as easily then, though.”

“Maybe you forgot he had to go on a business trip. That’s happened before.”

“You’d remember though,” Alana’s mom said. “You’re good with his schedule like that.”

“I’m going to do homework. I’ll leave my phone on the counter in case he’s better at contacting me than you.”

She was eating from a jar of peanut butter that she kept on her nightstand, when her mom yelled for her and Barry. Her voice was tense and raised in pitch almost to the point of cracking.

The two of them met in the hallway. “What the fuck now?” Barry asked, his hair still messed and in a pair of gym shorts and an old t-shirt with stained armpits.

“She’s in a weird mood today.”

“Everyday,” Barry said. She followed Barry down the stairs and found their mom sitting on the loveseat. There was a younger woman dressed in a police uniform and an older man in a wrinkled blue-striped oxford and sagging beige slacks held up by suspenders. Sweat had soaked through his undershirt.

The police officer was sitting down on a chair that had been moved in from the kitchen, and the older man stood a couple steps behind her. The officer stood up as the two entered the room, and then sat back down. The awkwardness of the movement made Alana more uncomfortable.

“We have some bad news,” the officer said in a voice more shaky than her mom’s had been.

“This about dad?” Alana asked.

“What about dad?” Barry asked.

“Mom said she didn’t hear him leave this morning. You see him come home last night?”

“I watched part of a movie with him. Didn’t hear him leave then.”

“Kids,” their mom said. Barry stopped.

“I’m Officer Karen Dealey with the Elkridge Police Department, and this is Dr. Michael Samuelson, one of our medical examiners.” Alana breathed deeply, waiting for what was to come. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see their mom already crying. She heard Barry start to do the same. To keep from doing it, she focused her attention on the officer’s shaking hands, but they became blurred quickly.

“This morning, Carl Watkins was found at Elkridge Golf Club. There was nothing we could do.”

“You have him?” Alana’s mom asked. “Can we see him?”

Officer Dealey looked confused, and turned to the medical examiner. He moved forward and crouched next to the sitting officer as if he were a baseball catcher. He didn’t speak until their mom was looking directly at him.

“I apologize,” he said. “Officer Dealey is trying to be tactful in an unpleasant time. Someone at the golf course found Carl drowned in a pond. It was clear he had been in the water for a number of hours and was dead.”

“You sure it was him?” Barry asked.

“Yes,” the officer said. Barry ignored her and kept his attention on the doctor.

“We found a wallet in his suit breast pocket. The description and picture on the driver’s license matched the body. There’s no doubt that it is him.”

“Can I see the body, to be sure?”

“Yes ma’am,” the doctor said. “If you’d like, you can come with us. Officer Dealey can drive you home. You may also call a friend or have a family member drive you.” He reached into his pant’s pocket and pulled out a metal tin, from which he removed a business card. “The address is on the bottom. “You’re welcome to come anytime, but we’d appreciate a call beforehand so we can have everything set up for you.”

“I’ll come with you now,” Alana’s mom said. “You two?”

“Fuck no,” Alana said. “No. No. No.”

“I’ll go,” Barry said. Taking advantage of your one time to not be a fuck-up, Alana thought, after eighteen shitty years.

The two of them stood up to leave along with Officer Dealey and the medical examiner.

After the door closed and the four were gone, Alana realized she had been useless. From then

on, Barry would be the one who had been strong enough to go see the body while she had freaked out fled to her bedroom. She needed to do something to make this easier for mom. She'd start making phone calls, get family over before her mom and Barry returned to make things manageable for the next day or two. There was her dad's brother, Grayson, and her mom's two sisters, Angela and Ellen. Three phone calls, then she could say that she had done something. Been helpful. Contributed.

It was only when her uncle answered that she realized she didn't know what to say. She breathed slowly in an effort to keep her voice from cracking. She recalled how the officer had started the conversation. "I need you to sit down," she said. "I have some bad news." She followed the same pattern with her first aunt, and was about to dial the second when her phone rang.

"Are you out of your mind?" Her mother's voice asked, louder than Alana had heard it before. "You don't know he's dead."

"The officer said," Alana trailed off. "I thought, for when you got home, you know, after."

"After is when I'll call them, not you. This isn't news you should be telling until we are certain, and I'm not certain until I see him and so you're not certain."

Alana ended the call. Ellen remained, Aunt Ellen with her three dogs and living room that smelled like blueberry tea. If she didn't call and Angela broke the news to her — and Angela would do this unless mom had called and specifically told her not to — would Ellen feel betrayed? Neglected?

Alana composed herself and called Ellen. The words came out quicker this time, fewer pauses as she struggled to swallow like a child with swollen tonsils. She was relieved at this realization, and saddened too. What had been unimaginable an hour earlier was now less

affecting. She understood how the medical examiner could have told them without reacting like an amateur actor reading through a play for the first time.

Grayson was the first to arrive and had brought a frozen lasagna.

“In case you don’t want to cook,” Grayson said. Alana put it in the freezer.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m sure we’ll eat it later.”

“Things may not slow down for a while,” he said.

The two sat in silence broken by crying jags that they apologized for. Then Ellen and Angela arrived.

“I need a favor,” Alana said to Grayson. She headed upstairs and he followed. She scrolled to Kaelen’s number in her phone. “I need you to call him and tell him that I can’t make it tonight. Don’t tell him why, please.”

Grayson looked at Kaelen’s name and shuddered. “I didn’t think you’d be his type,” he said. “He’s a shitheel; you’d be fine just standing him up and not having to worry about him talking to you again.”

“Please?” She listened as Grayson plodded through the conversation.

“Good news,” he said. “You’re not going to have to worry about him talking to you again.”

She heard the front door open and the influx of four voices consoling each other at once invaded her room. She wasn’t sure she’d feel better down there, with her uncle and aunts and mom and brother and whomever would be making their way over as each of them in the house passed the news on to more people who should be told. Godparents and family friends; neighbors wondering about the increasing number of cars in the driveway and along the curbs. But, she knew her mom wouldn’t accept her up here. Alana had broken the news, and needed to be with those she had broken it too.



## **SEPTEMBER**

## Shaun (Chapter 4)

“We forget our dreams when we wake up, right, so how would I know?” Shaun asked, angry at being distracted from finding the golf course and angry that Kaelen would ask about the body before the start of a match. He didn’t have Kaelen’s ability to, as coach said, “hit in the present”, and he didn’t want to have to try to block images of the bloated body from his mind before every stroke. “You see any signs?”

Kaelen checked his phone. “You’re still a couple miles south.”

“Nah, I remembered the houses from last year.”

“That’s ‘cause we’re in the suburbs,” Kaelen said, smacking the bottom of his cigarette pack against his palm. “It’s designed to all look alike. Even the people; I bet couples can swap spouses up here without anyone even noticing.”

“Not until after the match,” Shaun said. “If coach doesn’t smell it on you, god knows one of the Mormons we’re playing will. Hell, they can probably smell your come from last night’s jerkfest.”

“That smell’s from me finding something interesting to do these last ten minutes while you’ve been driving around in circles, telling me how wrong the phone’s directions are. See?” Kaelen put his hand in his pocket and extended his fist from his shorts until the fabric couldn’t stretch anymore.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Shaun said. “Calm yourself with this.” He tossed the container of chew to Kaelen.

“You got gum for when we get there?”

“Yes.”

A strong mint odor filled the car. Shaun wondered just how many chemicals they needed to

add in to make it smell that way. Had they ever even tried to add mint leaves in as well? They'd get the smell and probably save money on the amount of tobacco in each can. For English class, he had to write a business letter. He could send out based on that, although the teacher would probably not appreciate the humor.

"You wanna come over for dinner after?" Kaelen asked.

"Anything good?"

"Lasagna, I think. Mom wants me to swing by the store on the way home and pick up some French bread."

"So I gotta swing by the store, you mean?"

"Yeah, if you want dinner." There was a beep from the phone and a robotic voice told Shaun to turn left at the next street. "Jerome'll be there."

That's why Kaelen wanted him there, to give him someone he could whisper cruel remarks too and not have to worry about the cop threatening to beat the shit out of him. Nothing worse for a cop than a witness.

"They back together?"

Kaelen nodded. "You figure a woman's independence oughta last more than three weeks, you know. What is that supposed to communicate to me about how to treat a woman?"

"Any partner," Shaun said.

"Relationships. Period."

The car crested a sleight hill, and on the immediate horizon Shaun saw the green of fairways. Not a speck of brown visible, despite the lower-than-average snowfall that winter and no rain throughout August.

"You want me there?" Shaun asked, curious if Kaelen's glibness would be strong enough to

endure watching his mom and Jerome together again.

“Do what you want,” Kaelen said. “But she makes a good lasagna.”

Shaun parked and spit into the bottle; Kaelen did the same. Shaun grabbed a water bottle from the back, rinsed out his mouth, and spit that onto the pavement. Kaelen did the same while Shaun checked his teeth in the rearview mirror. Fuckers would call them out to get the two stroke penalty.

The two of them took their bags and headed to the putting green. Their coach was already there along with the six other players on the team. “You boys are late,”

“I still got ten minutes to warm-up,” Shaun said. “And you’re probably not going to use my score anyway.”

“It’s a wonder I waste a spot on you,” the coach said. “Kaelen, you’re in the last group. You got thirty minutes.”

Shaun practiced twelve foot putts and then headed to the first hole. Two years ago, when Kaelen made varsity and Shaun had to beg him to ask the coach to let him manage the team so he could get some range time, Shaun knew that his future was not in golf. Hell, he still wasn’t certain if he had earned the spot or if Kaelen had told coach that he played better with Shaun on the team. They dropped the worst three scores anyway, and Shaun was never on the cusp of being in the top five so it wasn’t like he was hurting the team.

The first hole was a par-five that doglegged right two hundred yards off the tee. Then it was another two hundred to a thin stream that split the fairway, and a hundred from there to the green. Even with the dogleg, Shaun ended in the right rough and walked down the right side of the fairway while his three playing partners walked up the left. They’d be hitting towards the hole while he’d have to fly it over some trees and back onto the fairway.

Kaelen carded a 34, the low round. Shaun trailed the other cars out of the parking lot so he could light up in celebration. “That’s the first below par,” he said. “I’m scanning it and sending it to every fucking place I can think of. I keep doing that well, after a few weeks they’ll notice me, right?”

“You keep going under and I’m sure someone will notice. And there’s state.”

“There’s state,” Kaelen said, taking a deep drag. “And those young fuckers. Last week, the guys from Richland were telling me, they played Westlake and a freshman shot 32. I get coaches interested in me, they’ll see the state results and get a commitment from him instead. Shit, in 9<sup>th</sup>-grade, if a fat postman with a walrus mustache had paid any attention to me, I’d have blown him in an alley. That kid’ll say yes to whoever asks him first.”

“He can change his mind later.”

“I don’t got one to change. Hell, I’d still blow that postman if he’d offer me a scholarship. I’m fucked. He could have a goatee for all I care.”

“You got the low round and went under,” Shaun said. He couldn’t remember seeing Kaelen this intimidated, and over a kid they wouldn’t even see play until next month.

“It’s not worth sending out. Who’s going to see it? Some secretary and if she even passes it on, nothing’s gonna happen. It’s not like I couldn’t just write bullshit scores and have my friend sign the fucking card. Thirty fucking two.”

“They’ll see it and probably call the local coaches, see if they have any read on you.”

“Yeah, and they’ll say we haven’t heard from him since May. Thinks he’s too big for our program, think of the attitude’ll have at yours. Plenty of other kids coming up, there’s this freshman from Westlake shot a 32.”

Shaun pulled into a nearby church. “Let me see your card,” he said. The parking lot was

empty, but he drove to the backside anyways, where the street traffic wouldn't see them.

"Why?"

"Just give me the fucking card, Kael."

Kaelen took it from his back pocket and handed it over. The pencil was smudged, but the numbers could still be made out. "Lean the seat back and close your eyes." Kaelen said. He did as Shaun asked.

"Hole number one?" Shaun asked.

"Driver, wanted it on the left but left it too far center. No reason to push early, so hit a six iron with a slight fade short of the creek. 52 degree on, but long. 30-footer ran right and I had to make a six-footer to save. Six-footer was easy; no breaking inside five feet on any of the holes. Shitty placement by whoever was in charge."

"Hole number two?"

Kaelen spoke, and Shaun reached his hand across onto his friend's lap. Kaelen's speech paused briefly for a short, added breath and then continued on, describing a three-hybrid off the third tee. Shaun undid Kaelen's button and reached his hand inside. He hadn't even known how focused he had been on getting a scholarship; he hadn't even talked about golfing in college other than in a joking manner when he got the brochures from Wyoming and Montana. Shaun hadn't even heard him mentioning taking the SATS and he hadn't been at the school that morning last March when it seemed like the whole junior class was taking them. Maybe he had done so in June, but he hadn't asked Shaun to help him study.

Shaun listened as Kaelen described his round. His hand wasn't needed after the sixth hole, but he didn't put the car in reverse until Kaelen had missed an eight-footer for a 33. That's what caused the panic, Shaun realized. Not the score, but the 33 that could have been if he had read no

break like every other hole inside five feet rather than six inches right.

“I thought you were over that,” Kaelen said. “Though clearly you’ve been practicing at least on yourself.”

“One time thing to get you to calm the fuck down,” Shaun said. “Don’t try to trick me next week with the same bullshit.”

“We still gotta pick-up French bread.”

\*

Jerome was drinking a beer as Shaun followed Kaelen into the kitchen. “Meredith didn’t say anything ‘bout extra company tonight,” he said. “But good to see ya, Shaun.”

“Well, extra company surprised me this morning,” Kaelen said. “Thought I’d use it to surprise mom tonight.”

“Glad you’re as cheerful as I remember.”

“I’m gonna go shower quickly, but Shaun feel free to enjoy a brew while I clean up.” Kaelen used the counter’s edge to pop the top off from a bottle and handed it to Shaun. “Microbrew. Jerome always brings the good stuff.”

“IPA,” Jerome said as Kaelen left the room. “Go ahead, you had to deal with that prick for an hour today. You deserve a drink.”

“He’d say the some thing about you.”

“Probably,” Jerome said. Shaun sipped the beer. He was used to the faint, water-downed cans he drank with Kaelen at the golf course. This was bitter and gave the impression of drying out the inside of his mouth, though he knew that wasn’t true.

“Have a seat,” Jerome said. “I needed to talk to you anyway. How you holding up?”

“Got my ass kicked on the course today.”

“Nature of the sport,” Jerome said. “Kaelen has no idea how difficult that game is for some people. I’m lucky to get one par a round.”

“I’m happy to be chipping onto the green to one-putt for par.”

Jerome tilted his bottle into his mouth. “About the body. We’ve run into a snag and I’m wondering if you remember anything else that you didn’t tell us?”

“Like what?”

“Just anything stand out. Footprints, clothes, a man running away from the scene.” Jerome laughed. “Not that I’m trying to give you ideas on what you did see.”

“Can’t think of anything, but I’ll let you know.”

Jerome slid him a business card. “In case you do, call me anytime.”

“You all have any leads?”

“Leads?” Jerome asked. “We’re not real-estate agents.”

“Ideas then, whatever you call them.”

“Guy drowns on golf course. Nothing else.”

“Was he drunk, beaten, anything like that?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Jerome said. “Those sorts of details might make it in your memory, lead us astray. Right now, just the guy drowned is all I can tell you.”

“But if I think of anything, I gotta tell you?”

“Remember anything, and yeah. That’s what happens when I’m a cop and you’re a witness. This isn’t you agreeing to help me paint if I help you build a porch. Jesus. You remember anything, you tell me. You got it?”

“Fine,” Shaun said. It would have been nice to remember something else that could help, a mysterious man watching from the across the pond or an empty vodka bottle in the bushes. But



there was nothing besides than the body and the bird. He finished the beer and took another from the fridge.

## Kaelen (Chapter 5)

Instead of eating with his mom, Conner, and Jerome, Kaelen put a couple pieces of lasagna on paper plates, and he and Shaun went to his room. He locked the door behind him in case Jerome wanted to try to play as a father-figure and force him downstairs. His dad had passed away when he was a sophomore, and he accepted that his mom needed to date. He thought it was healthy, actually, and had started setting her up with his friends' divorced fathers only a year after his dad's death. But, somehow, she had liked Jerome and Jerome, whether out of a sense of traditionalism, sympathy, or the slavish self-regard that comes from being a police officer, had concluded he needed a father-figure, and was persistent in that observation. He had even given Kaelen the speech about how he didn't want to replace his dad. Kaelen said that was good, and since neither of them wanted him to fall into that role, they shouldn't have any problems.

They ate while searching for the names of golf coaches at schools where Kaelen wanted to play, putting the information on a spreadsheet. "You hear anything about the body thing from Jerome?" Shaun asked.

"He doesn't talk about that shit with me," Kaelen said.

"You ever hear anything from Alana?"

"After what I said to her uncle, she's never going to talk to me again. Can't blame her, but then again it really isn't my fault. I'm supposed to be okay with someone standing me up three hours before without an excuse."

"She had an excuse," Shaun said.

"She did; it would've been nice to know before making an ass out of myself is all."

"She transferred into my trig class today," Shaun said. "If you want me to talk to her. You want some more lasagna?"

“Sure,”

Kaelen thought about why Shaun would have waited until after that afternoon to tell him, especially considering what went on in the parking lot. He had no illusions of it moving beyond fleeting episodes like that. That’s the way the two of them had always been together, never really together. Kaelen didn’t mind. The rumors appealed to both genders. The boys, shy and unsure, approached him knowing that he wouldn’t tell anyone and the girls approached him as if he was something to be tested. And he liked it that way. He liked listening as he uncovered what they liked — boy or girl, they were all not confident enough to be direct and ask. He enjoyed giving them that. Not pleasure, exactly, though that was part of it, but maybe acceptance; a way to begin to figure out who they were.

That’s why that afternoon was strange. Shaun had never expressed doubts about who he was, at least not to him. Even back when they had started together, Shaun would look at women on the computer while they played with each other. It had never occurred to him to resent it until he started fooling around with boys who didn’t need outside encouragements. And today he had jerked him off and then tried to set him up with a girl who had no reason to want to see him.

The lasagna had been reheated in the microwave. The melted cheese had become stiffer and the pasta chewier.

“She has my number,” Kaelen said.

“I can put in a good word.”

“Nah,” Kaelen said. “Sometimes people fuck shit up without meaning to, doesn’t mean the shit can become unfucked.”

“True enough.” Shaun threw his paper plate in the trash. “Your stepdad asked me if I remembered anything else.”

“When? And if you call him my stepdad again I might start spreading rumors about you at school.”

“While you were showering. He ask you about it too?”

“Nah. You were the one who found him.”

“Yeah, but like if I had told you anything I hadn’t told him.”

“He doesn’t like talking about work around me. Thinks I’ll warn the pot-dealers at school.”

He scraped the last bit of beef up with his fork and threw his plate away as well. He wondered if Shaun was getting ready to tell him something else.

“Wish I did,” Shaun said. “He doesn’t seem to know anything that’s going on.”

“He wouldn’t tell you if he did. He’s a cop; they just want information and don’t want to give any out. Anything he says to you, don’t believe.”

“I guess,” Shaun said. “I’m gonna take off.”

“Thanks for this afternoon,” Kaelen called after him. Shaun raised his middle finger without looking back.

\*

Kaelen had been up half the night going from webpage to webpage and copying coaches’ email addresses. Six hours and he didn’t think he was a quarter of the way through all the schools in Arizona. It seemed like every town had their own junior college or liberal arts school, with the bigger cities having a college or two. He determined that anybody who couldn’t find a college to attend just wasn’t looking hard enough.

The kitchen smelled of coffee. Kaelen knew Jerome had slept over; he had heard the stairs sigh as they walked up them together to her room; he had heard them giggling, probably drunk, as they passed his closed door. But his mom didn’t want her kids to think he was sleeping over,

so she made sure he was out of the house before he and Conner were awake. And the fucker still made coffee, but left without leaving the heating plate on. So now he had to either start a new pot or flip the switch and hope the coffee didn't turn even worse. He's either an inconsiderate, stupid fucking man, Jerome decided, or he is marking his territory in some abstract way. Making me have to adjust to him rather than vice-versa. He hoped it was the latter, because if it was the former, the criminals in Elkridge would have a pretty easy time of it. It would also explain why they hadn't even figured out what happened to Alana's father other than the obvious. He poured the coffee out and made a new batch.

When he got to the range that afternoon, Jerome was inside talking to Sue-Ann. Officer Dealey was sitting at the tables talking to some of the older golfers who got to the course early, played horribly, and spent the day inside bullshitting as if the lunch area were their private club.

"You trying to poison me with your shit coffee?" Kaelen asked. He swiped a range card from the front desk. "This have a hundred on it?"

Sue-Ann nodded.

"You don't even ask nicely?" Jerome said.

"I fucking work here, dick. Not having to ask nicely when getting a range card that I probably swiped is one of the many perks. Along with free lessons."

"And a patient boss."

"Saintly," Kaelen said. "Hey, Sue-Ann, you know you don't have to say shit to this guy, right? Hell, fuck with him and tell Dealey there what you're telling him, so she gets the credit."

"Go hit your balls, Kael." Sue-Ann said.

"I may need to talk to you in a few minutes too," Jerome said. "So don't be getting into too comfortable a rhythm out there."

He started with twenty to thirty yard flop shots and then stayed with his short irons for a bucket. For some reason it was easier to get his left arm pulling with those clubs while warming up, which made for better long irons on his second bucket. He was at the ball machine when he saw Jerome drive towards it in a cart. Less than 500 yards, and a downhill walk, and fucker was taking a cart. If he was that lazy in bed, Kaelen wondered why his mom even wasted her time.

“You closed that night,” Jerome said, pulling parallel to Kaelen. He’d have to walk around the front or back of the cart to get back to his range spot.

“Took you two weeks to learn that? By the second-coming, you should have this thing cracked.”

“Sit down.”

“I got work to do,” Kaelen said, then walked around the cart’s back. He didn’t want Jerome to think he was scared of him, so he ignored the soft whine of the electric engine until the hood of the cart collided with his bucket. His arm hit an aluminum support beam and he felt a bruise start to form.

“In,” Jerome said.

“Jesus, that’ll get me to cooperate.”

“Formality questions, Kaelen. That’s all. It’ll take half-hour tops.”

It was still late summer, so the sun’d be up late and he had nothing but some math and reading to do for homework that night. And that shit didn’t matter as long as he stayed eligible. He had the SAT scores he needed and all that mattered were the credits. He could make time.

“Hurry.”

“You closed that night?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“You shut down the course and Sue-Ann sent me home. When was I supposed to tell you?”

“Every detail helps,” Jerome said.

“It’d help if you knew what details you wanted me to tell you.”

“I don’t know that ’til I hear it. That’s why,” and Jerome started to speak slowly, “every detail counts.”

“I don’t know, shut off the lights at ten and finished counting the register at 11.”

“How’d you get home?”

“Sue-Ann’s spare truck. She lets me drive to the bank, home, and to the golf course. She knows the mileage too.”

“That piece of shit white ranger sitting out front of the curb some mornings?”

“If that’s your subtle way of telling me that you fuck my mom, our murderers and rapists don’t stand a chance.”

“You see anybody on the course that night?”

“Have you looked out the front window from the counter? You can’t see much beyond the driving range lights at night, certainly not the thirteenth hole.” Kaelen pointed across Jerome’s body, toward a tree line in the distance. “Which is over there.”

“Maybe not the hole itself, but somebody walking around. Some people walking around?”

“The parking lot was empty when I left, all the carts had been checked in, and the range lights were off,” Kaelen said. “As for somebody wandering the woods, climbing the fences, drunkenly trying to steal flags, or just trying to fuck his girlfriend or boyfriend in public without a real risk of being caught, I can’t tell you.”

“Why boyfriend?” Jerome asked. “You have a thing with this guy? He get aggressive and

you have to fight him off or maybe you were the aggressive one.”

“We done?” Kaelen asked.

“Sure. See you at dinner.”

“I’m practicing late.”

“Breakfast then,” Jerome said. Kaelen stepped from the cart, and watched Jerome drive back up the hill to the clubhouse. Fucking putz, he thought. And if my mom’s stupid, Conner’s got another five years with that guy until he can get out of there.

He practiced until he was hitting balls he couldn’t see to spots he couldn’t see. There was the faint flash of yellow, but he judged the distance and direction more by feel. He had convinced himself that pros knew everything the ball was going to do the second they felt the contact. The better he knew that, the better he could adjust.

Back at home, Jerome’s car was parked a block away, but he would’ve known how Kaelen drove home so, like the coffee that morning, maybe this was him making his presence known. Would he have been this big of a dick if there hadn’t been the body in August, Kaelen wondered. He pulled the truck behind Jerome’s sedan, bumpers nearly touching. He took his clubs from the truck bed and walked the block to his house with them clicking together behind his back.

He took them to his room, then went back to the kitchen to get the keys to his mom’s car, a sub-compact she had bought used. There was just enough space for him to back it in front of Jerome’s car, bumpers almost kissing again. Back inside, he poured a bowl of cereal and sat at the counter. A pile of phone records had been placed in the middle, like a trophy, with a couple lines highlighted. They were from the night before the body was found, and from the golf course to Alana’s father’s number.

Kaelen finished eating, washed the bowl, then took the papers to his mom’s upstairs office.



He turned on the shredder and started to feed it the documents. It took less than a minute for Jerome to come barging in, wearing a t-shirt that had clearly belonged to Kaelen's dad and a pair of gym shorts. He had to give Jerome credit in the fitness category.

"What the fuck?" Jerome asked. "That's evidence."

"What type of cop leaves evidence on a counter where somebody can find them?" He kept shredding the documents. Jerome went back to the bedroom and Kaelen heard the sounds of arguing. He returned, still dressed the same, with handcuffs.

"You fucking serious?" Kaelen asked.

"Stand up and turn around."

He took what remained of the paper and put it in the shredder. It went in a bit, then the shredder jammed. "You're gonna have to buy mom a new one," Kaelen said.

"Stand up."

Kaelen did and saw Conner and his mom watching from the hallway. "Lot of good you fucking him is doing now," Kaelen said.

"Watch how you speak to her," Jerome said, pinning Kaelen face-first against the wall.

"Only you can talk about fucking her to her?" The handcuffs were pinched around his wrist. Of course the asshole had tightened them more than they needed.

"Walk. Down the stairs. The car's to your right out the door."

Kaelen couldn't help but laugh as Jerome called his mom to move her car. If he'd known he was going to be arrested, he would've hidden the keys in the house instead of just putting them back where they hung. He wanted to inconvenience the shithead, not get him reprimanded. Too bad Jerome didn't cut him the same vague generosity.

"Have I got questions for you," Jerome said, as he drove toward the station. "So many

questions.”

“Shaun’s dad is my lawyer,” Kaelen said. “Talk to him.”

## **Alana (Chapter 6)**

Alana walked into her fourth period classroom and sat in an empty desk next to Shaun.

“You’re in my seat,” she heard a cracking voice behind her say. The stranger coughed, and tried again. This time his voice stayed on the same pitch.

She stood. “Sorry.”

She could see the boy recognize her and then flinch trying to hide it. “Never mind,” he said. “You take it. I think there’s a couple empty desks on the other side. I’ll tell Mr. Rodriguez to change his seating chart.”

“You sure?” she asked. “He just told me to sit here yesterday.”

“Yeah, yeah. If he wants you there, you should sit there.” Alana sensed relief in the voice that the decision could be passed onto the teacher.

“Thanks.” Alana sat back down. Since her dad’s passing, her classmates had been as skittish as kittens. In the bit pieces of condolence conversations she had had, she sensed that death was seldom for them and when it occurred it was a grandparent, uncle, or distant relative. She realized how young they all were, how they viewed their families’ health as invincible as they viewed themselves. Even in those rare cases of someone closer — a parent, brother, sister — the stories she heard were medical: cancer, heart attack, Alzheimer’s. There were no murders, no inexplicable happenings. Those who could be sympathetic, who had gone through the grieving process, couldn’t really understand her.

But three weeks after the funeral, she found herself understanding of them. Before her dad’s death, she hadn’t been aware of how many conversations revolved around parents, what they would or would not allow; now, she found herself slipping back into those conversations and afterwards she would replay them in her mind to remember if she had mentioned her parents or

simply her mom. She didn't like how easily the habit of blaming only her mom was forming.

"Hey, Shaun," she said. He looked more relaxed than the boy who had tried to reclaim her chair. He smiled at her, too wide and she could see the silver of his fillings. "You eat lunch with Kaelen, right?"

"Usually," he said.

"Where?"

"Football bleachers or hall by our lockers. Depends on the weather."

Alana looked out the window as a strong breeze pushed the thicker branches a few feet off the ground. "Today?"

"Probably the bleachers."

The bell rang and Mr. Rodriguez took attendance. He stopped briefly to erase a name on his seating chart and write, she assumed, hers in its place. He didn't thank the student who had given up the desk.

She found them lying shirtless on adjacent bleachers, using their backpacks as pillows. Kaelen's abs were more defined than Shaun's, though Shaun had a deeper tan.

"Hey," she said.

"You found us." Shaun said. He had sat up while Kaelen remained on his back.

"I did."

Alana paused. The idea had been simpler in her head. Her family hadn't gotten much information from the police regarding her father and it took three or four phone calls to get one in return.

"You work at the golf course, right?"

"Kaelen does," Shaun said.

He should be making this easier, Alana thought, he hadn't even apologized for being rude to Grayson. He didn't even smile politely at her when they crossed in the hallway. And now he just stayed on his back, eyes closed.

"I want to see the pond," Alana said.

Kaelen sighed, and slowly sat up. "Why?"

"It's where he died."

"When?"

"Whenever, but soon."

"After school tomorrow?"

"Okay," Alana said, "I'll meet you there."

\*

Dad's truck was still in the garage, untouched from when he had parked it after getting home from work. That was another unsolved puzzle from that night, how her dad had gotten to the golf course and the police were as clueless about that as they were about everything else that surrounded the case. They had badgered her mom about it to the point of tears and, on the odd occasion when they did return calls, they always asked about it. The confusion made sense, if they knew how he had gotten to the golf course that night, they might be able to figure out if he was alone or with someone, but it was clear that mom had no idea and asking her about it was a waste of time and showed little imagination. Their job was to accept the fact that her mom didn't have the answer to that question and move on to someone who might.

The truck's cab was cluttered with empty cans of soda, mostly root beer. She'd start the cleaning with those because they wouldn't remind her of anything besides how much he liked root beer. She could handle being reminded of that. After the cans, were the paper bags of fast

food restaurants, then smaller items like gum wrappers that could easily assumed to be trash. Any paper that couldn't be immediately classified as trash, she put on the seat. She emptied the truck carefully, looking for something that the police may have missed. But she found nothing — no diamond earrings for a secret girlfriend or hidden stash of condoms. There were aluminum cans of cola, sandwich bags that had developed some mold, rotten banana peels and apple cores kept in a plastic bag. By the end of the cleaning, the trash bin was full and the only things in the Salvation Army bag were a few spare ties and a sports coat her father kept in case he needed to stop by a client's house without much warning to review the progress of the family's IRA or stock portfolio.

The smell was even neutral and void of memories. That night she found herself wishing that her dad smoked a particular brand of cigarettes, dipped peppermint chew, or even drank something more odorous than unsweetened iced tea. How nice, she thought, to be able to go into any gas station and buy cigarettes to remind her of her father, use them as incense on the anniversary of his death, but he even used unscented deodorant and shaving cream.

It became more difficult when she opened the glove compartment and papers spilled out. These were people he met and talked to, who had listened to his investment and savings advice. These were people with whom he had developed some sort of relationship. She slowed, but held herself together. All the papers she hadn't thrown away, she put in a pile and took to her bedroom. She'd sort them later, business from personal, and see if she could find anything. Eventually, dad's boss was going to ask about them, but she'd hold onto them until then. Maybe he already had what he needed; maybe they'd be forgotten and she'd be able to keep them.

At the carwash, she shampooed the carpets and seats with such force that she thought the upholstery was going to get sucked into the shampooer. She sprayed the exterior with the water

gun on full-pressure and worried the exterior paint was going to flake off.

Both her mom and Barry were waiting for her when she arrived home. Her mom's eyes were already red and she started to cry harder when Alana put the keys on the counter.

"What the fuck are you doing?" her brother yelled, slamming his hands over the keys. The plates nearby vibrated with his anger.

"The truck needed to be washed," Alana said, more forcefully than she had expected. She wasn't used to meeting his anger with her own. She preferred to walk away and close her bedroom door while he tired himself yelling in the hall.

"It isn't yours," he said.

"I'm using it tomorrow, and I wanted it clean."

"So it's yours now?"

"I didn't say that," Alana said. "I just need it for tomorrow."

"You should have asked," her mom said. "I would have liked to have checked, for something."

She had three weeks to check, and all she did was throw out trash. He wasn't in his trash. To Barry and her mom, he had turned into a figure to be memorialized, not remembered. Maybe that's why she did it without asking, to remind them all that parts of him will disappear as soon as they made the effort. She didn't know what part of him would remain in her, and wanted to find out.

The course's fairways were dotted with yellow patches and she could see the white tops of some balls in the streambeds. She wondered how far the water in the pond had receded from its banks in three weeks.

Kaelen stopped the cart by the tee-box. "Sue-Ann doesn't allow carts on the par-threes," he

said. “Not usually, and I don’t want any jackass seeing me do it and thinking they can.”

“I can walk,” she said. He had been silent on the drive over, other than pointing out where she needed to turn. He stayed silent as they headed towards the green. She began to breathe deeper, and the air smelled of mold and rot.

“This it?” she asked.

“This is the place.”

She looked at the water and wondered if the remark was an intentional joke of some sort. She shouldn’t be surprised if it was; he hadn’t done anything to make her regret the date’s cancellation. If she had her druthers, she wouldn’t be here with him. But he knew the course and where her dad had been found.

“I didn’t see him until the casket,” she said.

“I read up after it happened. I guess drownings take a lot of work to get ready.”

“He drowned?”

“I guess. Jerome doesn’t speak much about it to me. I thought that’s what might’ve happened, considering everything.”

“Why would Jerome tell you anything?”

“He wouldn’t. That’s what I said. I get asked about it, but he never tells me anything.”

“Ah,” Alana said. It made sense that he’d found her dad. Who else would be on the course that early in the morning? “You remember where he was?”

“Just off this bank, like twenty or thirty yards. Jerome tell you what happened?”

“He avoids giving us an answer; I don’t think he knows.”

“He ain’t sharp,” Kaelen said. “I’m waiting for my mom to realize that.”

“Are they dating or something?” Alana asked.



“Just enough that he thinks he should be disciplining me, but not enough for him to feel comfortable about it.”

Alana hadn't even considered her mom starting to date again. The thought of someone who wasn't her dad trying to discipline her made her shudder. She teared up. “You remember anything else?”

“It was a hectic morning. Cops were down here as soon as we called and shut everything down.”

Alana picked up a stick the length of her arm and gripped it through the mud. Maybe in the bushes there was a piece of clothing or slip of paper that had been missed; a bloodstain on a branch or leaf that had somehow not been gathered into a bird's nest or washed away in the rain.

She pushed into the thickets, using the stick to push the branches and thorns aside. She focused on stepping between or onto the roots, flattening the path in front of her. She made it in partway in and realized it was too thick unless she wanted to chainsaw everything.

“We could dig it up.” Alana said. “Not everything, but like from where you were standing when you saw him to maybe ten or fifteen feet on either side.”

“No fucking way,” Kaelen said. “We keep them trimmed down some so golfers can see the pond, but they've been here since before I worked here. Sue-Ann would destroy me.”

“Replant them temporarily?”

“This is just where they saw the body; who the fuck knows where it went in. Sue-Ann owns the property on the back border of the pond in case she ever decides to expand or redesign, but we don't know if he fell in here or way the fuck out there and the wind just pushed him to here.”

“Can you get us over there then so I can look?”

“How?”

“You work here. You know where the backside developments end and the woods begin?”

“Not enough to promise I won’t get you lost in them. I’ve never been there.”

Alana shielded her eyes and looked across the pond. The trees were twice as tall with roots that covered what little dirt could serve as a bank. She imagined them growing under the water like tentacles and reaching up to encircle her dad. Or perhaps they worked more like jellyfish, poisoning him with a barb and cramping his muscles until he drowned. The carp — a shitty pond like this had to have only carp — circling under him, mistaking his shade for the sun setting or raising, waiting for the right time to start nipping at his body. She briefly forgot that she had ever found anything valuable in nature.

“We could take a canoe to the other side,” Alana said. “Does Sue-Ann have one?”

Kaelen shook his head. “And I don’t either.”

“I’ll find one.” She couldn’t think of anyone who might have one off the top of her head, but it was Utah. There was bound to be one in someone’s garage. “There a place to store it here?”

“There’s a shed out near the driving range where we keep the mowers and shit. Not many people go in there, and nobody looks for anything but whatever they’re sent in to find. Shit, even if someone saw it, they’d just figure it’s always been in there and they just hadn’t noticed it.”

“Alright,” Alana said. “I’ll find a canoe and when I do, I’ll call you so you can open the shed and we can keep it in there until we need it.”

“It’s gonna be a while,” Kaelen said. “Still warm and we’re booked solid on weekends.”

“Skip fucking school then. If there was anything, weather’s likely ruined it and I don’t want to spend more time waiting for weather to ruin it some more.”

“Why you think I’m going to search with you?”

“Because you treated me like shit when my dad died.” Alana said. “And you know it, or you

wouldn't have come with me today."

After dropping Kaelen off at his house, Alana drove up and down roads that branched off the main streets she drove home. She wrote down the addresses of the houses whose open garages had a canoe inside. She'd drive around again later to see which ones kept them open at night. It only needed to be big enough to sit two or three people and with an easy way out of the garage without making a sound. She felt those requirements were minimal, but still spent more time searching than she would have liked.

## **OCTOBER**

## **Shaun (Chapter 7)**

The day after his arrest, Shaun asked his parents if Kaelen could move in with them, at least until things between Jerome, his mother, and himself sorted themselves out. After his parents agreed, Shaun proposed the idea to Kaelen. He didn't bring over much more than his clothes and golf clubs. After a week, Shaun stopped asking if he had talked to his mom that day and after the second week, Shaun's parents told Kaelen that he was welcome to stay with them as long as he needed.

Once Kaelen's living situation was finalized, Shaun's attention shifted to getting him prepared for the state golf tournament. He couldn't offer advice during play, but he could prod Kaelen towards going into the competition with a plan. The weekend before the tournament, he had called the course earlier in that week to reserve the earliest tee-times on both Saturday and Sunday, telling the pro-shop that there'd be a foursome so they didn't have to worry about being paired up with another group. He also made sure Kaelen told Sue-Ann to adjust his schedule so he closed those days rather than opened.

The night before the first practice round, Shaun sketched hole diagrams from the yardage book into a larger notebook in which he'd write details about layout, carrying distances, course conditions, and the greens' speed and breaks. He'd track tee-shots, approaches, and putting statistics. The end-goal was a surrogate caddy that could help Kaelen with the logistics during the day. As far as his temperament, Shaun hoped that his presence in the galley would keep him calm. Kaelen could handle mishits, but when he missed close putts, he went into a funk that seemed to last until he buried a double-breaking 20 footer.

At the clubhouse, Shaun told the marshal that the other pair in their foursome had cancelled last night and headed to the first tee. The par-five's fairway was green, but dotted with small

spots and strips of brown. The oak trees that stood separated it from the ninth hole's fairway had lost some of their leaves as well. As difficult as it would be to find a ball among the dried foliage, it'd be much more difficult hitting balls buried in it. For the first three holes, Shaun played with Kaelen, but criss-crossed the fairway frequently to find yardage markers. Near the green, he walked from the 100-yard markers to the front of hazards to get an idea of the carrying distance. He'd calculate the distance to the other markers after the round. After the bend on the third hole, Shaun pocketed his ball and Kaelen hit four tee-shots. They were far enough ahead that it was unlikely that a group behind them would catch up. Shaun kept Kaelen's score and made notes about the course, only playing when they were in sight of the clubhouse. At the greens, Shaun put a ball above, below and to either side of the hole, and while Kaelen putted each out, he looked for the circular slits that indicated other possible hole locations. They did the same that Sunday.

In Shaun's room the next evening, Kaelen sat on the bed and turned to the first hole in the book.

"You got any advice better than keep it in the middle of the fairway?" he asked.

"Slow back-swing and full follow-through."

"Keep my head down."

"Drive for show; putt for dough."

"I should be good to go then." Kaelen said. He drew a blue circle on the hole's diagram to make he'd like to aim his tee-shot. Below that, he wrote what club to use, given normal wind conditions. Then he circled where he wanted his second shot to land in black ink, and wrote the club underneath. At his desk, Shaun tried to focus on his trigonometry, but was distracted by Kaelen's hand as it moved from spot to spot in the air while he tried to remember how he had

played each hole that weekend. As the hand jumped through the air, he tried to guess what hole Kaelen was replaying. He could've moved next to him on the bed and looked in the book to check his accuracy, but that action was intimidatingly intimate.

There hadn't been anything physical between the two of them since the afternoon in the parking lot. Shaun had worried that Kaelen's moving in, if only temporary, would encourage him to push more boundaries. After all, to his parents, either of them falling asleep in the other's room would be harmless, a fluke of staying up late rather than an expression of want. And at times, Shaun felt the same way, that falling asleep in the same room or in the basement while watching a movie was meaningless when it came to their friendship. But that didn't explain why he hoped that Kaelen wouldn't catch him watching while he re-charted his golf shots or why he kept looking despite that risk.

Kaelen opened his eyes, and Shaun's attention flinched back to trigonometry.

"You ever hear of Long Beach?" he asked after writing a few notes into the guidebook.

"Nope."

"It's between Los Angeles and Orange County."

"No idea; I only know Disneyland, and that was like four years ago." Even then, his memories had been filtered down to nothing more specific than visual flashes and sensations.

"I've been talking to the coach there about the prospect of a scholarship."

"Where?"

"Long Beach College," Kaelen said. "I don't know much about it, but they're the only place that got back to me when I started sending out my scorecards."

"Full-ride?"

"Nah, the coach said they didn't do that for golf. They split the allotment between the team

members.”

“Still, that’s great. You gotta take it.” Shaun stopped himself. “Unless someone comes in with an even better offer.”

“They all ignored me. Even my follow-ups.”

“Idiots then, you’ll show them.”

“We’ll seen. Nothing is official until there’s an offer sheet, signed by me and my guardian.”

“Oh,” Shaun said. Since Kaelen had moved in, he had only referred to his mom by her first name or as his guardian. He also only contacted her when he needed something from school signed. Shaun wasn’t sure if she even knew Kaelen was playing in the state tournament.

“When’s that?”

“No idea,” Kaelen said. “If I suck though, it doesn’t matter. What about you?”

Truthfully, Shaun hadn’t given it much thought. His grades and test scores were good enough for Utah, and he hadn’t considered looking at other schools. The larger issue for him was convincing his parents to let him live on campus. “Utah, I guess.”

“Since we’re not basketball and I’m not a prodigy, coach said they’re pretty strict on meeting general admittance requirements. I’m right at the cut-off, and I know you’re a better student than me.”

Shaun hadn’t seriously thought about out-of-state schools. Kaelen, he knew, had his issue with their classmates a couple years earlier, but that had sorted out and whatever was said was more like ambient sound rather than directed conversation. And, despite their friendship, he had never been a focus of the gossip. He wore jeans and t-shirts while some of Kaelen’s friends matched belts with shoelaces; headbands with nail polish. They didn’t have many classes together and had separate bus routes, so their friendship was on the periphery of their classmates’



radars. They sat together at lunch or hung in the hallway before school, but he could invite Kaelen over for dinner or to watch a movie and no one would know; Kaelen even kept the friendship quiet. Shaun wasn't naive enough to believe that it stopped in high school because they all become more open-minded or accepting, but rather, by that point, there wasn't much else to say.

"You want me to look into it?" Shaun asked, unable to emulate Kaelen's ability to ask without asking. Other than the episode in the car a month earlier, he hadn't been forward. But his willingness to discuss things, made him feel that he was always the one pushing things. Years ago, when he stopped the physical stuff with Kaelen, he verbalized it, while Kaelen had seemed content with letting it all go unsaid. Shaun suspected that if he had simply quit reciprocating, it all would've ended without either of them acknowledging that anything had happened in first place.

"I'm just saying you'll probably get in, if you're interested in going elsewhere." Kaelen said.

Other than during the trip to Disneyland, Shaun hadn't seen the ocean nor had he ever surfed. Those might become possibilities. Also, the idea of moving somewhere else was appealing in its superficial sense. The two of them would have a change of scenery without losing their friendship, which was a possibility if Kaelen got the scholarship and he stayed. With Kaelen refusing to speak to his mom, it might be years before he returned.

Shaun pulled up the website. There were pictures of happy students studying on the grass, walking together, paying intense attention during a lecture, and cheering at sporting events. It looked like the homepage for every other school he had seen, and nothing drew his immediate attention. It offered the same majors as everywhere else, with the additional promise of an average sports program. If he went, he might tell his parents that he was going because he

suddenly wanted to move to California, but he knew he'd be going only because Kaelen asked him to.

It was intimidating, thinking about the scope of that decision. Out-of-state tuition was high enough without adding in room and board. Twenty-five thousand a year so he could go to college with Kaelen. There were couples in the high school making similar plans, but it had struck him as far-fetched when he heard them talking about it. And, most of those were in-state, either at BYU where dorms would certainly not be shared or at Utah, which was lax about sleepover rules, but there was still the general issue of living on-campus or off. He couldn't think of one couple considering moving out of Utah to go to school together.

And if he did, that was another matter. Applying was easy, fill out the form and tell his counselor to mail the school a transcript. If he got accepted, which was likely — his grades were well above the cut-off and the school would likely appreciate the higher tuition income he'd provide — what then? He doubted they'd be roommates that first year, and by the second they could have entirely different groups of friends. And that was without considering the implications of him choosing to move to another state for Kaelen. That was something that couples did, married couples or stable couples who wanted to stay together and understood that distance, even if that was only a two-hour plane ride, could drive them apart. If he got a scholarship, Shaun doubted Kaelen would keep it quiet; he would at least tell his mom out of spite, who would then tell her friends, some of whom worked in the school as classroom aides or in the office. Or the golf coach would tell every parent and athlete in attendance at the school's year-end awards banquet. Scholarships, even partial ones, were not something that could be kept to one's self. By their nature — the signatures, one coach talking to another to get an understanding of a kid, the handling of all the paperwork — people knew about them and

inevitably followed up. And then he'd be asked and he'd say Long Beach College, and then people would make connections in their minds regardless of the truth, if Shaun even understood what the truth was between him and Kaelen.

If they were strictly physical, strictly temporary, and strictly isolated to the past, then that was acceptable in his mind. However, Kaelen's refusal to talk about it gave Shaun little insight into how he saw things. If he asked because he wanted a friend in California, some sense of security, that was different than if he expected something more attached. Shaun could refuse because of the sheer absurdity of the request and no harm would be done to their friendship and he'd have a place to visit in the summer. If not, though, if this was his way of broaching the idea of something more serious, more significant, it was almost flattering in its degree of unfairness while also frustrating.

After Kaelen went to bed, Shaun investigated the website closer. The application wasn't just for Long Beach College, he found, but for all the schools in the system. All he needed to do was create an account and start entering information. There were a few schools that required the completion of an additional essay, but at the end he simply needed to check which schools he'd like his form forwarded to. That made it easier. Instead of applying to one place, he could apply to a variety of them and make the decision after he got accepted. Then it would seem like he tried for better schools and couldn't quite make the cut, but Long Beach College was still in the area he'd like to go, and maybe a step above others nearby. Then he could choose between that and Utah. And, who knew, maybe he'd get into a school he didn't expect and surprise himself by going there. At the very least, he told himself, no one could accuse him of following Kaelen, perhaps not even himself.

## Kaelen (Chapter 8)

Kaelen stood on the practice green, his attention focused on his left wrist. When he lost concentration, he tended to push the putter with his right hand rather than pull it forward with his left. He had a similar problem on his downswing, though it was easier for him to remind himself because he had time to walk off his frustration if he felt his body making that mistake. On the green though, if he missed a makeable putt, he tended to storm over and sloppily try again. He couldn't risk such mistakes today.

The course appeared the same as it had been when he left on Sunday, except for maybe a few more dead patches on the fairways than he had seen riding in with Shaun. He wouldn't know for certain until he got there, but the rough looked like it had been trimmed for the tournament, which was the opposite of what he expected. The greens were markedly faster, though. Maybe the practice rounds on Saturday and Sunday had been a mistake because even though he was pulling with his left arm, the ball was going at least five feet past the hole. For him, this was the worst part of warming up — getting his body in tune with the quickness of the greens. His full swing was consistently paced, and he altered distance by shortening his backswing, but getting into a similar groove with the putter was trying. On the tee-box and fairways, there was little variation in the swing unless he landed under a tree or bush. On the green, every putt was different unless he got within three feet of the hole on his approach shot or chip, which was completely unrealistic. His arms needed to get in synch with the shortness of that day's greens, but when he shortened his backstroke, his arm pulled too quickly through and when he lengthened it, the stroke slowed, but never enough to lag the ball close.

He'd received a message from Long Beach College's coach earlier that day, wishing him luck. He texted back, asking what he needed to shoot to get a scholarship, but the coach hadn't

told him any specific number as if by knowing it he'd cheat himself out of hitting it. That was a perk to high school golf, and maybe college, he thought: ignorance of any score other than your own. There wasn't a number urging you to try to clear water on the second shot or tempting a high, soft lob rather than the safe pitch-and-run almost guaranteed to leave an uphill putt. He wouldn't feel pressure to adjust his game, but he also wouldn't know where he stood until all the scores had been turned in.

"You're up in ten," his coach called from the sideline. Shortly afterward, he heard the announcement from the pro-shop. The putter still wasn't cooperating, but he was out of time. He should have had Shaun drive him earlier, but he hadn't wanted him to miss too much school that afternoon. At the tee-box, he shook hands with his partners and the official. He reached into his bag, pulled out a couple aspirin, and showed them to the official who okayed the pills. He didn't want to tighten on the course and then wait until he was back at the clubhouse for the back nine before getting the go ahead.

The foursome on the fairway had split, with three going to right and one to the left, and two of those to the right were in the rough. Just avoid that, Kaelen thought, and pulled out his five-wood. He had decided last night the extra forty yards wasn't worth the inconsistency. He wanted to walk off the green with a confident par, knowing all parts of his game were working. After he had that reassurance, he could start getting aggressive if he chose. He wasn't playing for the title so much as for the scholarship, and he guessed anything under a 78 could bring that to him. Anything on top of that was bonus. When he split the fairway while his partners all went right, he knew he'd made the right decision. He hit the five-wood again with his second shot, ended 140 yards from the green for his approach, and walked off the first green with a birdie. With seventeen holes to go, he felt like he might have a chance at the tournament and maybe

scholarship offers from elsewhere.

On the next tee, a par-four, he pulled out the book he and Shaun had used to plan his round. On Monday, he had decided to use the three-wood — another bit of distance without much loss in accuracy — but the birdie had given him a surge of confidence and his attention shifted to his driver. He was up first, but as he pressed the tee into the ground, he second-guessed his choice and returned to the three-wood. By following his plan on the first hole, he had gotten a birdie and there was no reason to change his strategy because he had over performed. He walked away from the hole with a par.

The inevitable slowdown came, and a bladed shot on a par-three led to a bogie, then a couple more pars, then back-to-back bogies, and then a par. The ninth was a par-five coming back toward the clubhouse, and Kaelen used the same strategy as the first hole: two five-woods with the hope for an accurate, mid-range approach. As he was lining up his third shot, he noticed his coach whisper something to Shaun and then the two of them walked towards the clubhouse. He tried to put it out of his mind, but Shaun had walked along the ropes all that afternoon. Distracted, he hit his seven-iron long, to the back of the green and then saw a spectator pick up the ball and put it in his pocket.

“What the fuck?” he said, almost as an aside to his playing partners. Neither of them said anything, and he ran toward the green, the clubs clinking behind him, their weight and awkward positioning changed his normal gait from a stride to a wide waddle. He felt a few clubs drop out, but he’d pick them up after he got everything sorted at the green.

He slowed near the green when he saw his coach yelling at someone and Shaun standing a few feet away. The man’s hair was longer now, but he wore the same aviator sunglasses that Kaelen had seen resting on the bar and kitchen table at home. “What the fuck, Jerome?” he

yelled.

Jerome's hand dropped to his right side, hovering above a bright yellow device.

"Put down the clubs," he said. "We can handle this calmly."

"You took my fucking ball," Kaelen said. "What the fuck are you even doing here?"

"Put down the clubs and put your hands in the air."

"I'm on the phone with dad," Shaun said. "He's going to meet you down there."

"Where am I going?"

"You're being arrested for possession," Jerome said. "Now put down the clubs. I'm sure Shaun will make sure they all get back to you."

"Of what?"

"We'll talk about it at the station, but I need to place you under arrest. To do that, I need you to put down your clubs."

"Today. You're doing this today?" His mind jumped to the Long Beach coach. There was no way to explain this as a did not finish, and if he told the truth there was no way he'd get the scholarship. Nobody on the team got full rides, and he wasn't good enough for the coach to take a chance on. He was fucked. He had ignored all the other coaches from nearby schools on the hopes of leaving, and now Jerome was taking that chance from him. He wanted to pull out a club and attack the green with it, plow rows in it with his five-iron like he was tilling a field. Jerome had had a month to pull a stunt like this, and he'd waited until today.

"You'll get my clubs?" he asked.

"Yes," Shaun said. "Don't say anything until my dad gets there."

He dropped the bag from his shoulder, hoping its edges had dented the green in some way.

"You gonna cuff me again?" he asked.

“Yes,” Jerome said. “Now turn around.”

\*

Kaelen sat in the same cramped room as a month earlier. The walls were the same yellow-white and his chair a simple foldable one like those used for large gatherings in schools and churches. The table though, was sturdy and heavy. Even with Jerome in the room, it was the only thing that gave off any sense of authority. His hands were still cuffed behind him, tightly, as before. Kaelen focused on that tension rather than Jerome’s voice. He wanted that voice to be nothing more than sounds.

“I’m sorry about today,” Jerome said. “I really am. Honestly, I didn’t want to do it. Your mom didn’t find a lot of pot in your room, and your dad and your tournament and everything. I imagine you’d been under a lot of stress and this was just a way to get yourself at ease. But your mom was worried, and though you and I don’t see eye-to-eye, I figure if you got your mom worried, then it’s my job to get myself worried. We may not like each other, but she loves you and that makes this little problem partly mine.”

Kaelen tried to turn his wrists so that he could feel the metal dig into his skin. It was surprising how quickly the sensation appeared and then faded away. He told himself that he only needed to stay quiet until Shaun’s dad arrived.

“To be honest, I’ve only got the warrant and nobody really wants to do anything to you, like charges and stuff. You got college coming up, and student loans and one drug conviction on that and you’re ineligible. Which means maybe you’ll go piecemeal to community colleges or something while you work at the golf course. Assuming, Sue-Ann lets you work full-time and pays you enough to live off of. Maybe Shaun’s dad will hire you to be his secretary or something. I hear in-laws are good for shit like that. Nobody wants to see their son’s boyfriend



struggling by working at some fast-food joint and not moving forward. Hell, maybe he'll even front the tuition money so you can join Shaun at school, take classes together, study, live together. That'd be nice for the two of you, don't you think?"

Again, Kaelen twisted his wrists to distract himself.

"Though, maybe," Jerome said. "We could come to some sort of understanding. I let you go, see to it that the evidence gets misfiled so that even if the asshole prosecutor wants to charge you with something he won't be able to. I'll even pull out a tape recorder, read your rights, you can say you wanna talk to your lawyer, and I'll keep badgering you so that anything you say gets tossed out. I'll take the ding on my record and probably the desk-duty suspension that'll come with it all for you, you understand. All you need to do is apologize to your mom for moving out and tell her that you'll move back in at least until graduation, and then, problem solved."

"That's what this is about?" Kaelen asked. He suspected it might be a trick on Jerome's part, but if he stuck to that aspect of his claims and didn't talk about the pot there couldn't be any harm in a conversation. "Why does she care? I'll be moving in August anyways."

"You think a mother wants to spend less than the maximum possible time with her son?" Jerome asked. "And, I know we don't get along, but you're much easier to deal with than your younger brother. Can you imagine her? Stuck with him after school every day. You're not that much of a conversationalist yourself, but at least you offer variation."

"She can always talk to you," Kaelen said.

"All she wants is for you to move home," Jerome said. "After that, all this is over. We even got the results from the body your friend found. He was drunk and drowned. He likely blacked out and fell into the pond. We didn't find anything else, no hits to head or bruises. Couple scrapes here and there, but nothing extreme."

“So you don’t think I killed him anymore.”

“My job is simple: I read reports, ask questions, and follow wherever it all takes me. The phone company said he called, you were working at the time, and ta-da — I have to ask. You could’ve been more cooperative. None of our ugly history had to happen. Other than that thing with Shaun, I know little about you. Maybe you like older guys; maybe older guys like you and you like money. These, like most things in your life, are things I don’t know about you and don’t care to learn. I do know you smoke pot, which is illegal and which your mom is worried about. Move back home, and it’ll get sorted. She might want to test you periodically, but that’s better than probation where you have to piss in a cup in front of a complete stranger. She’ll probably only make you leave the bathroom door open. Even that’s pretty easy to fool, so you can keep smoking pot too. Look at that, all your fuck-ups forgiven by her.”

There was a knock on the door, and Jerome unlocked Kaelen’s cuffs as Shaun’s dad walked in. “You say anything?”

“He asked for you from the get-go,” Jerome said. “And I’m looking to waste time getting a confession that can’t hold up. So we were just shooting the shit, nothing about the pot, swear to God.”

“Kaelen?”

“He didn’t ask about the pot,” Kaelen said. Shaun’s dad had gotten him out of his second jam in as many months, but he understood that it was all being done as a favor for Shaun and not because the man felt any connection to him. He followed Shaun’s dad to the car.

“Maybe I should move back home,” Kaelen said. Asking Jerome to do this today was fucked up, but he had ignored his mom’s phone calls. She’d been through a lot the last couple of years, and if this was her reaching out, maybe in time he could think about forgiving her.

“That’s a bad idea,” Shaun’s dad said. “He pulls you from the tournament on some bullshit possession charge.”

“He found it in my room.”

“Which you haven’t been in in over a month and he’s had access to the entire time. No matter what, it wasn’t holding up and he knows it. So why this?”

“He said mom wants me to move back in.”

“She wants that, here are her options: call you, call me, call Shaun; drop by the school, drop by our house, drop by the golf course; invite you to breakfast, invite you to lunch, invite you to dinner; ask you nicely, guilt you, use the courts. None of those involve getting you disqualified.”

“She may not have known,” Kaelen said. For the last few years, he and his mom hadn’t gotten along great and until he died, his dad had acted as a go-between during their worst fights. But the fights had been inconsequential until she refused to break up with the man who had arrested him. Even then, she seemed more apologetic than angry.

“You move back and Jerome can talk to you anytime he wants about anything. Give it enough time, and you maybe even forget he’s a cop who wants to know why that guy may have called the course you were working at a couple hours before he died.”

“He said they figured out he was drunk and fell in.”

“He asked you about it?” They pulled into a parking spot outside a Chinese restaurant.

“He didn’t ask anything, just said they figured it out.”

“You say anything to him about it?”

“No,” Kaelen said. He had thought telling Shaun’s dad that he had one fewer case to worry about would be good news.

“With the pot, Jerome could’ve come to me to work out an agreement that didn’t jeopardize

your future. He didn't need to make a scene, and he did. You may think you don't trust him because he's dating your mom and that situation makes you feel disloyal, but you shouldn't trust him because he decided to fuck up your life in the worst way possible. He doesn't care about you. If you are ever in a room with him and he tries talking to you, ignore him. If he says hello, don't even politely say hi. If they have a report that says they think the guy was drunk, fell in, and drowned, I haven't seen it. The one I've seen, says booze and drowning, but not a word about how he got in the pond in the first place — whether he fell or was pushed.”

“I understand,” Kaelen said, and his house, mom, and even Conner became more distant in his mind that moment. His mom would hear about that afternoon — through Shaun's dad, Shaun, Jerome, or the neighborhood — and she'd decide to break-up or stay with Jerome. If she stayed, there was no way he could ever go home again and if they broke-up, there'd be guilt mixed with suspicion on her part. A part of him hoped she stayed because then, at least, he knew where he stood in her eyes.

## **Alana (Chapter 9)**

The first time she tried, she had knocked down two bicycles and scattered an assortment of sporting equipment. She barely made it out of the garage and around the corner — up the block, away from her truck — when she heard the garage door close. But she had learned that an aluminum canoe was too heavy for her to carry on her own. She'd either have to ask Kaelen to help her steal it or find something lighter. The whole school knew about his arrest, and so she was reluctant to ask him to help her steal from a garage. Who knew what kind of trouble he was in? Maybe the police were trailing him at night.

A few days after the first fiasco, she found a garage with a two-person kayak. Unlike the first one, this garage was clean and organized; except for a lawn mower, most everything hung on the walls. It was after school, still daylight, but also early enough that most likely the neighbors were away too. Maybe, she thought, if she parked the truck in the garage and lifted the boat into the bed, anybody who saw would assume she had permission. That might be less suspicious than walking it down the sidewalk at night. She circled the block, saw that nothing had changed, and turned onto the driveway. The kayak was lighter than she expected, about as much as a mid-sized dog, and so long that a portion of it had to rest upon the truck's tailgate. She backed out and drove to the golf course.

There were a couple other older men in the clubhouse talking to Kaelen, and she tried to look innocuous by staring at the sodas and sports drinks through the refrigerator's glass doors. With everything that had happened, she wondered if he would even remember their agreement or if he would act as awkwardly as she felt. The two men left, laughing at some unheard remark, and she approached the counter.

"Drive to the far side of the parking lot," he said. "Behind everyone on the range. I'll meet

you out there in a few minutes. I gotta find someone to cover the counter.”

“Aren’t they gonna notice?” she asked.

“They’re busy watching balls.”

She listened to the radio while watching the yellow balls disappear into the setting sun. It seemed like an unnecessarily repetitive sport. Kaelen knocked on the window. The two of them lifted the kayak out of the back, and Kaelen handed her a ring of keys.

“The short one, like for a padlock,” he said and lifted the boat over his head. She walked along side him. “When you want to do this?”

“Sunday afternoon?”

“Meet me here at four,” Kaelen said. They were at the red shed, and it looked so old and worn that she doubted the lock provided any real security. Pull hard enough on the door, and the latch would break from the wood.

Inside was old gardening equipment, lawn mower blades, bags of fertilizer, and what could be miles of rolled hoses. “I’ll lean it in that corner, I guess,” Kaelen said. “Will it crack if I stand it up?”

“No idea,” Alana said. “It’s designed to hit rocks, right? So it’ll probably be okay.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Kaelen said. He maneuvered it through the door, angled the front onto the dirt floor, and the pushed it up against the wall.

“It’s not gonna fall over, is it?” she asked. He pulled the front toward him some more so the angle was less severe.

“Paddles?”

She retrieved those from the rear of the truck’s cabin. “I’ll see you Sunday,” she said.

\*

Alana gambled that insects and thorns were a larger threat than tipping into the pond, and dressed in jeans with a long-sleeved shirt. She parked where she had earlier, and walked to Kaelen, who was at the end of the range near the shed. He was standing barefoot, wearing shorts and t-shirt.

“Ready?” she asked.

Kaelen handed her the key. “Pull it out and put my clubs in there. I’m gonna grab a cart.”

She stopped counting the people on the range when she got to fifteen. They would all notice the bright blue plastic that was twice the length of the carts she had seen. “Isn’t that a little obvious?”

“Most of them know me,” Kaelen said. “They’ll probably figure I’m heading out to gather balls from the pond or that we’re on some kind of weird date. Doesn’t matter though because they’ll forget as they try to figure out where their swing is fucking up.”

“Alright,” Alana said. He hadn’t tried to back out when she dropped off the boat. He had earned some degree of trust.

The boat stood in the corner still with its paddles next to it on the ground. She checked the casing for cracks, then carried it out still impressed by its lightness. She had the door locked again when Kaelen returned. He had put on a pair of flip-flops.

He stood the kayak on its end again, and rested it in the semi-circular on the back of the cart that designed to hold a golf bag, then he tightened the strap around. “You’re gonna have to hold it up, to be safe.”

Alana kneeled on the passenger side, facing back, and grabbed onto the oval. “Not too fast, please,” she said, and regretted it immediately. She sounded too cheery, almost flirtatious. Kaelen angled the paddles between them on the cart and started toward the 13<sup>th</sup> hole. A couple

times, especially when they were going downhill, she worried the wind would catch the kayak like a sail and send it flipping behind them, but she was able to maintain her grip. She felt the smooth pavement give way to pebbles then grass as they drove up to the pond's edge.

Together, they lifted the boat out and placed the front into the pond. Alana sat in the front oval while Kaelen pushed them further into the water at the back. She tried to help by using the paddle to coax them further into the water. She heard Kaelen's feet splash in the water and then she felt the slight rocking as he sat down. One end of his paddle came down and rested on her shoulder. "That tree?"

Alana synched up her rowing with Kaelen's, and the lack of wind let the two of them cross with ease. As they grew closer to shore, she noticed that rather than a gradual shoreline like a beach, there was a ridge a foot or so above the water. She hoped the water wasn't too deep. A few feet from the lip, they turned the kayak sideways. Kaelen tested the depth with his paddle, and climbed out, trying to keep the boat from swaying too much and flipping over.

The water went up to the hem of his shorts, just above his knee. He pushed the kayak alongside the edge. "Climb on out."

Alana stood awkwardly. Despite Kaelen's grip, the boat still rocked and she worried that as she stepped out, her end would shoot backwards and she'd fall in the pond. She took a hold of one of the tree's lower branches, and stepped up. The boat remained steady. Kaelen followed her up.

"Can you check my calves for leeches?" he asked, turning around.

She saw a few larger black marks, but when she went to brush them off with a twig they were just dirt. "None."

"Alright. What are we looking for?"



“Anything,” Alana said. Up and down the pond’s edge, it all looked the same. Bushes and trees grew through layers of leaves that had fallen for who knew how many years, and there was already a fresh crop starting on top of the older ones. If something had happened to her father out here, it was likely that any clue had already been covered. Maybe, instead of a piece of jewelry that fell off in a fight or stick used to knock him unconscious, she and Kaelen would only find broken branches that hinted at what might have happened instead of telling the story.

She thought back to the funeral and to memories of how her dad looked before he had died. In the coffin, he was wearing his wedding ring and she noticed how the bulk of his watch raised the cobalt cuff of his shirt. Even in death, mom made sure to dress him as the financial advisor he had been in life, though without a sports coat because Barry didn’t have one to wear to the funeral. Even without the jacket, her dad’s outfit had struck her as too severe, as if her mom was trying to distract the line of people walking up to his casket from remembering the circumstances of his death.

“You want to split up?” Kaelen asked. “I go down the shore and you go up?”

“This was a mistake,” Alana said. “There’d be something, we’d see something, right? Broken branches, a strip of dirt that looks as if a 200-pound kettle bell had been dragged through it. Or something similar if he staggered in drunk. I don’t see anything. It should be obvious, right?”

“You’d think, but shit grows over quickly. We drop seed into divots on the course and within a couple weeks, you can’t even tell the difference.”

“But that grass is short,” Alana said. “There’s like decades worth of growth here and you said no-one comes out here so I thought something would stand out.”

“I only suggest the tree because it’s a pretty big landmark. You wanna walk up the shore and I’ll walk down it?”

“Why don’t we walk together, I’ll just go further into the brush because I’m wearing jeans?”

“We can do that,” Kaelen said. “We’ll just keep a lookout and see what we see.”

They walked in silence, Alana ten feet away from the shore. She had to maneuver her body through the thickets, and if she missed anything because of the branches and thorns, she wanted him close enough to notice. He didn’t seem to mind the slow progress, and his eyes kept scanning the area. Except for the snapping of twigs or the odd sound of a bird or insect, the area was quiet.

“This far enough up you think?” Kaelen asked. Alana turned around. She could barely make-out the route she’d just walked. She had been sober and hiked with care. She needed to climb up a rock or something; if she got high enough, she could look over everything and maybe see a scar leading from wherever the nearest road was to the pond. Unfortunately, there was nothing high up for her to stand on and the trees were close enough together that the branches big enough to support her would also interfere with any line-of-sight. She walked to Kaelen. She still wanted to walk down from the boat for about fifteen minutes, so there was no need to waste time staggering back through the brush.

“You didn’t look too surprised when I showed up the other day,” she said.

“I got all the surprise I have sucked out of me already.”

“Is it true that you swung a golf club at him?” She had already heard three or four different versions of the story at school. It was only a matter of time until one master story overtook the rest.

“Nope, I turned around and he arrested me. No crying, no running, no physical threats, no mace. He never pulled out his gun and I didn’t kick in any window.”

“That’s good, I guess,” Alana said. “That they can’t charge you with anything else.”

“They didn’t, they haven’t, and my lawyer says they won’t. The asshole was fucking with me. Did a pretty good job of ruining my life, too.”

“How?”

“If I had a chance at a golf scholarship, now I don’t.”

“Did you explain what happened? Maybe he’d understand, you know. Like he got into some trouble when he was younger too.”

“He knows I didn’t finish.”

“He know why?”

“There’s plenty of other people out there who did finish.”

“I think you should explain what happened. Maybe you’ll get a break.”

They passed the boat, and Alana again went into the bushes. They walked another fifteen minutes or so. “This is hopeless.”

“Likely,” Kaelen said. “We can keep going if you want.”

“It’s getting chilly,” she said. The trees kept the area shaded, and the sun had begun to set.

“How are you doing?” Kaelen asked. “With everything.”

“I’m stealing kayaks and going on pointless walks with drug dealers, apparently. My mom would probably say I’m not doing too well.”

“I don’t deal.”

“Why’d you have it then?”

“It wasn’t mine,” Kaelen said. “Not that I haven’t smoked pot before, you know, but I was holding it for someone.”

“Who?”

“I shouldn’t tell you. If someone finds out that I was talking to you about it, Jerome could ask

you and you'd have to tell him what I said."

"I promise I won't tell anyone," Alana said.

"Once they threaten to fuck up your future, whatever you promise me isn't going to matter.

Let's talk about something else. Where you looking at college?"

"Nowhere yet, I'm going to start looking at places this spring," Alana said. "My dad wanted to do like a two-week tour of campuses this summer. He wanted to do the same with Barry, but Barry's a complete fuck-up. He'd flunk out of GED course."

"I have a younger brother. He'll probably turn into a fuck-up down the line. Or a dick if Jerome moves in with my mom."

"Who's that?"

"The cop who arrested me," Kaelen said.

"And your mom's staying with him?"

"Yup. Before everything last week, we got in a fight and he arrested me. My mom stayed with him then. This time, she said she was worried about the pot and that he was only trying to help. Like fucking up my future is trying to help."

"That's crazy," Alana said. "My mom's crying every night. I think if I even bring up college around here, she'll go crazy. Barry'll be there, but she might consider me better company."

"It took my mom eight months, after my dad died. She acted like she was going out to dinner with friends, but usually when she got home from work the first thing she did was change into jeans and wash off her make-up. But she's not a dyke, you know. So when she started to wear make-up out again it was like a dead-giveaway."

"She make a big issue out of it?" Alana asked. "With mom, it seems like everything needs to have a conversation. Should we buy the brown eggs or the white eggs; your dad always got the

brown ones and I don't want you or Barry to feel bad. Stupid shit. All the conversations about the stupidest shit. Maybe I want her to start dating, get her distracted, so I don't have to talk through every little thing."

"It'll fade," Kaelen said. "And one day you'll realize you haven't talked about your dad in a month or two."

"How'd your dad die?"

"Leukemia," Kaelen said. "It took like three years."

"So you had time with him? Before it happened."

"Yeah. I was lucky like that."

They were at the back at the kayak. Kaelen climbed into the pond and held the boat steady while Alana stepped into it. She was disappointed she hadn't found anything about her dad, but she had enjoyed talking with Kaelen. And, even if he decided to never tell her, she had figured out why he had pot in his room. That proved she could solve mysteries.