The 100 Precepts of Orran Dain

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THE 100 PRECEPTS OF ORRAN DAIN

DANIEL PICKLES

Master’s Program in Creative Writing

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THE 100 PRECEPTS OF ORRAN DAIN

By

DANIEL PICKLES, B.S.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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By the time you read this, we suspect that the human bodies we were wearing have been found, and that a flurry of fragmented reports have begun to hit the wire services. --Marshall Applewhite

Preface:
One: History and Scope

I’ve often wondered whether I’m miserable enough to be a good writer. All in all, my life has been pretty great. No drug problems. No abuse. No hard-boiled education in the School of Hard Knocks, though McGregor High School did have its moments. I did have a deadbeat dad, but he had the courtesy to stay out of sight and leave me to my mother, even going so far as to die when I was eighteen, ensuring that he couldn’t cause me any undue stress as I grew into adulthood.

To be sure, I’ve had some problems, but they’re pretty boring: anxiety, a touch of depression, a tendency to eat pizza at an incredible rate in order to choke it down before my stomach realizes it’s full. But beyond those occasional troughs, I’m pretty good. So what am I supposed to write about? Who cares about the plight of the privileged Midwestern white guy? Not to mention, being born and bred in Minnesota, it’s a near genetic impossibility for me to speak as though something in life may have inconvenienced me. It’s not done. We look at our shoes and eat hot-dish to cope. We don’t complain.

These things weighed on me as I considered my thesis. There’s a temptation to imbue everything with tremendous gravity when you’re in an MFA program. You shouldn’t just say something, you should say something important; something that makes a deep emotional connection with your reader; something that forms a bond and transcends time and space, allowing your words to echo across whatever remains for the human species, and never, ever
loses its power, even when read by our far superior evolutionary descendants a thousand years from now. If my book doesn’t resonate with the denizens of the underground kingdom of bug-people that will rule the earth in the far flung future, I thought, I will have failed and squandered my time studying creative writing. It’s a tremendous amount of pressure, as you can probably imagine. It locks you up, makes you question whether trying is even worth it. But of course it is, bug-people be damned. So you find a way. In my case, the way came in the form of a potentially apocryphal quote that kept finding me. In a nutshell: “Write the book you want to read. The one you cannot find.”

That particular version of the quote is attributed to Carol Shields, but you can also find versions attributed to Toni Morrison, Meg Cabot, and a whole herd of others. Fortunately, the attribution isn’t important. The important part is that this question led me to write The 100 Precepts of Orran Dain.

This gave me a starting point. Rather than asking myself whether I was sad enough, or had endured enough to write a worthwhile book, I considered what I would want to read. It would have to be set in the Midwest, preferably in a small town. It would involve con-men. It would be good vs. evil, but on an intimate scale. It would be real, with real problems.

As for the thrust of the plot, that was the easy part. For as long as I can remember, I’ve been fascinated by religious cults, both real-life and fictitious. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu-Cult served as an early inspiration, as did his Esoteric Order of Dagon. As I grew older, real groups joined the mix: The People’s Temple; The Branch Davidians; Heaven’s Gate; The Process Church of Final Judgment; and Charles Manson’s crew of killer-hippies all fascinated me. There was even a cult that sprang up in my hometown a couple of years after I moved away. Frankly, that felt a bit like the universe pointing a finger at me. To my knowledge, they’re still there.
The novel would be about a cult. My intention was to explore not only why a person might be compelled to join a cult, but also what would motivate someone to lead a cult. Gemini Lovegood and Arthur Noll are my attempts at working out the answers to these complex questions and Willy Grieves is the lens through which we see them. At the heart of the story, all of these things were centered on a darkly comic narrative exploring the subjects of religion and faith, and how they can affect and influence people.

In his book Raven: The untold story of the Reverend Jim Jones and his People, author Tim Reiterman lays out the following theory for Jones’s ability to control his people:

Like the temple, most cults set out unattainable goals such as heaven on earth, because attainment would leave the organization without a justification for its own existence. The cult really strives to preserve a state of mind with defendable borders. […] And this alarmist view is promoted by the charismatic leader who constantly asks his followers to push a juggernaut of paranoia (Reiterman. “Radicals”).

The element of control, then, at least in the case of Jim Jones, all comes back to a sense of identity. People feel an intense need to belong. Given a mastermind to provide the proper cocktail of identity, belonging, isolation, and paranoia, people will do crazy things. And of course, this notion is nowhere near exclusive to religious cults; it spills in to media, politics, and many of the more well-lit areas of society.

There’s also a certain sense of irony in the fact that a writer may have been one of Jones’s influences in the way he exerted control over the People’s Temple. According to Melissa Dittman in her article Lessons from Jonestown: “Jones, who acted as the pastor of the People’s Temple, studied [George] Orwell’s system of mind control described in ‘1984’ and
commissioned a song that his followers were required to sing at Jonestown about the advent of the year 1984.” The notion that Jones found such a powerful weapon in a book written by a man that was arguably one of the most outspoken and effective critics of manipulation and mind control felt a bit eerie. It also provided much-needed validation for my instinct that my novel would be the right place to tease these questions out in greater depth.

Thus my theme was born, though I still had some four-hundred plus pages to go before I’d realize it. In retrospect, I think it’s good that I had no clue what I’d be writing about in this book. I’ve always been of the opinion that a writer is better off the less he or she knows about the theme of their current work before they begin. My own writing is no exception. I started with this small handful of elements, and felt unprepared. Now, looking back, I think this was the best possible scenario. I brought so little to the table when I started that I focused only on finding the story, and in finding my story, I found my theme.

*There’s nothing wrong with being incompetent. It just means you don’t have to do as much.*

--Charles Manson

**Two: Guidance, Process, and Problems**

In writing my novel, the most important thing was to create a sense of the place and the people that comprised the story. Quite simply, I love where I live. I love the snow, the trailer parks, the weirdos, the hillbillies, the coyotes wandering through town, and everything in between. But of course the problem then becomes the issue of my familiarity. A writer can fail by assuming too much. The fact that I see this place every day makes me take important details for granted. My guiding light in this regard was John Gardener’s concept of Fiction as Dream. In Gardener’s words:
The writer presents a scene—let us say a scene in which two rattlesnakes are locked in mortal combat. He makes the scene vivid in the reader’s mind; that is, he encourages the reader to “dream” the event with enormous clarity, by presenting as many concrete details as possible (32).

Common sense? Maybe. Also the single most important thing I learned in graduate school, along with the power of concrete over abstract details. My bumbling experiences as a poetry student at UTEP had given me a solid core of what it meant to provide my reader with concrete details. Combined with Gardener’s concept, I became aware of the special brand of hypnosis that occurs between a reader and a writer. I provide the details and, in a perfect world, my reader sees what I intend them to see. It’s a tenuous state, particularly for a fledgling novelist, and it’s easily broken by abstractions or author intrusion.

I don’t think there’s a specific kind of writing that can best create the state that Gardener describes. In my opinion, it comes down to voice, which is a highly individualized thing. When a writer uses a clear voice, their voice, the prose feels like it’s “written on air” (Lansdale). Disingenuous writing is a surefire way to pull the reader out of the story. This meant I needed to spend time making sure that I used something as close to an authentic voice as I’d ever used, or my characters wouldn’t be believable. My quest for voice left a trail of gutted chapters in its week, but eventually I came to realize that if I wanted to sound authentic, I had to stop obsessing over it. I wrote faster, focused on moving from point A to point B in the story, and cozied up to the idea of writing something terrible. The words started to flow more easily, and some of them even sounded like me. I’m still not sure I’ve found my voice or if I ever will, but whatever pieces of it I’ve found are here, in this novel.
Whether I succeeded in creating my own fictive dream remains to be seen. There will be more revisions, more agonizing over details, and more adding and removing the viscera of my story until I feel I’ve got the right mix. Regardless, this is the principle I attempted to follow while I wrote *The 100 Precepts of Orran Dain*.

I had my rough outline, my guiding principle, a voice, and the will to write a novel. Experience was the x-factor. To date, I hadn’t written anything as long or as ambitious as the project I had in mind, and to compound matters I’d spent a great deal of time obsessing over my process. Was I, to use common internet terminology, a plotter or a pantser? In other words, should I begin by writing an outline (plotting), or simply start writing and hope for the best (pantsing)? As a writer, finding the appropriate process is almost as important as finding the right story.

I pored over the lectures that Lex Williford had given in his Writing the Novel course, obsessing over the details he provided regarding outlining, mind-mapping, and the different ways a person could think about the story they were writing. One valuable metaphor that stuck with me, as mentioned in one of our meetings, was that of Lex’s aging car and the fear it inspired when undertaking a long drive. In the end, Lex said, he learned to appreciate the journey. With that mindset, the whole thing seemed less daunting. If I broke down in my novel’s Death Valley, that was okay—it’s all part of the journey. I began writing and recording what I’d written in mind maps.

Naturally, many disasters occurred. As of the date I finished my first draft, I’d been writing this novel for closing in on fourteen months straight. You’re seeing only a portion of the words that went in to it (my best guess based on Scrivener totals is 250,000 or so words, if you’re curious). The rest are decaying in my Thinkpad’s recycle bin. Those excess and excised
words contain a near complete failed version of the novel that I abandoned. Nevertheless, after a long series of stumbles, I hit a kind of rhythm and a process began to form.

The writing was non-linear, skipping from chapter to chapter. I worked on whatever I had the ideas or motivation to work on at a given time. If I had no ideas or motivations, I’d start filling in the cracks between the chapters I had already written. This was new territory for me. I’d only ever written in order, chapter by chapter. The change in process brought clarity to some advice that Lex had pointed out to me in lectures and conversations in the past: writing out-of-order allows the author to indulge two halves of a conflicted brain. One half is devoted to the scene, the details of the moment, painting a vivid picture for the reader and seducing them into the fictional dream, as explained by Gardener. The other half of the brain wants to focus on order and flow; it wants to organize the scenes and consider the story in terms of narrative arc. Up until this point, I had been attempting to force my brain to engage both elements simultaneously, and failing miserably in the process. By allowing myself to focus on one thing or the other, the process became much easier. I let my scene-mind go wild as I wrote scenes upon scenes, with no regard for where they would eventually fall in the overall plot of the novel. Once I arrived at a place where I felt I had written every scene I needed, I indulged the half of my brain that needed to organize.

Speed was also a defining factor. As I wrote, I found myself overthinking every scene and agonizing over every detail. This is not how novels are made—at least not for me. I decided that I would work as quickly as possible while I worked the kinks out of my new process. This enabled me to keep moving without bogging down. In Ann Lamott’s words:

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you
and a shitty first draft. I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, that you won’t have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren’t even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a whole lot more fun while they’re doing it (28).

Working in this way helped to resolve a long term problem I’ve encountered while working on longer projects. After a certain number of words, often around the twenty-thousand mark, the book would bog down. Confusion would cut into my confidence and I’d begin meandering in odd directions, trying to find the thread that I’d somehow lost in the process. I can’t honestly say the problem disappeared upon discovering the new process, but it was diminished. To use a tired yet appropriate metaphor, I spent my writing days staring at the trees. When that was done, I took a step back and contemplated the forest. Eureka.

As with any solution, my new process also contained several new and unforeseen consequences. At the end of writing my scenes, for example, it was somewhat overwhelming to look back over several months’ worth of work with the understanding that I would have to sift through it all and find the timelines. Consistency also bared its fangs as I realized that characters had disappeared throughout the course of the novel, never to be seen again. Fortunately, I’m an optimist. I viewed these problems as good problems to have. New problems. Problems that only a guy who’d written a zero-draft of a novel could have, and being that guy was half the battle. As I began what some might call my second draft and I called my first draft, I worked through these problems attempting to correct them. As of this writing, I’m still working at it.
The only way you can control people is to lie to them. You can write that down in your book in
great big letters. The only way you can control anybody is to lie to them.

--L. Ron Hubbard

Three: Influence/Framework

Over the course of writing my novel, I drew inspiration from a variety of sources and a
range of media. In the beginning, I labored under the delusion that I had to make my research for
the novel as formal and serious as possible. All business. Enjoying myself felt like cheating.
After pouring through a few serious books on the topic, I happened to read a pulp novel by
author Adam Neville called Last Days. Last Days is essentially a horror novel, and not a
particularly good one, though it was enjoyable. More importantly, it made me realize that there
was a tremendous body of fiction on cults as well, both on paper and film. The expanded options
proved invaluable and allowed me to have a great deal more fun as I wrote. Some notable
eamples include True Detective, Brian Evanson’s Last Days, The Path, The Sound of My Voice,
and an army of short stories and obscure found footage films too long to completely recall.

In terms of non-fiction, Raven and Helter Skelter provided a sense of the megalomania
that can take place in the brain of a cult leader. My own take on it, Gemini Lovegood, is far more
subdued than Charles Manson or Jim Jones, but to my way of thinking that’s what makes him
dangerous. Unlike his predecessors, Gemini can play along with the world if he thinks it will get
him what he wants. Nevertheless, there’s a towering ego lurking in Gemini’s brain, and it was
informed by passages such as the following, taken from Helter Skelter:

There are days when I get caught up in being the most notorious convict of all
time. In that frame of mind, I get off on all the publicity, and I’m pleased when
some fool writes and offers to “off some pigs” for me. I’ve had girls come to visit
me with their babies in their arms and say “Charlie, I’d do anything in the world for you. I’m raising my baby in your image.” Those letters and visits used to delight me, but that’s my individual sickness. What sickness is it that keeps sending me kids and followers? It’s your world out there that does it. I don’t solicit my mail or ask anyone to come and visit me. Yet the mail continues to arrive and your pretty little flowers of innocence keep showing up at the gates (Kindle Loc. 11133).

This stuck with me as I wrote Gemini. I had no interest in making him a neo-Manson, but I wanted to infuse him with the kind of insolent pride that would lead a person to that mindset, in which he believed he had not only earned, but deserved the power and sway he held over the people that followed him. For Gemini, as for Charles Manson and Jim Jones, Hell is simply the absence of attention. This is Gemini’s primary motivation: he needs to be seen and adored. The more people he can draw, the better. Though the leaders of cults often insist any number of crazy things—that they’re the messiah, that they can lead people to the promised land, that they can arrange for transportation to a new dimension—the one thing that is a near constant with all of them is that they insist on keeping their audience at all costs. Say whatever you want about their claims or omnipotence; criticism is fine as long as you’re still listening. The point at which the threat of losing the following becomes apparent typically coincides with the time at which an acolyte is asked to begin mixing up a cauldron of purple juice.

Willy Grieves was a bit more of an eclectic assembly. He’s a part Nic Pizzolato’s Rustin Cohle from True Detective: “Well, if the common good has got to make up fairy tales, then it’s not good for anybody,” though he’s a bit more Jim Harrison’s Sunderson, from Great Leader: “As a man with an extraordinarily ordinary mind the confusion he felt was blasphemous as if he
had suddenly lost his arms while driving” (10). Mostly, though, he’s an amalgamation of the
countless tired old men I’ve met growing up in Northern Minnesota.

Tonally speaking, I wanted to strike a balance somewhere between reality and dark
comedy. This kept me humble in a lot of ways. At heart, I’m a fanboy; if I can find a way to
squeeze a tentacle-faced monstrosity into a story, chances are I’ll do it. In this case, though I
stuck with writing Gemini as what I hoped would be a realistic and charismatic leader and also a
terrible person. His claims are far-fetched, but no more so than many of the more well-known
cult leaders of the last century, and as Reiterman argues in the above quote, Gemini works with
what he perceives as a defendable philosophy, or at least one that can’t be actively disproved.
This serves the tone of the novel by providing an interesting set of circumstances for Willy
Grieves, who’s never quite able to accept what he’s seeing. Like me, Willy’s an optimist, even
though he may not always seem like it. As such, he’s easily disappointed in people. Using Willy
as a means to watch Gemini essentially built the tone of the story, and much of the humor can be
traced directly back to that.

My own feelings on religion are a driving force in the storyline as well. My mother did
her best to raise a Catholic, but it never quite took. I found it off-putting, even as a kid, that
people would be nice simply because they thought someone was watching and keeping score.
Worse yet were the people that thought they were entitled to treat you as they pleased if you
weren’t living according to the invisible scorekeeper’s rules. Keeping in mind that I have no
problems whatsoever with personal religion, I’m always wary of the ways people use religion as
a way to justify their actions. As Richard Dawkins put it in *The God Delusion*, when asked why
he attacks the worst examples of religion rather than focusing on the good:
If only such subtle, nuanced religion predominated, the world would surely be a better place, and I would have written a different book. The melancholy truth is that this kind of understated, decent, revisionist religion is numerically negligible. To the vast majority of believers around the world, religion all too closely resembles what you hear from the likes of [Pat] Robertson, [Jerry] Falwell or [Ted] Haggard, Osama Bin Laden or the Ayatollah Khomeini. These are not straw men, they are all too influential, and everybody in the modern world has to deal with them (15).

I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that Gemini and Willy are the author indulging in some play on religion. Ultimately the reader can reach their own conclusions about whether Gemini truly believes what he’s saying. Maybe he is the newest incarnation of a divine being beckoning people to a new home, far in the depths of space. Or maybe he just enjoys the sport of manipulating people. Maybe both. Regardless, his actions have real-world effects in the story and the city of Barlow—Willy specifically—has to deal with them.

This also points to a certain moral complexity that I wanted in the novel. Though Gemini is a bad person with bad intentions, the people that follow him, for the most part, aren’t. They’re searching for a sense of identity, belonging, purpose, and in the course of trying to find it, they get dragged in to Gemini’s muck. This parallels many of my own feelings on religion, and its why I don’t begrudge anyone their faith. It’s my hope that in writing Gemini and his followers, I’ve managed to elucidate the difference and make the point that the bad elements and the good are very different and often very separate.

A final piece of framework is the standard good vs. evil story. It takes a fair amount of guff, sometimes with good reason. Many good vs. evil stories are oversimplified. Still, there’s
something about them, when done right, that I find appealing. I wanted my story to have a Manichean vein running down the center, not dominant, but detectable. Barlow is the setting for my battle, in which Willy and Gemini tussle back and forth for the soul of the town. Midwestern towns have an interesting history as battlegrounds of this sort: *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *Summer of Night*, and *Boy’s Life* are all examples that have inspired me. I don’t aspire to reach or exceed any of those, but I will say that (to my knowledge) mine is the first one that plays out primarily in a trailer park.

Circling back to a point I made at the beginning of this preface, above all things I hope this book is fun. I want people to enjoy reading it and to get something from it. I don’t need it to be art, though if someone finds it to be art, that’s fantastic. Laughing and enjoying the read is enough for me. That said, there’s still a long way to go. The last fourteen months were a great start, but after moving forward beyond defense and graduation, there’s still plenty of work to be done if I want it to shine. And I do.

*Optimism is a perfectly legitimate response to failure.*

-Stephen King
Works Cited


Part I: November
Chapter One

Arthur woke to the taste of dust in his mouth. He sat up, smacked his lips, and fell into a
coughing fit that turned in to a series of dry-heaves. Something grainy, chunky, filled his mouth.
It tasted bitter as his saliva turned it into paste.

Grabbing the glass of water from the floor near his pallet, Arthur set about swishing and
spitting, swishing and spitting, swishing and spitting into the empty bucket in the corner of the
room where all of the prayer mats were typically stored.

He didn't bother wondering why the prayer mats were gone.

When he finally drained the glass, he worked the remaining chunks out of his cheeks and
teeth. White shards of something papery had gotten in to his open mouth somehow. One side was
rough and tacky, the other was smooth with slight bubbles. He ran a hand through his hair and
felt more chunks slip loose and hit the floor. They were all over his bed, too.

He looked at the ceiling. A large spot remained where a chunk of plaster the size of his
head had crumbled apart and fell, landing in his mouth. He marveled at the odds of a chunk of
plaster the size of his head, above his head, falling in to his mouth and waking him up. Arthur
had never been chosen to receive a sign, but if there ever was one, this was it.

He dropped from his bunk and brushed the remaining plaster from his shoulders. He
couldn't hear any of the others in the house. They were probably in the basement, praying,
listening to Brother Norm ramble on about the gospel of Orran Dain in his crude, bumbling way.
Why Gemini had picked Norm as the speaker in his absence was anyone's guess. The man was
an incredible oaf, who even at his most charming made people uncomfortable. He, if anyone,
needed to hear Orran Dain's message.

Arthur wondered if that was why Gemini had picked him.
Out into the hall and down the stairs. Faint voices now, drifting into the kitchen from the basement stairwell.

Arthur felt a gust of November wind and heard the mail skitter across the floor. As he reached the bottom of the stairs on the first floor, he noticed that the front door stood wide open. Strange. This time of year the cold would shrink the door-frame, making it a recurring nightmare to get the door to close. Another sign, maybe? Arthur doubted it.

He shut the door and went to the empty living room. The collection buckets and a stack of freshly-printed pamphlets waited by the door. The plan for the morning had been to drive to south Barlow and go door to door spreading the word of Orran Dain and collecting donations. Things had been very dry of late in the donation department. People would often give them money to put an end to the conversation and keep them at bay for a spell, but that could last only so long. When it became clear that The Church of the Long Dead, Ever-Living Orran Dain wasn't going away, people changed their strategy. They stopped offering money. They stopped answering the door. Because of that, Arthur had learned to hate his shift on collection days. The others pretended like they loved it, probably to put on a good show for Gemini. Arthur did too, to a certain degree, but he hated it. He wondered if collection day was canceled, if maybe Norm, in a rare moment of clarity, had decided to keep the members in the house for a day of relaxation and fellowship.

Gemini used to have days like that, but more and more he was obsessed with the money. Arthur didn't dare say it out loud, of course. He didn't even hold it against Gemini. The world was what it was and people needed to pay bills -- even people that were part of a holy organization destined to change the world. But at the very least Gemini didn't need to push so hard.
"Orran Dain will show a way if a way is to be shown," Arthur mumbled to himself. The 34th precept. He'd spend time later in the day considering it more. But for now, he needed to see what was happening in the basement.

#

At the bottom of the stairs Arthur found Norm. Towering above everyone else, Norm stood by the counters along the wall, pouring something into a series of paper cups arranged in symmetrical rows. Six rows of five, thirty total, a perfect multiplier of three and ten, the sacred numbers of Orran Dain. Also the exact number of members in the church. Thirty was perfect. Never more, never less. Gemini, the leader, made thirty-one, but as the thirteenth manifestation of Orran Dain, he didn't count. Just like Jesus didn't count as the thirteenth apostle.

Norm whistled as he worked, sloshing the purple juice across the counter top. Some low-level initiate would be cleaning that later. Arthur cleared his throat to get Norm's attention, then nodded at the cups.

"Hey. What's going on?"

"Special service," Norm replied. "Big news. Big day."

"How so?" Arthur asked.

"Last night I got word from on high. A vision. Or divine direction. Whatever you want to call it."

"From who?" Arthur asked.

"Orran Dain himself. None other."

Arthur remained skeptical, but kept his reservations to himself. He remembered a saying that his father had had used when ranting about the slower employees in the factory he ran: Jim is a good guy, but he's about as sharp as a bag of wet mice. He used a variation here and there,
but the message remained: Sharp as a bag of rubber balls; sharp as a sack of fat kittens; sharp as a drawer full of potatoes. Once, in the throes of a dark mood, Jim had looked like, what was it? A monkey fucking a football. Any of which could have applied to Norm. He'd been a criminal before coming to Gemini, and now he was a criminal in a long dry spell between crimes.

"So what's the news?" Arthur asked.

"He called us home. Time to leave these bodies behind and head into the beyond."

Arthur blinked, considered the words for a moment. "What do you mean?"

Norm paused, set down his pitcher of juice and blew out a long, cleansing breath as though Arthur was testing his patience. "I mean just what I said. Today is the day. We're leaving Earth. We're meeting Orran Dain."

"Meeting him how?" Arthur asked.

Moving fast enough to make Arthur jump, Norm spun and glowered at him. "I meant just what I said. We're leaving today. Right now. People are on the way out in the other room. Everyone is going."

Though he wasn't quite sure why, Arthur felt shaky. The meaning of what Norm said was far too slippery for his brain to grasp. Every time he got close, the thought wiggled away and he glimpsed only part of it. By the time he came to his senses, Norm had gone back to his work.

"Come on," Norm said over his back. "Let's go check on everyone."

#

Through the narrow doorway of the workshop the basement opened into a broad unfinished space. Perpetual leaking left the area damp and chilly, especially now in deep Autumn. A podium set atop a folding card table formed a pulpit, in front of which five rows of folding chairs provided a place for the congregation to sit. Empty seats littered the sitting area,
though Arthur was still counted at least fifteen to twenty people remaining. Most of them were unconscious, though a few still talked in low voices, or muttered to themselves. Arthur counted through the people, seeing who he knew.

Sandra slumped in the second row, a string of purple drool soaking her white blouse. Sandra was pregnant, she'd just informed the group last week. The baby was Gemini's, which meant a part of it would be Orran Dain. Anna was pregnant as well. She was in the third row, slightly more awake than Sandra. Anna clutched at her stomach and moaned, her feet slipping across the concrete floor as she rocked back and forth.

Chuck Thomas was in the front row, doubled over. Arthur watched his weight shift, so slow as to be almost imperceptible, forward, forward, until he toppled headfirst on to the floor, crushing his empty foam cup in the process.

"Get his legs," Norm said.

The idea of moving Chuck repulsed Arthur, but the shock of what he was seeing prevented him from coming up with any alternative. Could he do anything else? Was there anything else to do? He wasn't sure. The only thing he had was Norm's voice, so he shuffled to Chuck's left side, rolled him on to his back, and grabbed his ankles. Together, he and Norm lifted Chuck and carried him to the edge of the basement where they placed him on top of several other bodies.

"Is this everyone?" Arthur asked. His voice sounded incredibly quiet, almost a whisper. Norm turned on him, smiling.

"Yep. Every last one of us. Help me grab some cups and pass them out."

Norm headed for the workshop area at the bottom of the stairs. Where is Gemini? Arthur wondered. How could transcendence happen in the absence of their leader? The news that it was
time to shake yourself free of your mortal form was one thing when it came from the living manifestation of your own personal God; it was quite another thing coming from a violent half-wit that someone left in charge in a moment of misguided decision making.

"What's the hold up, Noll?" Norm asked from the other room. Arthur, still too overwhelmed to shake himself free of the hypnotic power of Norm's voice, wandered towards the doorway. Norm emerged with a tray of cups.

"Pass these out to anyone that you see moving or talking. When that's done, go find the sleepers and check pulses. If they're alive, I choke them out to speed things along. If they're dead, let me know and we'll move them to the side."

"Why do we need to move them?" Arthur asked.

"Why do you give a shit?" Norm replied. "It was part of the vision. Just do it."

Arthur accepted the tray of cups. Most of the people were unconscious now. From where Arthur stood, he could only see one person that was awake. Erskine Weaver, the group's oldest member at seventy-one, sat in the far back corner, coughing and dry heaving. He raised a hand and waved to Arthur.

"Could use another one back here," Erskine said.

How Erskine could still be conscious at this point was beyond Arthur. A sea of crumpled paper cups lay around his feet and a peppering of purple flecks stained the front of his shirt as though he'd pounded his drinks and spilled on himself in the process. The old man's complexion was an unhealthy gray that allowed the purple and blue veins beneath the skin of his face to show through the semi-transparent flesh. His clothes hung from his leathery frame, which looked as though it was more sinew and gristle than flesh and bone. Given his appearance, Arthur
suspected a stiff breeze could knock him in to the grave, let alone whatever concoction Norm had whipped up to get the job done.

Erskine grabbed the rims of three cups with his right hand and set them on the floor near his feet. After taking a few deep breaths, he swallowed each one like a shot of whiskey. When he finished he rocked back in his chair and sucked air in through his teeth.

"Christ that's terrible."

Arthur nodded. "Do you need anything?"

"I guess not," Erskine replied. "Just sit here for a minute, would you?"

"Sure."

The old man spit a wad of purple phlegm on to the ground and wheezed.

"I keep thinking about it," he said. "You sit around your whole damn life wondering when you're going to kick the bucket, and now here I am kicking the bucket."

Arthur took a seat next to Erskine. In the time since Norm had returned to the workshop, several others had gone limp in their chairs. A few muttered or groaned, a few fell to the floor. None of them had drunk as much as Erskine. The next closest was Frank Bonner who topped out at three cups. After a quick scan of the floor at Erskine’s feet, Willy counted seventeen cups.

"Does it hurt?" Arthur asked.

"Who the hell knows," Erskine replied. "My guts are paining me, but I guess they'd do that if I drank that many cups of anything."

Erskine's face folded in on itself, scrunched to a degree that Arthur didn't know was possible. A gurgling came from the old man's guts and he looked up and met Arthur's eyes.

"You hear that?"

Guessing that politeness had probably flown out the window by now, Arthur nodded yes.
"Jesus. They're gonna find me in here, dead with a pant load. I hope that doesn't happen. I don't mind dying, but I don't want to be that guy. At least I could have a little dignity, or something, you know?"

Erskine clutched his gut with both arms and looked as though he might puke. "Help me to the floor. I want to lay down."

Scattering the paper-cup graveyard with his foot, Arthur cleared a space and lowered Erskine to the ground. He wondered for a moment whether what he was doing was ethical. Erskine wasn't terminally ill, or even sick—at least not as far as anyone knew. This wasn't a mercy killing, even if it was an adult deciding to go out on their own terms. Was there some legal loophole that could result in him being convicted of murder for this? Manslaughter?

Then the absurdity of the question dawned on him. Why did it matter if he intended to kill himself? At that moment Arthur realized that he had no intention of killing himself right here, right now, or maybe ever. Why should he, especially in the absence of the man that claimed to be the person that would lead him and all the others to the land beyond.

Erskine, as if sensing his sudden revelation, grabbed Arthur's arm and squeezed. The old man's eyes were wide with pain.

"Don't be a dumbass," Erskine groaned. "Get out of here."

Arthur stood, letting Erskine's hand fall to the ground. The lights had gone out behind the old man's eyes now, though his body still convulsed a bit as the life left it.

"What's going on?" Norm asked from the doorway. "Erskine die? I thought he'd go first. Tough old bastard must have an iron gut."
Arthur nodded. "Yeah, he's gone. Listen, Norm, I think we need to take a step back here for a minute. Are you sure we should be doing this without Gemini here? What if your vision was just a dream?"

"Don't dream when I'm awake," Norm replied. "It was a vision. I'm sure of it."

"Okay," Arthur nodded, "But maybe we should hold off, you and I, until we can talk to Gemini."

Norm swept his hand along the far wall of the basement, pointing at the stack of corpses along the wall. "We gone too far for that now," he replied. "Shit's already in motion. It's just you and me now and we're on our way out. I'll do you, then finish myself off."

Arthur took a step back, putting several more chairs between himself and Norm. He'd seen Norm mad before, mostly when he was drunk. In fact, drinking wasn't allowed at the house anymore because of Norm specifically, Arthur suspected. It had been added as a precept shortly after Norm got too drunk and punched out John Owens for, as he put it, "looking at him crooked." Norm's anger wasn't a pretty sight. It was fast, hard, brutal--exactly what you'd expect from a moron. In Arthur's experience, certain subspecies of stupidity were marked with a tendency for anger. Norm was a textbook representation of that subspecies.

"Listen, Norm. I'm not letting you do me, okay? I want to call Gemini. I don't think he'd want us to do this. I think you've gone too far."

"I think you aren't going far enough," Norm replied. "Not anywhere near far enough. You don't get to bail out when the shit gets too rough for you. We're in it now. And don't tell me about what Gemini would want, because I-" Norm paused for a moment and cocked his head as though listening for something. His jaw worked and he stammered. "Because I know that my vision was real. We all need to go. Now. Today."
The way Norm emphasized that word, all, sent a cold wave through Arthur's chest. It was becoming more and more apparent that this wasn't a voluntary suicide. This was compulsory. Norm bought the tickets and he was making everyone take the ride, whether they liked it or not.

"Okay, fine," Arthur replied. "You're right. I admit it. I'm scared. I don't want to die. But you're right. It's time to go. Let's get Erskine moved over first, then you can make sure I get things done the right way, okay?"

Erskine nodded and smiled, looking pleased as punch that Arthur was finally talking sense. He crossed the room and grabbed Erskine's body under the shoulder while Arthur took the feet. They shuffled through the rows of chairs to the far wall. As they drew near the stacks of bodies, Arthur rushed forward, pushing all of his weight into Erskine’s legs. The knees buckled inward and upward as Erskine folded in to a tight ball between Arthur and Norm. The body made a crackling noise and Arthur felt a spray of warm liquid across his face as he plowed the corpse in to Erskine at top speed. The larger man toppled over backward, tangling himself in the folding metal chairs in the process, as Arthur bolted for the door.

He surprised himself by weaving in and out of the scattered chairs. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he fully expected to pull the traditional horror movie standard of tripping and falling as he attempted to escape from his predator. But no, he made it through and closed the last few feet toward the workshop doorway. As he crossed the threshold, he spared one look back, to see how far behind him Erskine was. To Arthur's surprise, he hadn't moved an inch. Instead, he remained amongst the chairs in the back end of the basement, holding something about his head.

As he realized what was happening, Arthur attempted to change course and get behind the wall where he'd be safe. He wasn't fast enough, and the thrown chair sailed in through the
doorway, hitting him dead in the back of the neck. The blow wasn't severe enough to knock him unconscious, though it did make his head spin a bit. Just enough to send him sprawling on the floor and into the cabinets on the opposite side of the room under the workbench. Upon impact, he heard a crunch. Whether it was his bones or the wood of the cabinets, he had no idea.

He pushed himself up, but Norm was already on him. He kneeled on Arthur's back, pinning his arm's to the ground.

"I said we're all going out," Norm hissed through his clenched teeth. "I meant it. Every one of us. Every fucking one."
Chapter Two

"Leave me alone, you old pig."

Willy blinked. He never knew how to process these situations. The owner of Bison Bob's Fine Liquors had called him in personally, requesting the presence of Detective Willy Grieves of the Barlow Police Department, to discuss an important matter relating to the enforcement of laws. The matter stood before Willy now, staring up at him. Willy put her at about sixteen, if that. Blonde hair, tall for her age, mean as a sack of rats swatted against a tin shack. He hadn't even accused her of anything yet.

"Whoa," Willy replied. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves here."

"Fuck you," the girl replied. "You can't hold me on shit."

"Hold you?" Willy asked.

"Yeah. You ain't taking me downtown, mister. Not now, not ever. My dad would skin you and make a hat from your wrinkled ass if you tried."

Okay. Willy nodded and appraised the girl. She didn't look like much, but crazy won a lot of fights. Bob Bryles, AKA Bison Bob, AKA Big Bison Bobby, believed that the girl in question was in the habit of stealing bottles of Boon's Farm wine from his inventory. He had no proof of this beyond a hunch and the occasional clank of glass from within the girl's book-bag.

"What's your name?" Willy asked.
"Eat shit," the girl replied.

"Okie, dokie." Willy bent and grabbed the girl's backpack.

"Can't open that," the girl replied. "Illegal searches and seizures and all."

Bison Bob, looking very smug behind the checkout counter, crossed his flabby arms and leaned back, his tremendous girth causing the rickety stool to scream in protest. "You're in the hands of the law now, girl. Best clear your conscience. Make your peace with god. Maybe Willy will go easy on you."

"Bite it sausage fingers. I know where you park your mobility scooter." Indeed, she did, Willy noted. It was sitting, unattended, at the end of the check-out counter even now.


"Delilah Bransom?" Willy said. The girl had written her name on a small tag on the back of the backpack. The jig was up. "You Jay Bransom's daughter?"

"Maybe," Delilah replied.

"I know your dad," Willy unzipped the bag and removed not one, not two, but three bottles of wine from inside. "I'm not going to tell him about this, but if you ever so much as look at this store again before you're twenty-one, I'll go have a talk with him and let him know what you're up to. For now, though, we're good. Get going."

The girl sauntered out of the store without a word of thanks. In fact, as she hit the door, she cast one narrow-eyed glance back at Willy that might have been even more disdainful than a moment prior. Bison Bob shook his head and gave Willy a look that said everything there was to say: Willy, the look said. You're going feeble. Too naive and soft-headed in your old age to recognize a life-long criminal when you see one. You should have taken her in. Booked her.
Recommended the death penalty, or at the very least solitary confinement. You are a disgrace, Grieves. Or at least that's what Willy heard from the look.

"She'll be back," Bison Bob said, shaking his head.

"We'll see," Willy replied. "She needs a hobby."

Willy's radio squawked, providing a convenient excuse. "Let me know if she comes back, okay?"

"You can bet on it," Bison Bob replied.

Willy could hear the dispatcher's tinny voice repeating his name over the radio the minute he stepped outside of the bar. What the Hell? He'd spent years on the force, worked his way up to detective, and now they had him chasing down wine-thieves and God knows what else because the city refused to cough up the money for another cop. What next?

"I'm here. Go ahead, Rita."

"Complaint came in from Jones street. Some kind of yelling from 1537. Roaring."

"They heard what? Roaring?" Willy asked.

"Screaming," Rita's voice crackled back over the squad car's radio. "Roaring maybe. Maybe an animal, maybe a person. I don't know. They heard a sound that didn't seem natural, so they called."

The neighborhood from which the complaint originated was fairly quiet. Hell, the whole town was fairly quiet, but that particular strip was an island of quiet within the relative quiet of the entire city. About the worst that ever came out of that area were noise-complaints about one of the rental houses. Even then, though, there was rarely any action; the local kids were boring as shit, sober nerds less concerned with illicit behavior than chaining their computers together to play some seizure-inducing video game that Willy's ancient brain was incapable of grasping.
Even when they were loud they weren't that loud, and they never bothered committing interesting crimes. Still, in a quiet city everything seemed pretty loud, Willy supposed, so he didn't mind too much.

"Have one of the patrols check it out," Willy replied.

"You're in the area," Rita said. "Save the tax payers some money if you do it."

Willy sighed. He hated making stops like this. Over the course of his career as a police officer Willy had knocked on more doors than he cared to remember. Rarely, if ever, did anyone look happy to see him. Still, at the end of the day, he was still a civil servant.

#

Willy pulled to the curb in front of the house. He'd never been here before, or if he had he didn't remember it. Nothing look too out of place: shaggy grass, some weather-chipped paint, couple of cracked and taped windows, maybe a couple of boards in need of replacement on the deck, but nothing sinister.

It was bigger than he expected. Two stories with a generous attic at the top. Willy didn't see any movement in the windows.

Willy walked to the neighbor's yard first. Technically speaking, he couldn't go look in the windows of the house, but nothing prevented him from making a circuit through the neighbor's yard on the off chance that some small detail might find its way to him in the process. Another sound, maybe. The smell of grass. Some kind of reason that would allow him to knock on the door without looking like a fool.

He left the sidewalk and made his way through the overgrown lawn. A woman with a pure white shell of permed hair and a floral-print dress watched him from the window of the
neighboring house. She'd be the one that called, no doubt. Probably spent all day watching the place, searching for some reason to call the police, make a fuss, and bring some meaning to her dull, cat-filled life. Willy waved, but the woman didn't return the gesture.

The wind kicked up, sending dead leaves skidding across the street. Willy hoped he might be able to hear something, a hint of the noise that had prompted the old woman to call the police, but no such luck. Aside from the sounds of the leaves and the wind, nothing in the neighborhood stirred. He took what he hoped to be his last look at the house and turned back to the squad car. He hadn't made it more than three or four steps, when he heard a muffled crash followed by a burst of shouting.

And there it was. He turned back to the house, heading for the door. He knocked, waited a few seconds, and with no response forthcoming, he took a step back. A moment of cold doubt cut through Willy as he faced the massive, baby-blue door. He hadn't kicked in a door in years, maybe decades. Could he still do it? Only one way to found out. He drew his gun, leaned back, and thrust his right foot forward. The frame splintered and the door buckled inward.

Willy made a mental note to celebrate his continued ability to kick in a door at a more appropriate time.

The interior of the house was clean. Spotless, even. A thick, sweet smell hung in the air everywhere, maybe some kind of incense, he couldn't be sure. Maybe it was the air, which was thick and hot and made his clothes feel like they'd start sticking to him at any minute.

Through the living room, empty, into the kitchen, also empty, and around to the back door. The doorway to the basement was in the back of the kitchen, settled into a yellow wall, surrounded by pictures of young people smiling and holding Frisbees. There would be time to puzzle that out later.
Music seeped up through the floor and Willy could feel it throbbing in the soles of his feet. Simon and Garfunkel. Horrible, blaring bullshit. What kind of torture chamber was he going to find at the bottom of these stairs?

The door was open, eliminating the need for an encore door-kicking. Willy crept down the stairs doing his best to keep quiet, though it was really only a token effort. With the volume of the music he doubted that anyone in the house could hear him, even if he decided to stomp as loud as he could.

Hints of a bellowing voice cut through the music every few seconds. Someone, hidden beyond the angle of the stairwell's wall, was singing along to the music. Willy spun around the particle board partition at the bottom of the stairs into a small workshop area. He kept his gun up and focused on the source of the singing.

A massively tall and wide man was hunched over something, his arms working up and down. Willy spotted a chair, a pair of legs. The giant was standing over someone in a chair.

"Turn around," Willy yelled.

The giant continued his work, undeterred.

"Turn around," Willy yelled, louder this time.

The giant, still facing away from Willy, perked up, turned towards the window, searching for whatever had pulled him from his work. He shifted to the left and turned off the stereo, which afforded Willy a glimpse at the man tied to the chair. He looked badly beaten but alive, at least for the moment. His head was rolled to the left, his eyes fluttering. The giant kept one hand on the man's face, holding a funnel steady in the unconscious man's mouth. His other hand held a pitcher of something purple.

"Put down the pitcher," Will said. "And turn around."
The giant turned to face Willy. Seeing his face didn't diminish the comparison to a giant one bit. A wiry white beard burst from the giant's face in all directions. His bushy brows were up, curious, surprised to see someone else in his basement. Willy noted, with some curiosity, that he was wearing a pair of overalls, clipped only on one side, with no shirt.

Straight from the set of Hee-Haw, apparently.

The amount of time that passed as they stared one another down could have been anywhere from a minute to an hour, Willy wasn't sure. He felt the weight of the gun in his hand, thank God, and felt somewhat safe. But the ease with which the giant accepted the situation and the sheer size of him put Willy on edge. The basement suddenly felt too cramped, too tight. No matter where he went, all that would ever separate him from the giant would be a few feet of open space and six inches of matte-black steel that was hopefully still serviceable after years of Willy's neglectful cleanings.

"I gotta go home now," the giant said. "Nothing personal, mister. But I'll take you with me if I have to."

"I'm good here," Willy replied. "Now go ahead and get on the ground, face down, and we'll take it nice and easy, okay?"

"I don't think so. Like I said, I been called home."

"Look at me," Willy said. "I'm old. Kind of feeble, even. I don't exercise. All of which is to say, I don't plan on being a hero here today. So if you don't get down, I'll probably just start spraying bullets until I run out and-"

The giant took a step forward and the words froze in Willy's throat. The second step was faster and Willy could feel it in his guts. The giant came on like a landslide, much faster than Willy expected him to move. Willy clenched his teeth and tried to force himself to remain calm
as he ducked out of the way, ran a handful of steps, and pinballed off a utility shelf on the left
hand side of the room, opposite the stairwell. The giant braced for another charge, and Willy
fired a shot into the ceiling.

Wood chips and dust drifted to the floor. The giant blinked and stared at Willy.

"I'm not in the mood to kill anyone today," Willy said. "Really. Just put your hands
behind your head."

The giant smiled and came on again. This time, rather than bouncing off another wall,
Willy withdrew threw the small door into what he hoped was a larger section of basement.

He couldn't turn to check his surroundings, so he kept his left foot back, scooting it along
the floor as he retreated from the oncoming train. He felt something hit the back of his leg, then
give way. There was a sound, the ting of folding metal chairs being forced into one another. The
giant swung a fist and Willy dropped, feeling his ribs buckle on the edge of a metal chair that
popped out from under him and hit the wall. And there, by the wall...

The giant's foot came down with unimaginable force, aimed straight for Willy's upper-
body. He scrambled away, running in to another cluster of folding metal chairs in the process. He
felt the wash of displaced air over his face as a massive sprung work boot slapped the concrete
floor. He exam up quick, risked the glance backward to make sure there was a path, and weaved
through a few of the scattered chairs. Had his eyes failed him? There was a person laying by the
wall, staring at him. The person was covered in blankets. No, not blankets, other people. They
began materializing everywhere. The border of trash along the walls of the basement resolved
into stacks of corpses. *What the hell did I step in?*
With open hands up, as though he intended to tear Willy apart at the seams, the Giant continued his advance. Willy's mental def-con level dropped to red. If the situation wasn't defused by now, it wouldn't get defused with words.

Willy fired once, twice, three times. The giant slid to a stop at his feet, the last of his momentum burning away. The shots were clean, in the chest, center of mass, which is much more effective than the Lethal Weapon headshots you see in the movies.

In the heat of the fracas, Willy had almost forgotten about the man in the chair. He could hear him in the other room, making a gurgling, choking noise, deep in his throat. As Willy rounded the corner back into the room, a rope of purple slobber dangled from the man's chin to his shirt.

Willy keyed the talk button on his walky. "Rita? I need an ambulance at the Sycamore address. I've got one down from gunshot wounds and another that might have been poisoned. There's also a shitload of four-nineteens."

"Um. Repeat," Rita replied.

The man's color was had changed, even since Willy had made it into the basement. He was pale, getting more pale by the second. His breath was getting more and more shallow. Sweat poured down his face and soaked his shirt. Whatever the giant had given him, it didn't look good.

"Just hurry it up. This guy looks like shit, okay?"

"Got it," Rita replied.

Poison control, Willy thought. What would poison control do? He approached the tied man, tilted his head forward, and jammed two fingers as deep into the man's throat as he could. For the span of several seconds, there was no physical response. Then the gag reflex twitched. Faintly at first, then harder, and finally the spasm was enough to put appreciable pressure on
Willy's fingers. This last was accompanied by a geyser of purple fluid that slicked the front of
the man's shirt. Willy forced his fingers in a second time, then a third, and on and on until his
efforts produced nothing.

Content that he'd done his best given the situation, Willy leaned against the wall and slid
to the floor to wait for the sound of sirens.

#

After the counting was said and done, the Barlow police department recovered twenty-
seven dead people from the house. The sole survivor, aside from Willy, if you counted him, was
the man that Willy had forced to puke.

"You're a hero," Ed said, smiling at Willy. Ed smiled all the time. He was young and
good looking with jet black hair, a white horse-toothed smile, and not a wrinkle in sight. Willy
liked him despite all of that. He was leaning against his squad car, parked in front of the house in
a stream of constantly flowing cops and paramedics moving in and out of the house. Willy sat on
the curb, nursing a lipful of chewing tobacco to calm his nerves.

"I don't know about that," Willy replied.

"Bullshit. It's true. Paramedic said the guy would've probably kicked if you hadn't barfed
him like that. Some quick thinking there."

"I just do it whenever I come across an unconscious person," Willy replied. "It's kind of a
hobby of mine."

"Funny," Ed replied. "Really, though, are you all right with everything?"

"I guess," Willy replied. "Never had to kill anyone before. All I could think when I was in
there was 'this is it, I'm going to kill him or he's going to kill me, and I retire in two years. I'm too
old for this shit.' Stick me in a life or death situation and I turn into a Danny Glover cop cliché, apparently."

"Seems like a sensible thing to think, considering the circumstances."

"They got any ideas what was going on in there?"

"Mass suicide. No obvious signs of struggle with the stiffs. Unless he subtly poisoned them all, they were going along with the plan. Aside from your puke-pal, that is."

"How very sensitive of you, Ed," Willy replied.

"I process things with humor," Ed replied. "Speaking of, it seems like you've already had a pretty full day. Why don't you skip out and take it easy for the afternoon? Come back fresh tomorrow."

Willy considered that for a moment, but discarded the idea. There were people that needed to think about things in order to process them, and there were people that needed to pointedly not think about things to process them; Willy was one of the latter. He didn't need to spend the afternoon, lounging on the couch and buddying up with the warm, cozy thought that he'd killed his first man today. No. That didn't sound like a solid plan at all.

"I don't think so," Willy replied. "I've got some paperwork to handle at the station. I'll go do that and come back here later for a look around."

"If it suits you, it suits me," Ed replied. "How do you want me to handle this."

"Lightly," Willy said. "Very lightly. Don't let word of this get out, if you can help it. Let's wait until we know exactly what happened. Go check in with the neighbors. Ask around. See if anyone knows what these people were up to in that house."

"You're the boss," Ed replied.
Chapter Three

Something jagged prodded Arthur's back and woke him up. His eyes wouldn't open, so he rubbed them and felt a shower of clotted crust break away from his eyelids. He sat up. The sky overhead was dark, full of bright stars, far brighter than he'd ever seen before. He knew he was in space, though he couldn't exactly say how he knew. The absence of wind, maybe. Or the absence of sound. Or maybe it was the stuffy feeling of being in a place where the air felt frozen in place around his skin. To his right and left, the edges of the stone horizon dropped away in soft slopes. A meteor, maybe? Or an asteroid? He forgot how to tell the difference. Regardless, he recognized that he was sitting on an island of loose stone, slipping through space at an imperceptible speed.

He retraced his mental steps, walking backwards through his own head, trying to remember where he'd left off. He felt like a reader losing his page. He remembered waking on the rock, and he remember a life before that, though he couldn't trace it to any exact end. There was an existence at the Orran Dain Church of Forward motion, which lead to...nothing. A frayed string at the end of a rope. A blurry smudge on the severed end of a strip of film.

The inside of his mouth tasted sweet, though he couldn't remember drinking anything. His stomach hurt, too. Years and years ago, while he was still an elementary school student, he'd taken a bet from some friends and attempted to drink an entire pitcher of warm Lime-Aid within five minutes. He won the bet and celebrated by doubling over and hosing down the floor of his parents' kitchen with a vibrant green ray of puke. The taste inside his mouth reminded him of that. Not because of the Lime-Aid, but because of the sugar thickened bile left in his dry mouth after the episode came to a close.
And quick as that, the memories popped back into his head. The basement. Norm. Purple drinks all around. Poor Erskine, collapsing on the floor, lamenting the futility of death and pant loads.

Arthur gasped. He looked at himself, saw the purple stains on his shirt and palms. He could smell the purple juice seeping out of his pores like old booze. He stood up and ran his hands over his arms, checking to make sure he still had a physical presence. He did. Thank God. He couldn't imagine life without a physical presence, and didn't care to try. So had he survived, then? And if so, where in the hell was Earth?

"You didn't make it, Bud," came a sing-song voice from the opposite side of the asteroid. Gemini plucked a somber note on his guitar and nodded at the immense nothingness all around them. "You kicked the bucket, Arthur! We all did."

There were more of them now, Arthur saw. Norm. Erskine. Sandra. Even Chuck Thomas, with the snow-white remnants of a crushed Styrofoam cup still peppering his forehead. Everyone was there staring at him, smiling at him with sticky mouths outlined in fuzzy purple nebulae of juice-mustaches.

"Congratulations," Gemini said. "You're all dead. You guys should all give yourself a pat on the back for a job well done."

Norm's broad smile beamed over the crowd like a spotlight as he meandered through the gathered people, hugging with impunity. As he reached Arthur, the tremendous grin grew a span wider. He pulled Arthur in to a tight hug that cause Arthur's head to spin. "I forgive you for not believing me," he whispered into Arthur's ear. "I told you it'd be so good. Way better than shitty old Earth, and now here we are, having a space party, in real live space." He turned his attention to Gemini next, jerking his right thumb in Arthur's direction. "I told him, Gemini. I said this is
what Orran Dain wants, and this is right, and we're out of here today, because it's time, but he didn't believe me and now here we are out in space. Man, I knew it."

Gemini frowned. "Is this true, Arthur?"

Arthur shrugged. "You weren't there. I didn't know-"

"You didn't know," Gemini replied, turning his back on Arthur. He stared into space for several seconds, leaving Arthur to think about what he'd done. "After all the time we spent building what we had, you didn't know?" Gemini asked. "How could you not know?"

"It just felt so out of the blue,"

"Out of the blue?" Gemini replied. "Out of the blue." He shook his head and smiled. "I guess you suspected that we'd have some notice. Maybe Orran Dain would send us a space-telegram, asking us to RSVP for his glorious afterlife. Sound about right?"

"Nothing like that," Arthur replied. "But it's a pretty big thing to decide over the course of one morning."

Gemini sighed and set his guitar down on the rock. "What am I supposed to do? Everyone on this rock did what they were supposed to do. Norm told them it was time; they all went for it without asking questions. You didn't. What am I supposed to do about that?"

"I don't know," Arthur replied. He felt stuck under Gemini's eyes, like an ant shriveling under a magnifying glass.

"But surely you see my quandary?" Gemini asked. "Why should you receive this for free, when everyone else has paid the price."

A feeling came over Arthur, like a pressure, squeezing him out of his own space. He took a deep breath and felt his heart shudder in his chest.

Offering a punishment too lenient would be an avoidance; being too severe would be an admission of guilt. Did it matter? Gemini had a way of sniffing out the truth. Arthur knew that Gemini wouldn't let him rest until he had said exactly what Gemini wanted him to say.

"You should send me back," Arthur replied. "I'll do better. Then I can go later, when I've earned it."

Gemini smiled. "Yes."

Arthur's heart stopped in his chest. Part of him had believed that Gemini would let this slide. He would see Arthur's willingness to go back as an act of real faith. It hadn't occurred to him that Gemini might actually take him up on the offer and send him back.

"Show Arthur out, everyone," Gemini said. The crowd gathered in close, wrapping their arms around Arthur, hugging him tight, smooshing their sticky cheeks against his own.

"Stay still," a woman said. "You've got to stay still."

"No," Arthur replied, but the words came out as a phlegmy gurgle. He tried to say that they needed to let him loose, that he was getting too uncomfortable, too crushed, too claustrophobic, but no one would budge.

"Stay still," Norm whispered, his hot breath filling Arthur's ears. "Stay still. It's going to hurt, but we've gotta get you fixed."

Arthur looked up, trying to focus on the stars and calm his nerves. Something sent hot ripples through his body. Above him, the sky ripped open and a bright, searing sun battered his face. He tried to close his eyes, but someone slapped him in the face and told him to stay awake.

"I don't want to sleep," Arthur replied. "But we're too close to that sun. We're going to be incinerated."
"You'll be fine," a voice replied. Something passed in front of the sun--a massive head, maybe the face of Orran Dain. Arthur closed his eyes.


Arthur began to choke.
Chapter Four

Willy returned the next morning, after the handful of patrol-officers had cleared the scene and gathered all applicable evidence. As he approached the house, he searched for some hint that he may have missed that would have clued him in to the tragedy he'd walked into the prior afternoon. Nothing looked particularly wrong with the place. The generous lawn hadn't been mowed in a while, but even in their overgrown state the edges looked even and sharp, as though they'd never been allowed to intrude on their surroundings. Apple trees dotted the edges along the fence, deep blue Columbines filled the areas on either side of the front steps, and there was even a small garden around back, per the reports. A string of baby blue Adirondack chairs lined the front porch, which spanned the entire front of the house. Planters hung from the eaves, dangling clusters of blue morning glory flowers, slowly turning brown from lack of water. The whole place had a sort of fuzzy gloom about it, probably attributable to the wooden siding, long since gone to gray and black. The most striking feature was the door, which had been painted a radiant shade of blue. Willy almost regretted kicking it in.

The stairs creaked and sagged under his feet, but despite their dry protests they held. Probably won't last, Willy thought. They'll probably snap, shatter my hip, drop me into an alcove under the porch. I'll probably be paralyzed. Probably wind up laying there for days, covered in ants, waiting for death. That was Willy's luck. First a mass suicide and then a spill under a dark deck followed by a long, agonizing stay in death's own waiting room. They'd find him in there weeks later, once the neighbors complained about the smell: dead, like a feeble old man, his pants full of his own shit and his face full of a stupid, surprised expression.
He punched the code into the lock-box and swung the front door open. The air was thick and damp inside the house and for a moment Willy was caught between the wall of cooling October air at his back and the humid warmth of the house lapping at his face. As he shut the door behind him, the breeze stopped, leaving the smell of cold air and leaves behind.

The hardwood floors were scuffed and old, filled with footprints from the parade of tromping police carting the bodies out of the house the prior day. A few rows of boots and shoes lined the wall, along with several wall-pegs and winter coats, most of which had been patched a few times. From this point in the house, Willy could see along a narrow path that lead all the way to the kitchen wall at the opposite end of the house. Through the kitchen window, he could see the bushes swaying in the breeze, their branches scraping at the glass. The incredible silence made him fearful of what he might hear. Willy wasn't a spiritual man, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he damn sure wasn't stupid enough to think he knew it all, either. A place like this? No telling what kind of weird energy might be hanging around the place.

If he went to the kitchen and hooked around to the left, he knew he'd find the doorway to the basement. The basement was the star of this particular production, so he'd save that for last. Too much there to go in cold. Whatever he found might occupy his mind and cloud his judgment about the rest of the rooms. Best to begin with a few of the opening acts, first.

_Eenie, meenie, miney, moe. Living room, second floor, kitchen, back yard._

The temperature of the house worked its way into his clothes and forced a few beads of sweat to the surface. Might as well get the second and third floors out of the way first, then work his way back down and take a break outside. If he survived the trip up to the third floor, of course. It was entirely possible, given the circumstances, that his heart might give out halfway up the second flight. He'd feel the shooting pains in his chest after the first few steps, followed by
the telltale lightning strikes down his left arm. By the time he made it to the third floor, there'd be an El Camino parked on his chest and he'd be in a cold sweat. Thump, thump, Willy. Thump, thump, stop, flat line. Dead, a few months before retirement, alone in a house where a bunch of kooks had...

Best not to think about it. Do the job first, ponder mortality later.

Pictures lined the walls on either side of the stairway. Most of them had been taken around the house. Smiling house-mates sitting in the yard, or in what Willy guessed were the bedrooms. They all wore the standard blue robes of the house, each in a slightly different shade than the others, as though the batches of dye hadn't quite matched up. Some were a baby blue, others royal blue, and others still the color of a robin's eggshell. Willy made a mental note to ask whether the robes held some kind of key to hierarchy once he had the opportunity. Beyond the blue robes there was little linking one picture to the next aside from the wide-eyed dopes smiling in each one. All ages and sexes were represented, men and women, young and old, smiling for a picture that was probably one of the last they'd ever take.

Each of the four second-story bedrooms were the same: bare off-white walls under a soft blue ceiling. Gray steel bunk bed frames against each wall, each with a pair of thin mattresses and a single blue blanket. Each room had a stack of rolled blue yoga mats stacked in the corner like firewood. The doors had been removed, which Willy assumed provided a sense of forced community: no privacy, no private property, no families beyond the house-mates. There were no dressers, just wall-hooks for the robes, six in each room. Space enough for 24 members all told, though space would be tight.

The bathroom offered no more feature or personality than the bedrooms. White tile, occasionally featuring a hand-painted blue star, and a plastic box full of communal hygiene
products under the wall-mounted sink. One grimy window stuck inside the shower stall offered a grainy view of the back yard. Thankfully the door had been left in place.

The other door, directly adjacent to the bathroom, looked as though it had been through a war. The padlock still hung from the loop on the door-frame, though the wood had splintered and broken away under a pry-bar. Flakes of the door's bright blue-paint dusted the floor, testifying to the force the first officers had used as they battered their way in.

A short, empty stairwell lead to the third and final floor: a long, peaked attic room that spanned the entirety of the top floor. The group's leader, Jim Lavelle, AKA Gemini Lovegood, used this space as his private apartment, set apart from his devotees. He clearly didn't adopt the same austere decor he subscribed to his house-mates. A big screen television covered a large portion of the far wall. The closet was full of clothes, jeans and t-shirts mostly, and several more piles of similar clothing were tossed on the lush king sized bed in the corner.

Willy sat on the bed, surprised at how his weight settled into the contours. It figured, didn't it? A civil servant, the sole detective on the Barlow police force, a total of 42 years of impeccable service under his belt, and every night he slept on the same ratty full-size mattress he bought at Sears with his 1984 Christmas bonus. Meanwhile, the leader of a commune - hell, might as well call it what it really was: a cult -- slept on a fancy memory foam mattress like an oil sheik. Willy Grieves had a spine like a god damned question mark while this half-assed Jim Jones probably popped out of bed like an Olympic sprinter every morning.

After taking a moment to overcome the unjust nature of the world, Willy reached over to the nightstand and began poking around. Handcuffs, a few copies of racy magazines -- mostly Nugget and Swank -- a bag of cheap grass, a few loose pills, and an array of pipes, bongs and dildos to make Dennis Hopper weep. Gemini had spared no expense on his own low-rent
Midwestern version of opulence. How many scandalized Lutherans had lost children to this house? Tallies were still being taken on that score.

Speaking of which, Willy rose from the bed and began the long trek back down the stairs.

#

He was moving too fast and he knew that. You couldn't rush intuition, but there was a certain logic to what he saw. That is, there was a logic to it if you were prepared to admit that life rarely cared for logic or obliged those that required it. Willy's entire career as a detective had been an exercise in honing that particular philosophical mechanism. At this stage in life, as practiced as he was, he found himself rarely (if-ever) fretting over a missing share of sense or logic. Instead, he rolled with it - whatever "it" was at a given time.

The garden offered nothing, though it looked well-tended and mostly picked over. Frost would soon kill off whatever was left and turn the black dirt into a knobby mess that would become a bed of weeds by fall. In the shed he found his murder weapon, or what was left of it: a shelf lined with gallon jugs of anti-freeze, with three removed from the dead center leaving a space in the row like missing teeth. If Gemini had orchestrated this, he was either a world champion moron, or he wanted everyone to see what he'd done. Or, rather, what he led people to do. Despite the morbidity of the notion, Willy supposed there was a kind of grim satisfaction to be had in that. Still two years shy of the standard retirement age of sixty-five, Willy couldn't even convince the waitress at the Downtown cafe to let him order from the senior menu. A man didn't need four eggs two pancakes and two strips of bacon for breakfast; why should he be forced to pay for it?
The missing jugs, he knew, were locked away in the evidence cave at the Barlow PD headquarters, along with a giant wash-basin and a metric shitload of samples of the purple fluid that filled the washbasin and the stomachs of twenty-some odd stiffs recovered from the basement.

There were no chalk outlines. Plenty of photographs though, all of which Willy had subjected himself to before coming here for a look around. Aside the tiny, walled off entry way and a few posts that supported the floor-joists, the entire basement was one massive, water-stained cave. Windows lines the upper portions of each wall, facing out onto the yard, barely above grass-level. A hundred-gallon water-heater and a massive heating unit filled a corner in what would be the far right-hand side of the house, and to Willy's left a long bare-wood tool bench spanned the length of the basement, right up to the stairs. The bench was covered in tools, most of which looked like they'd seen heavy use. Folding chairs of all makes and models filled the central space of the basement, tossed in all directions from the prior day's fracas and knocked in to further disarray by the police and medical support staff clearing a path with which they could bring the bodies up to the first floor. Several of the bodies had been dragged off to the left side of the basement and stacked like sandbags, for no particular reason. Early to the party, knocked off and set aside to not give the latecomers cold-feet, maybe?

Willy's knuckles popped, sending tremors up his arms. Aside from the sleeper at the hospital, he had no one to question about this. Unconscious in the hospital, fresh from having a fair amount of coolant-cut Kool aid drawn from his guts, it wasn't clear when the fellow in the hospital would be in a state that allowed him to answer questions. Leaning against the tool bench, Willy squeezed a load of Copenhagen into his lower lip and spit a brown puddle on the basement floor. His prospects were shit. People would want sense. They always wanted sense
from senselessness. Like he was some kind of god damn wizard that could produce something from nothing.

Abracadabra.

#

After a few final moments of poking around the house, Willy scribbled notes in the yellow pad he carried in the pocket of his sprung gray blazer. He noted the jars of freshly canned vegetables in the cupboards, as well as the rows of neatly-stacked groceries. He noted the bills stuck to the front door of the refrigerator by glossy baked-clay magnets shaped into blue stars. He noted the fresh collection of organic cleaning products, crowded together in the cabinet under the sink. A part of him hoped he'd find a diary or a letter on the premises, something convenient and pithy that explained the whole situation and provided the location of a safe-deposit box containing all the evidence he'd need to back up the letter's contents. He had no such luck.

On his way out of the house, Willy paused for a moment at the small wardrobe next to the front door. Judging by the location, he guessed it was some kind of impromptu coat closet for the house mates. He opened the door on a whim and validated his prime detective work. Coats of all colors and sizes formed an enormous fluffy mound against the back wall of the wardrobe.

Willy sifted through several of the coats, shaking them to see if any held wallets or other belongings that might hint at the identity of some of the corpses in the morgue. Again, no such luck. Just as he was about to abandon this new ground as a lost cause, he spotted a handle on the bottom of the wardrobe. It had been hidden when the doors were closed, but now, with them open, Willy could see that a portion of the wardrobe's bottom had been sectioned off from the rest of the structure to provide extra storage space. He slid the drawer open.
Books. Papers. Brochures. Materials for some kind of church, featuring pictures that matched those he saw lining the stairwell. It wasn't a church he'd ever heard of. The Church of the Long-Dead Ever-Living Orran Dain. The name was printed on all of the brochures, along with a web address and a few bullet points about the group. The books looked like cheap copies from a vanity press, all plain white pages with black typeface. The cover offered scant information. *The 100 Precepts of Orran Dain, written by The Long-Dead Ever-Living Orran Dain*. Interesting.

Given that nearly everyone from the house was dead, Willy didn't imagine that they'd miss a copy. He slipped one in to the pocket of his gray waistcoat and headed for the car.
Chapter Five

The Barlow Police department sat on the northernmost edge of the peat bog that surrounded the city on all sides. For the three months out of the year where the temperature left the zone of uncomfortable cold to dawdle in stifling humidity, the air became a pungent chowder of mosquitoes and something near the smell of sewage. Now, in late autumn, most of the swamp grass had died and curled over, forming a bleak yellow carpet, punctuated here and there by frost. While the scenery did evoke a certain sense of hopelessness in those that stared at it for too long, the fact that the mosquitoes and the hot stink had been beaten into a retreat by the cold provided a near perfect counterbalance. Willy made sure to park his car a fair measure away from the bank closest to the swamp. Every year the basement of the police department flooded a bit more, further validating Willy's suspicion that the swamp wouldn't rest until it had reclaimed this man-made lump of soil and sod, possibly taking the building and any nearby cars down with it. Easing back a bit, closer to the door, further from the bank, Willy figured he increased his margin of preserving his ancient car by somewhere in the neighborhood of 7-10%.

Rita met Willy at the doorway of the Station. Her hair formed a layer of copper frizz, interrupted down the middle by the narrow trench carved around the band of her microphone-headset. The smell of cigarettes seeped through the entryway, disturbed by the cold air. Willy could hear the screech of her office phone in the background.

"I've had one hundred and eighty calls today, all about that house," she said, the last word falling from her mouth like a rotting tooth. "They're clogging up the lines. Maniacs with bolo-knives could be skinning people alive out there and I wouldn't know or be able to help, because I'm too busy fielding calls from press to dispatch anyone."
Willy looked past Rita into the stuffy dispatch closet. All five lines of the dusty gray office phone blinked in mismatched rhythm. A mound of stubbed out butts sat next to the phone like a wayward porcupine, testament to Rita's tendency to handle stress through sheer force of nicotine.

"For what it's worth, I didn't see any maniacs," Willy replied. He headed for his office door, but understood the futility of the escape. Rita bolted in front of him, putting a five foot two ginger wedge between him and the tantalizing silence of his office.

"For what it's worth, I'm going to lose my mind if this keeps up. The City Council has been calling too. They want to meet with you. Work out the details for a press conference. Do it. For my sake, please do it."

Willy's supply of answers had run short, and that's surely what they'd want. Why would a group of people up and decide to off themselves with anti-freeze? The only person that could answer that question was having his guts flushed clean of chemicals up at Barlow General. According to the scant reports Willy had gathered from the hospital staff, maybe he'd come out of it soon, maybe he wouldn't. No one knew just yet.

"I'll give them a call, okay?"

"Thank you," Rita replied. "What do I do until then?"

"Hang up on anyone that's not calling about a maniac skinning people with a bolo knife."

#

Willy shut the office door behind him, cutting off the daylight from the hallway. He occupied an architectural error, the product of a handful of incorrect measurements that left a tiny space between the walls, about the size of a cleaning closet. It had no windows and the ventilation system bypassed it entirely, leaving it in a perpetual state of cold-clamminess.
Thankfully he'd been able to convince the City Council to have electricity wired in to the room so he could keep some lights and run his computer without need of an extension cord.

He collapsed into the beige office chair and fished a tin of Skol from his breast pocket. He filled his lower lip and felt his nerves calm. *Better. Much better.* He left the lights off, letting the pain in his forehead spin out the last of its momentum.

The mildew brought on the headaches. In an effort to green the city, the administration had put cutting-edge plumbing fixtures in every municipal building. The war-torn eco toilet in the bathroom next door to Willy's office was no match for a herd of patrol officers on a Midwestern diet of beef and cheese. The subsequent overflows manifested as a creeping brown water stain that climbed the easternmost wall of Willy's office. At last check, the stain had grown almost as tall as Willy. He didn't want to measure, but eyeballing it from his desk he suspected it might have topped him out now. Soon the whole wall would slough away into a mound of damp plaster oatmeal on the floor.

Willy flicked the switch on his desk lamp and dialed the Mayor's office.

The line clicked and Willy could hear the Mayor's wheezing breath on the other line. He was a sweater, the mayor. Willy pictured him, wedged behind his desk covered in a sheen of sweat like a moist snail, his face a warm hypertensive shade of red.

"Willy. We've been calling all day."

"I just got into the office. I was on-scene for most of the morning trying to get a feel for what happened."

The mayor swallowed, gasping in the process. "Got anything for us? We need to get in front of this thing before it turns in to a full-blown circus."
"Nothing much yet. Sounds like we've got one survivor, but we're still gathering information. His condition is pretty iffy, but if he makes it, he can probably answer a lot of questions."

"Was it a cult?" The Mayor asked.

"Not sure, but it looks that way," Willy replied.

"Jesus. Jesus. Keep it out of the paperwork. There's not a decent tourist in the world that's going to want to come to Barlow if we get a bunch of press from this. Christ. Weirdos and copycats, Grieves. We are in trouble. What if we become a cult town? Has that ever happened?"

"I don't know, but it didn't seem to work out very well for these guys, did it? I never heard of 'em, and they're mostly all dead now. I can't imagine many kooks making a pilgrimage to visit the home of a bunch of dead, no-name assholes in Northern Wisconsin."

Willy heard the furious clicking of keyboard keys on the other end of the line, followed by a series of sloppy gulps. The ambient noise from the mayor's end of the line sounded like a sucking chest wound on a hippo. "We gotta have a face to face, Grieves. Me, you, and the rest of the Council. We need a plan of attack. We've gotta tie this shit down now. Today. Before the mystery crazy in the hospital wakes up."

"I don't know what you want me to-"

"Anything, Grieves! Anything!" The Mayor interrupted. "We need to have a sense of urgency about this situation. We're a town with nothing to offer aside from the highest per-capita number of boob-clubs in all of Northern Wisconsin. We don't need anything fucking with the meager tourist income we have."
"I understand, but the fact is, I can't tell you anything until I know it myself. You want my advice? We shut our cake-holes until we get a feel for the situation. If we go spouting off about it now, we could just be putting our feet in our mouths."

"How long do you need?"

Whatever Willy said would ultimately be a lie. He'd done police work for long enough to know that he had almost no control over meeting his deadlines, whether they were self-imposed or not. If he said two days, it might be right. It could also be a hundred days, if that's the way things worked out.

"Give me a couple of days, just to get my shit together. Okay?"

The mayor made a whining sound, the high-pitched squeak of a sad puppy. In this case, a sweaty man-sized puppy. "Okay. Fine. Do you think we're in for any other surprises, Grieves? I just want to know where we stand here."

"At this point, no. Beyond the guy in the hospital waking up, I think the we're past the surprises."

"Good. Good. Get back to me in two days, Grieves, or I'll find you."

_That'd be rich_, Willy thought. _You'd have to actually flop your carcass out of the central air, you greasy manatee_.

"Sounds great," Willy replied. The Mayor had already hung up.

_Christamighty_, Willy thought. _What next?_
Someone knocked at Willy's door. He'd closed his eyes, just for a minute, to let the throbbing in his head subside. He flipped on the desk lamp and rubbed his eyes. The strong mildew funk in the air left a dull ache in his sinuses.

"Who is it?"

"Ed," came the response from the other side of the door.

"Come on in, Ed."

Earlier in the afternoon, Willy sent Ed out to canvas the neighborhood. Ed was young, dark featured, probably referred to as adorable by the women in his life. People wanted to answer Ed's questions, because he had one of those nice, honest faces that you couldn't help but trust. Not like Willy. People might answer Willy's questions, but they were just as likely to offer him soup, or a blanket.

Ed entered the room and took a seat opposite Willy. He had his notebook at the ready, which Willy took as a good omen. Maybe he'd managed to gather something worthwhile.

"Jesus Christ," Ed replied. "It smells like a carp's asshole in here."

"Got some water problems in the walls."

"How do you stand it?" Ed asked. He looked around the room as though he expected to see a corpse moldering on the floor. "It's terrible."

"You come in here to for the express purpose of commenting on the sensory delights of my office, or did you actually have something productive to tell me?"

Ed smacked his lips. "It sticks to the roof of your mouth."

"I get it, Ed. What's the news?"

Ed flopped the notebook on the desk and ran his finger along the text. "Sounds like they were definitely a cult. They'd hit up the neighbors for money on several different occasions,
sometimes pretty forcefully. They also tried to sell something called a Cosmic Vibration
Reading."

"Oh boy."

"Yeah. The neighbors couldn't explain it to me exactly, but it's some kind of a past life
reading or something. So you can find out whether you were a manatee in a past life."

A vision of the mayor formed in Willy's head. Ed continued. "A neighbor gave me this."

He passed a brochure to Willy.

"The Orran Dain Church of Forward Motion," Willy read. "Orran Dain one of the stiffs?"

"Nope. Apparently he's some kind of space wizard. They believed that their leader," Ed
paused for a moment to scan his notes before continuing. "Get this, Gemini Lovegood. They
believe he's the reincarnated spirit of Orran Dain, come to bring them back to the holy land."

"The neighbors told you all this?"

"Nope. That's in the brochure. The neighbors just told me about the constant solicitations.
One of them also mentioned that Gemini Lovegood had come to his house a couple of weeks
back and borrowed some camping equipment. He was planning to take a trip. He called it a
'veision quest.'"

"Christamighty," Willy replied, rolling his eyes. "How's that going to work in Wisconsin?
Does he head in to a cornfield with a case of rice beer and a guitar?"

"Got me. I doubt he could manage much better than cheap grass this far out in the
boonies. Probably got a guitar, though."

Willy ticked through the messages on his phone, hoping for a call from the coroner. It
would take some time to work through and identify that many bodies, but it would make things a
damn sight easier if they had a list of names. That would be somewhere to start, at least.
"Don't suppose we know whether our friend Gemini was in the basement, huh?"

"Not unless you know something I don't know."

"I know lots of shit you don't, Ed. Nothing on this particular matter, though."

"There's a website in the pamphlet, too. Might be worth checking out."

"I'll do that."

Ed stood. "Well, I guess that's about it, and I'm two hours over my shift thanks to you having me knock on doors, so I'm cutting out."

Willy nodded and picked up the brochure.

Ed stopped at the doorway. "Hey, one more thing. Neighbor wants his camping stuff back. Told him I'd bring him in once we cleared the crime scene. Keep me posted, okay?"

"Sure."

The door shut behind Ed, leaving Willy alone in the pale circle of his desk lamp. He laid the brochure out on the desk and looked it over. A group of frolicking twenty-somethings in blue robes graced the front cover. They smiled at the cameras and basked in the glow of a cartoon sun superimposed on the image. *Welcome to the Orran Dain Church of Forward Motion.*

The brochure served as a sales-pitch for the services available through the church: Cosmic Vibration readings, $250.00; Psychic Scrubs, $100.00; Astral Plane Communication, $50.00/half hour; Consultation with the Long Dead, Ever Living Orran Dain, $500.00. Orran Dain's cosmic trench-coat featured a bevy of metaphysical curiosities available at competitive rates. The brochure directed interested parties to the church's blog.

The Church's blog offered a similar selection, with the added bonus of a brief About Us statement dedicated to warding off the mistaken belief that the group was a cult, rather than a legitimate, though young, religious order coming in to its own. There was also a Contact Us page
with a few fields where users could select a series of options and enter a message. According to
the disclaimer at the bottom of the page, all inquiries would be answered in 3-5 business days,
though the church reserved the right to disregard any messages that they found out of accordance
with their beliefs. The final drop-down menu on the page featured the very same list of services
from the brochure.

Willy skipped through the web-based service list three times before it occurred to him
that something was wrong. He examined the brochure and compared it to the screen. Each of the
services had doubled in price. Never a great believer in coincidence, Willy made himself a note
to check around and see whether he could find out when the price update had taken place.

He searched the site for a few minutes longer, clicking through each and every link,
reading and re-reading every page, searching for anything that he might have missed. By the
time he finished, no wiser than he'd been when he started, his eyes felt like a pair of hot stones in
their sockets.

Edith Margo's face popped into Willy's head. He'd served her eviction papers a year ago,
after her house had been condemned by a health inspector. Poor Edith, deep into her eighties,
had lived in the same house for thirty some odd years. Over that time, she'd managed to fill each
and every room of the house with trash.

Every manner of vermin moved in: rats, mice, house-centipedes, even cockroaches,
which were rare given the climate. By the time the county brought Willy in, the air of the house
was a dusty cocktail of rodent feces and super powered dust-mites, and a health hazard. Edith
had to move immediately, no questions asked, as a matter of health and safety.
Anyone with a set of eyes could have seen how dangerous the house had become. Anyone, that is, but Edith, who stared at Willy through wide, watery eyes, her lower lip bobbing up and down, asking him why she had to leave.

"Tell me again," she said, "how my house is dangerous?"

A sense of foreboding had grown in Willy since he'd laid eyes on the crime scene for the first time, and it went beyond seeing the bodies and killing a man. A cult had formed in Barlow, right in front of his face, practically tap-dancing on the top of his skull, and he hadn't noticed.

How could he have missed what was happening in his own house?
Chapter Six

The sun was a cold pink crust on the western horizon by the time Willy got home. November nights were early in Barlow, and though he cherished his bachelorhood, he hated coming home to a dark house. He flicked on the living room lights and scowled at the mess he'd left for himself. Bachelor life had the insidious effect of creating strange, creeping messes that formed over the course of days. They looked harmless enough at first, but given time to incubate, the sea of Styrofoam clamshell containers, Coke cans, and burger wrappers became something fearsome. The minefield of grease, special sauce, and refined sugar residue provided a breeding ground for an ever-growing family of fruit flies, which took flight to form a gritty haze in the air as Willy passed through the room. His cat, the ever-obese Uncle Fester, followed along behind him, nuzzling his leg.

"You just want food," Willy said. Fester stared back at him, disinterested. His attitude said it all: *food is the only worthwhile service you provide, two-legs.*

Willy filled the cat’s dish. Satisfied that he wouldn't starve, Fester turned his attention to the task of pirouetting his flabby yet surprisingly nimble carcass through the living room, swatting at and eating any fruit flies that he managed to catch.

The refrigerator was empty aside from a few skunky beers and a handful of condiment packets. The freezer wasn't much better, though he did manage to identify and liberate a beefy-man dinner from one icy corner. He couldn't remember buying it, but guessed that the ice probably kept the bacteria at bay. And if not, there were worse ways to go than being poisoned by a TV Dinner. Not many, but there were some.
The early evenings put Willy in a bind. He couldn't see anything with the lights turned off, but he could see far too much with them turned on. The mild summer nights allowed a measure of mellow, easy sunlight in the evening that lit the place up without coating each and every inch of trash and exposed dust with hot white light. The electrical lights did Willy no such favors as it called his eye to every poor cleaning habit he'd developed over the course of his life. Winters became an extended showcase of his unclean shame.

Resigning himself to the borderline-sentient mess that surrounded him, Willy opened a beer, took a sip, and spit it into the sink. *Jesus. How long ago had he bought that?* He couldn't even get bachelorhood right.

The glow of a fire flickered over the back window, probably Gordon out burning his trash. *Hell, Willy thought. Even a trash fire sounds better than this.* He slipped his coat back on and headed for the back porch.

Gordon and Willy had an understanding. They liked one another, despite their differences. Willy was a cop, he upheld the law, didn't really drink that often, and hated the fact that Barlow was a city associated with a special breed of north-coast redneck that wore too much camouflage and finished each sentence with *eh.* Gordon was a north-coast redneck that resented the city and its law enforcement officers for being the sole barrier between cold reality and the utopia he'd always dreamed of: A place where he could burn his trash without fear of repercussion, smoke doobies in the local McDonald's Play land while he enjoyed his twenty piece McNugget, and drink way too much Busch Light while driving his grumbling pickup along the backroads and listening to sappy country songs about cheating wives and tears in beers. On paper, they should have hated each other. But they had an unspoken agreement: Willy wouldn't
come down on Gordon for his foibles and Gordon would forget that Willy was a cop. With that arrangement in place, they mutually declared one another one of the good ones.

"Evening, Gord," Willy said.

"Evening. Shit. Sorry about the fire. I meant to hit the dump earlier, but I couldn't make it."

"Working?"

"Hungover."

"Ah."

Gordon circle the fire, looking like a wobbly skeleton covered in tattered flannel. The fire flickered in his enormous glasses, creating two pinpoints of firelight above his bushy beard. He kicked a few logs to create better airflow, knelt to judge his work, and slurped a solid three inches off the top of beer sweating in his fist. "You want a beer?" he asked, holding up the twelve pack and rattling the remaining cans.

"Actually sure," Willy said. "For once I could probably use one. I got a couple in the house, but they taste like they're from back during the Lincoln administration."

"Pretty hectic day, I'll bet."

"You could say that."

"Mind if I ask you a question?"

Willy perked up. For Gordon to ask permission, it had to be a hell of a question. On more than one occasion, in the midst of, as he called it, "roasting a bone," Gordon had paused to ask Willy how much of a penalty a joint of comparable size and quality would fetch him if Willy decided to bust him. Most of the time Willy accommodated Gordon's ego and assured him that a
joint that fearsome would land him in the local jail for a few days. The reality was probably something closer to a negligible fine or a slap on the wrist.

"Sure, go ahead."

Gordon took a breath, looked at Willy. "Those crazy fuckers from the house. Are they really a cult?"

Willy took a sip from his beer and considered the question. He wasn't supposed to discuss his cases outside of work, but if he couldn't talk to Gordon, who the hell could he talk to?

"I heard they were," Gordon continued. "But shit like that gets blown out of proportion, you know?"

Willy nodded. "It looks like they were. The neighbors gave us some wacky ass pamphlets that explain what the people in the house were about. They're in to this guy Orran Dain, who's supposedly reincarnated over and over again, turning up in each generation like some kind of astral herpes. In this case the resident messiah was someone named Gemini Lovegood."

"Lovegood?" Gordon shook his head and took another pull from his beer. "That a real name? Sounds like a grade A asshole."

"Could be real. We're not sure. Couldn't find it in the system and there isn't a picture to be found. Chances are it's a nick or a flat out fake name. We'll figure it out sooner or later."

Gordon produced a pipe from his back pocket cast a sidelong glance at Willy.

"You cool, or...?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Great." After sucking in a hit and holding it for a handful of seconds, Gordon smoothed his greasy brown hair back from his forehead and smiled. "I was there once. In that house."

"No shit?" Willy replied. "Can you tell me anything?"
"Not much. I was there selling, ah, encyclopedias. Dealt with a guy named Norm. Big guy. Kind of scary looking, but nice enough. Like one of those old bikers that kind of looks like Santa Clause until you notice the swastika pinned to his jean jacket. He told me he was buying for his boss and asked me about a million times whether I put any additives in my encyclopedias. I don't, by the way. So when you bust some of these local pigskin punks smoking frosted grass, don't come knocking down my door, okay?"

"Wait," Willy replied. "We're not really talking about encyclopedias here, are we."

Gordon chuckled and tapped his pipe on the sole of his beige work boot. "You got me. You really are a hell of a detective. Anyway. When you deal, you kind of learn to just tune shit out. Otherwise you're forced to listen to every stoner's inane opinions on their favorite jam-band, or their half-cocked theories about lizard people in the White House, or whatever. Nine Eleven is an inside job - that kind of thing. I kind of wish I'd listened now."

Willy shrugged. "Without seeing the leader, it wouldn't help much. He's the one that needs to be pinned down. God willing, he's down at the morgue right now, just waiting to be identified."

"I could identify Norm," Gordon replied.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Huge white beard with a scar above his left eye. Looks like maybe he took a hockey-stick there once or something."

They stood, silent, watching the trash fire spit cinders into the air. Gordon added a pair of logs, then fed in a few more boxes once he was sure they were burning.

"Seems like a pretty shitty thing to do," Gordon said. "Get a bunch of rubes to kill themselves for you. I wonder what drives a person to do something like that?"
Willy shook his head. "No idea. I can't even convince the waitress at Mahony's to let me order off the senior menu. I'm fifty-nine, for Christ's sake."

The work phone buzzed in Willy's pocket startling him - a message from Rita. *Doctor called. Guy at the hospital is awake and talking.*

#

The hospital rooms at Barlow General made Willy hope for a swift death. The city built the hospital close to a half a century back, and it hadn't changed nearly enough in the intervening years. Floors of dirty white tile, high ceilings, leaky wooden windows that still opened, and creaking everywhere. Every door in the hospital screeched like a sick cat when opened, closed, or looked at with a degree of force. With the exception of the modern equipment, the relatively recent replacement of the archaic boiler system, and several years’ worth of accumulated grime, the hospital was as it had been the day it was built. Willy could smell the alcohol in the cool, damp air, just beneath the thick haze of mentholated balm and anti-bacterial ointment. It was a wonder anyone ever healed here. Willy half expected to see a doctors in plague masks wandering the halls.

They'd put the kid in an isolated room at the far end of one of the hospital's wings. A stubby nurse with coiffed gray hair and thick glasses lead Willy down the long echoing hallway. She said nothing when they arrived, just opened the door and swept one hand through the doorway, indicating the stirring patient.

At first, Willy thought the kid was sleeping. He lay on his side, shivering, his skin a pale shade of gray. Twenty-five years old, according to the doctors. And though it wasn't discernible
through standard medical methods and testing, Willy was fairly certain that most twenty-five year olds still had their heads buried firmly in their asses. He certainly had at that age.

The kid's eyes fluttered, focused on Willy for a split second, and closed again.

"Are you here to arrest me?" he croaked.

"No," Willy replied. "We don't do that for suicide attempts, though if I thought you were maybe going to try again, I could have them hold you indefinitely."

The kid nodded.

"Are you going to try it again?" Willy asked.

The kid considered the question for a moment. "No. Not right now. Maybe later."

Every move the kid made looked like agony, slow and careful, as though his skin had been peeled off, leaving every nerve-ending exposed. He sat up, straightened his back, and gasped. "Everything hurts. It feels like someone punched the inside of my body."

"Good," Willy replied. "Remember that feeling the next time you decide to drink some Coolant-aid."

"If you're not here to arrest me, could you leave me alone? I think I'm going to puke."

Willy smiled. "Go on and puke. I don't mind. But we're not done talking just yet."

"What do you want to know?" The kid asked.

"Your name, for starters."

"Arthur Noll."

Noll. The name tickled the back of Willy's brain. He recognized it from Barlow. The Nolls were important in some way, though he couldn't place it.

"Thanks, Arthur. Now what can you tell me about what happened?"
Arthur closed his eyes and relaxed his head on the pillow. "It was normal, mostly. The plan was to go out and canvas for donations."

"Does that ever work?" Willy asked.

"Transcendence is rarely appreciated in its time."

"Come up with that all on your own?"

"No. It's one of the precepts of Orran Dain. We have to memorize them."

"We'll get back to that. You were saying?"

"We were going to go out and canvas, but Norm put a stop to that. He said he'd had a vision from Orran Dain."

Willy opened his notebook and scribbled some notes. "And Orran Dain is?"

"A man that lived a long time ago. He became cosmically transcendent through his one hundred precepts and he's been moving forward through time ever since. Every few generations, he manifests and gathers people to his church."

It was the kind of response that suggested staggering amounts of repetition, as though the kid had been using it for years, to the point that it required almost no thought to rattle off now.

"And in your case he manifested as Gemini Lovegood?"

"Right. But Gemini wasn't there. He's been gone for a while. On a vision quest."

Willy put the notebook away. "What does that mean, anyway?"

"Part of his responsibility is to be receptive to messages from Orran Dain. Sometimes that requires quiet and isolation."

"So he wasn't at the house during the time of the suicide?"

"No."

"So he's alive?"
"No."

"And you know that how, exactly?"

"I saw him when I died. He was with us, out there through the black hole that leads to Dain's Ocean."

The urge to roll up his notepad and smack Arthur across the face came over Willy. This interrogation should have been a molehill, but it was quickly becoming a mountain covered in lard and banana peels. Every esoteric new term sent Willy slipping down the edges, moving further and further from any actual understanding.

"So," Willy said, working to keep his poker face. "You saw Gemini Lovegood die?"

"No, but I saw him in death" Arthur replied. "In space. On a meteorite. Or an asteroid. Honestly, I forget the difference."

"I hate myself for even saying this, but tell me about it."

"I died," Arthur replied. "I guess Norm killed me somehow. When I woke up, I was on an asteroid-slash-meteorite. We were moving, but it was so fast that it was beyond perception. Also, space, so no gravity, resistance, or any of that stuff. Pretty much everyone was there. Gemini. Norm. Nick. Candy. Roger. Everyone."

"And you were going to Dain's Ocean?"

"That's right. It's not a literal ocean, but a place through a black hole. It's different there. Like a new big bang, with a new universe, new worlds, all to be colonized by the children of Dain."

"That's the cult name?" Willy asked.
"First, not a cult," Arthur replied. "A church. And no. We are literally Dain's children. I won't get into the logistics of that, but it has to do with non-denominational transubstantiation and a bunch of other heavy metaphysics that you probably wouldn't get."

"Okay," Willy said, holding up his hands. "You're right, I probably wouldn't get it. Let's skip ahead. You say this all happened while you were dead?"

"That's right."

"So if you died and saw Gemini there, how did you get back here?"

Arthur's jaw jiggled in its socket. He'd been trying to avoid thinking about this since the first hints of wakefulness started tickling his subconscious. "I don't know. One second I was on the meteor, asteroid, the next I'm in this hospital bed with a tube down my throat. Not for me to say, I guess. I can't expect to understand Dain's will all the time."

Willy traced his line of thought backwards, trying to recall how he'd wound up with Arthur floating through space on a meteor. Or an asteroid. His head was beginning to ache again, a flashing pain in the front of his skull, right above his eye. The muscle there twitched and he felt his eye wiggle. He needed to lie down, to sleep, to relax a bit and forget about the craziness he'd stumbled in to.

"Back to the basement," Willy replied. "You said Norm killed you. What happened?"

"Well," Arthur began. "He brought everyone to the basement. By the time I got there, things were already moving. He told me about the vision quest and how we were all supposed to leave our mortal tethers."

"Mortal tethers?" Willy asked.
"Right. Our bodies." Arthur paused for a moment, sat up straight. His face went pale and he fumbled at his nightstand for the bedpan the nurse had left there. He began to hack like a smoker, wet, gurgling coughs that sent tears streaming down his face.

"Should take better care of your mortal tether," Willy said.

Arthur, in the midst of drooling into the bedpan, shook his head. "Still a little woozy. Anyway. Norm said it was time. We were going to meet Dain. It gets a little blurry after that. Like a cosmic road trip."

"Did Norm say specifically whether or not Gemini was involved in the decision to go join Dain?"

"No. He said Dain spoke to him directly. Why?"

"Just curious."

"Oh," Arthur smiled. "Did you think Gemini lead us all to do this? Like maybe we were just his squad of dancing idiots that would prance around whenever he snapped his fingers?"

This was, Willy knew, one of those moments that he had a very poor track record of dealing with. Arthur was pushing what he felt was an advantage--his outrage over Willy making these assumptions. Arthur felt like now that he'd caught on to what was happening, he had the upper hand. Letting him think that, letting him run to the end of that leash like a stupid, high-velocity dog, would probably yield more information in the long run. Pushing back, on the other hand, would most likely lock his jaws shut. On the third hand, if he pushed the issue, he might be able to open the kid's eyes about what Gemini really was, maybe even make him an ally in the process.

"I'm not sure what to think," Willy replied. "But I have some concerns. I haven't got a for sure ID on Gemini's body yet, so he could still be alive. That's a little alarming, don't you think? I
mean, if he's still out there, but everyone else is dead..." He let the words hang in the air between
them, to see how exactly Arthur would react.

"He's not out there. Like I said. I saw him in space when I died."

"But you didn't die, Arthur. You had your stomach pumped, you were in rough shape for
a while, but at no point did you shit the bed, even for a split second."

"Yes I did."

"Do you think your doctor will corroborate that if I call him in here?" Willy asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. But not everything can be boiled down to simple medical nuts and
bolts, can it? We're talking about intelligence and ability far beyond even the lofty and forbidden
knowledge of the Barlow police department. We're talking extradimensional forces. Things that,
to a closed mind, might sound crazy."

"You got that right," Willy replied. "Was anyone else missing from the house?"

Arthur considered the question for a minute. "No. Not that day. Everyone was there."

"Okay. And the poison is passed out, you all drink it, everyone dies. That about sum it
up?"

Arthur nodded.

"Do you know what the poison was?"

"No. Do you?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Coolant," Willy replied. "Which is a pretty shitty way to go out cut loose the old mortal
tether, if you ask me. Seems like a god should be a bit more considerate of his followers."
Arthur sagged, shaking his head. "He's not a god. He's...it's complicated. But he's not a god."

"Whatever works," Willy replied.

"Shouldn't this matter to you?" Arthur asked. "You're a detective, right? Shouldn't you be piecing this together somehow?"

"My job is to piece together what happened and pick out anyone that crossed the law during the course of everything. Until that job creates some kind of need for me to understand your new age horse-shit, I think I'm just as happy not understanding."

Arthur closed his eyes and laid back in the bed. He didn't look like he was in much of a talking mood anymore.

"Okay, then. I'm guessing we're done for now," Willy said. "The doctors tell me you're going to be here for a couple more days at least. I'm going to leave a business card. Call me if you need anything, and don't go leaving town. We're not entirely finished here yet."

#

Willy stopped at the nurse's station on his way out. A pair of women, both dressed in soft purple scrubs, hunched over the desk peering at something on a computer screen. Willy gently cleared his throat to get their attention, which caused the woman on the left to look at him as though he'd just relieved himself on the floor.

"Excuse me," Willy said.

"Can I help you?" The nurse asked.
"Yes," Willy replied. "Crazy question. Did the kid from the mass-suicide die at any point?"

The nurse stared for a moment, blinking. She turned her attention to the computer screen, closed several windows worth of cat videos, and hammered away at the keyboard. She cycled through several files, her eyes scraping back and forth over each page.

"No," she replied. "He was unconscious and pretty sick, but his heart never stopped. We pumped his stomach, filled him full of water, and flushed the remaining poison out of his system."

"So he couldn't have had a brush with the afterlife?" Willy asked.

"What?" The nurse replied.

"He couldn't have seen, you know, heaven, or something, because he never died?"

"I can answer the first part," the nurse replied. "He never died. As far as heaven, how the hell should I know. I look like a wizard to you?"

"Thanks," Willy replied.

Outside the front door, Willy stopped and shivered. The temperature was dropping quicker and quicker every day, cold as the love of a catholic woman, as his father would have put it. Most mornings there would be frost on the ground, which meant that the camping areas were closing up for the year, or at the very least emptying out of all but a few hardcore campers that had the right gear for cold weather. If Gemini was out there, chances are he'd have to come in from the cold sooner or later, unless he was some kind of rugged Midwestern bushman that could withstand winters of subzero temperatures in nothing but a tent. Unless he had ordered the mass suicide himself and had the good sense to hit the road afterward, that was. Didn't seem likely, though. When a person invested time in convincing people that he or she was the living
manifestation of a God on earth, the odds held that they wouldn't favor anonymity. People like
that wanted to be the center of attention; they wanted the world to see what they'd done.
Otherwise what was the point?

Willy dialed Ed's number. After a few rings, Ed answered. Judging by the background
noise, he was driving.

"Ed? Willy. Got a favor to ask you."

"What's that?" Ed asked.

"The leader of that house. According to the kid in the hospital, he was off somewhere
having a wizard quest, like you said."

"A vision quest?"

"Yeah, sure. Anyway, he's out having his wizard quest. The kid couldn't tell me where he
went, but I'm betting he's at one of the recreation areas. Maybe Monticon. Can you get some
guys to poke around out in those places and see if they find any squatters?"

"Sure. Got a picture?"

"In my desk. Back of the book. The 100 Precepts book we grabbed as evidence. There's a
picture of him on the back page."

"Okay. Got it. I'll be in touch."
Chapter Seven

The phone pulled Willy from sleep at 4:00AM. He'd been dreaming, something deep and happy from when he was a kid, but the phone chased everything away, brought him back to his stiff gray life and left his heart racing in his chest. For a handful of shocked seconds, he didn't know where he was, then his eyes adjusted to the room and he caught the flash of the cell-phone on his nightstand and the dull moonlight coming through the curtains. The rest came back in bits and pieces. Coming home, too tired to bother looking at the mess. Collapsing in to bed, still in his clothes. And now waking up, cold and somehow still sweaty.

He pawed at the phone, his fingers not quite working at full capacity just yet, and managed to answer the call.

"Morning, Ed."

"Sleeping?" Ed asked.

"Nope. Was up sharpening my swords."

"Cool. I'm out at Monticon. We've got a tent here, not registered with the front office. Showed the picture to some of the rangers and one of them thought he might've seen Lovegood in the area. Want me to go shake the tent down?"

"No. Hold up. Call in a couple of guys for backup and wait for me. I'll be there in half an hour."

He swapped out the rumpled set of slept-in clothes for a slightly less rumpled set and stood in front of the bathroom mirror for a few moments, trying to put himself together. After staring into his own bloodshot eyes for a spell, he realized the effort was futile, slipped on his waistcoat, and started the car.
The morning was bitter cold and still dark. The hairs in Willy's nose froze to one another and his eyes watered. He felt a measure of respect for Gemini Lovegood. Anyone that could sleep outdoors in this weather deserved a glorious vision. Maybe something with a whole lot of virgins, or pies, or whatever it was that people hoped to see during vision quests. Probably the only thing Lovegood would see in this weather was a bad case of exposure, if it was him in the tent.

The long strip of road that lead to the Monticon recreation area felt like a black tunnel. If you looked hard enough to either side of the raised road, you might catch the occasional scrappy Black Spruce poking out of the muck, but beyond that it was nothing but a damp sponge for miles and miles. The glow of headlights on the worn reflectors of the road were the only thing to look at, and if you looked too long, they'd hypnotize you. More than once Willy had driven out on this very stretch to check out some wreck that had happened in the dead of night when some poor dupe put himself out by staring too hard at the glowing rhythm of the road-lines. More often than not he'd also find several spent cans of Milwaukee's best in the passenger seat, or better yet, tossed casually into the swamp twenty yards from the car, as though Willy might believe that the car just happened to go off the road in the exact same place that someone had left a mound of cans. Breathalyzers cleared up any lingering doubts.

With sleep still tugging at the lids of his eyes, Willy turned up the radio and switched it to KBUT, Barlow's country station. K-boot, or so the DJ's called it, though any sensible person would infer kay-butt. Willy didn't like country, but that was the point; the twangy steel guitar and weepy, overdone accents irritated him so much that he knew he could never fall asleep to it. Safety first.
After a few minutes of driving, three other sets of headlights came up on Willy's rear. He angled his mirror and tried to see if he recognized the vehicle, but the headlights kept the details obscure. The Barlovian morning commute didn't start for another three hours. It could be someone driving through, but to Willy's knowledge there were no convenient destinations anywhere nearby on this road. No freeway entrances, no motels, not even really any residential areas for quite a way. Nevertheless, driving late at night wasn't a crime, so Willy focused on the road and staying awake, and did his best to ignore the cars lining up behind him.

Miles passed and more cars joined the caravan. Willy brought out his phone and dialed Ed's number.

"Hey, Willy. You on your way?"

"Yeah. I'm there in a minute or two. How much backup did you call in exactly?"

"Called in Jack," Ed replied. "He's the only one that answered."

"He in a squad car?"

"Nope. He's got his own truck. Lives a couple miles from Monticon, so he just drove right over."

"He's there?"

"Yep. Got here ten minutes ago."

"And you didn't call anyone else?"

"Nope."

Willy checked his mirror and tried to make a rough count of the cars behind him.

"I've got five cars lined up behind me. At this time of day, on this road, that's damn close to gridlock in Barlow, wouldn't you say?"

"Sure. Why? You going to pull over and direct traffic?"
"Funny. I'm pulling up to the entrance now. I'll look for you."

Willy flicked on his turning signal and watched as five other sets of turning signals clicked on behind him. He eased to the side of the road, just beside the entry to Monticon State Park, and let the vehicles pass. As each one went by, Willy felt his blood pressure tick up by several units.

He followed the vans into the park, directly to Ed, and watched each of them park on the side of the road and disgorge well-dressed men and women and their frumpy, camera-toting counterparts. Ed watched, a look of bewilderment spreading across his face, from the opposite side of the road.

Willy joined Ed and noticed that Jack was there with him. Throughout the entirety of the time they'd worked together, which would be five years in short order, Willy didn't think he'd ever heard Jack say more than five words at once. The man was incredibly tall, thick-armed and barrel-chested like a lumberjack. Jack had a shaggy brown beard, thick brown hair, dark brown eyes and a deep, mellow voice that sounded like it was meant for the bassward end of a doo-wop band. Jack stayed where he was as Ed advanced to greet Willy, offering a borderline-imperceptible nod of his head.

"You brought the press?" Ed asked Willy.

"Someone did," Willy replied.

Willy approached the line of vans and cleared his throat.

"Everybody go home. You can't be here, by order of the Barlow police department."

The reporters and cameramen exchanged glances, then resumed the work of setting up their shots.

"Okay, fine. You win that round."
He approached one of the pairs. A chubby late thirties guy with long curly hair and sunglasses despite the darkness, wearing a leather jacket over a t-shirt with a picture of a smiling taco on it adjusted a camera as a slender blond in her mid-twenties adjusted her hair in a handheld mirror. She looked perfect, though Willy couldn't understand how. Reporters always looked perfect, men and women alike, even in storms, disasters, or cold, early mornings like this. Looking that put together at this hour of the day was an affront to nature. Willy didn't look that good after sixteen hours of sleep, let alone the standard four or five regular hours he lived with. She wore a long winter coat over her clothing, but Willy was certain if she took it off she'd be wearing an outfit that matched and looked fresh from the cleaners. It wasn't right.

"Morning," Willy said, addressing them both. "Cold enough for you?"

The blond woman looked at him and blinked. "Who are you?" She slipped off the coat as she asked the question. Willy was right; the impeccable beige pantsuit looked like it might still be warm from the iron.

"Detective Willy Grieves, Barlow PD."

"Did you need something?"

Willy recognized her now. Tatiana Mazlowski, channel six. She always seemed so nice on air. Now she had a look on her face like Willy had just force-fed her a handful of cat turds straight out of the litter box.

"Just curious. How'd you folks know to come out here?"

Tatiana smiled. Willy smiled back. He smiled because he could see a glistening snail trail of snot leaking from her left nostril, a result of the cold air. Apparently Tatiana hadn't developed the obsessive sniffling and nose wiping that protected native Midwesterners from such embarrassments. He suspected she was smiling for a different reason.
"I don't have to tell you that," she said.

"Of course not. Someone will, though. Might as well be you."

Her smile fell apart and turned back into that cat-turd grimace. Willy had ruined her fun.

"Yeah, I guess. Anonymous tip. Someone called the station and let us know that Gemini Lovegood was going to be picked up."

Interesting. Willy wondered whether Tatiana was telling him the truth, but decided after a few seconds that she probably was. She had no real reason to lie about it, and if she had found out some other way, then how had all the other stations found out about it too? A call seemed the most plausible. One leak, maybe in the police department, maybe not. Maybe just some guy in his basement with a scanner. Or maybe...

Willy thanked Tatiana and her cameraman and rejoined Ed and Jack by the cars.

"Let's get this done quick," Willy said. "I'd like to make this the lowest profile circus we can. Might as well do it now before any other spectators show up."

Ed and Jack nodded and the three moved through the narrow path through the trees to the campsite, at which a dull yellow glow seeped through the walls of a canvas dome tent. Aside from the footsteps of the three cops the woods had fallen into a sharp silence, interrupted only by the occasional snapping of a branch. In the quiet, ever footstep sounded like a sledgehammer falling on a sack of dry rocks. Once they made it to the edge of the tent's clearing, Ed and Jack fell back and waited on the perimeter while Willy moved in.

"Gemini Lovegood," Willy said, his breath puffing in the cold air. "Come on out. This is the Barlow police department."

Willy knew how this would go. He'd be forced to open the tent, to drag Lovegood out, force him in to the back of the car and to suffer his constant fit of kicking and screaming and
demanding a lawyer. That's how it always went. No one did the sensible thing and worked with the police. It had to be a challenge, every single time.

But the tent door slid open and out popped Gemini Lovegood, tall and thin, shaggy brown hair covering his forehead, which happened to be the only part of his body that was covered at all. He stretched and yawned, arching his back and shivering in the cold air, then waved to Willy.

"You're here to arrest me. I'm ready to go."


#

Gemini went without a struggle. He put his wrists together, smiling the whole time and waving to the cameras. He never once asked for his clothes.

The reporters devoured the sight in a stunned silence. Gemini's nakedness rendered all comments unnecessary. What needed to be said when you had footage of the naked leader of a suicide cult taking a languid walk to the back of a squad car in sub-freezing weather? Nothing. Nothing at all.

Willy's department car had no safety panel between the front and back seats, but none seemed necessary. Gemini acted as though he knew the drill and played along perfectly. In his world, everything appeared to be right on schedule. He eased into the back of the car, put his legs up over the front passenger seat and laid back for a nap while Willy wrapped up the police work. Reporters circled the car once Willy wandered off, gathering spare film and asking Gemini questions through the closed windows. He said nothing, just smiled and closed his eyes. Soon he'd fallen asleep, drool running down his chin and settling in his dark patch of chest hair.
Willy sifted through the tent, searching for anything that might incriminate Gemini. He found plenty of camping gear, most of which he suspected belonged to Gemini’s neighbor. Nuts and granola bars filled a corner of the tent, along with a case of bottled water and a couple of empty coolers. Everything seemed pretty standard, with the exception of a silver laptop he found nestled under a pile of rumpled clothes. He checked the laptop and found it password locked.

Ed peaked in through the loose flap of the tent, shining his flashlight around Willy’s feet. "Find anything?"

"A laptop. Camping gear. Nothing good."

"Damn. Want to sprinkle some grass around the inside of the tent?"

Willy grimaced. "Let's not make that joke quite so loud within earshot of reporters," he replied.

"What about the laptop?" Ed asked. "Think we can get anything off of it?"

"Hard to say," Willy replied. "Do you know of any way a guy could get Internet way out here?"

Ed gave Willy a serious look. "You mean other than through black magic?"

"Yes. Barring black magic, Ed."

"Yeah, sure. Lots of ways. Cell phone could be a wireless hot-spot, or you can get a mobile modem for a laptop."

"I didn't find a cell phone or a mobile modem."

Ed shrugged. "Don't know what to tell you. What makes you think he had Internet access?"

"He looked like he was expecting us. This all felt like a show. You picking up on that, or am I being paranoid."
Ed peered back though the flap of the tent towards the spot beyond the trees where Willy's car was parked. The low rustle of the reporters talking amongst themselves carried to the tent on the breeze. "Yeah, I could see that. Seemed a little too eager to wander around in front of cameras with his dick out, if you ask me. And it wasn't even a prize dick, did you notice that?"

"No," Willy replied.

"Well it wasn't. Nothing to write home about, you ask me. I mean it was fine, but Jesus. Come on. Have some modesty."

"Sure, Ed. Do me a favor when you're done contemplating Lovegood's dick. Collect all this stuff and bring it back to the station, okay?"

"Sure thing," Ed replied. "You bringing Lovegood in?"

"Yeah. Nothing to hold him on, but I'd like to get some questions in before we let him go, at least. Stick him in a cell and let him sweat for a few hours."

"All right. You'd better hurry. I left Jack back there to keep the reporters from getting too close to your car, but they probably overwhelmed him and stripped him to bones by now."
Chapter Eight

Willy turned up the heat and pointed his car back towards town. Six AM had come and gone, leaving a dull gray day behind. He smelled snow in the air, and it couldn't come soon enough. The bare trees, the dead grass and the endless frozen peat bogs made for scenery that only noose-salesman and drunks could appreciate. It wasn't fit for anyone that happy to live above ground and sober.

"Doing okay back there?" Willy asked.

"Fine," Gemini replied.

"I've gotta tell you, you're not technically under arrest at the moment, but I'm going to bring you back to the station to ask some questions. You want a lawyer?"

"I'm good," Gemini replied.

"You sure?"

"Sure."

"Then I guess there's nothing stopping me from asking you whether you ordered those people to kill themselves, then. So did you?"

"Me?" Gemini smiled. "No. Orran Dain did that."

"But you know about it?"

"I had a vision."

"What'd the vision tell you, exactly?"

"That Orran Dain would call the church home soon."

"But not you?" Willy asked.

"I still have more to accomplish."
How rich, Willy thought. Twenty some odd people dead and one in the hospital sweating coolant was a hell of a day's work by any standard, and now he had more to accomplish? No wonder Gemini was leading his own cult; with this kind of ambition he was destined for a leadership position.

"So if I look at that laptop of yours, I won't find anything on there connecting you to the mass suicide?"

"Nope," Gemini replied. The smug shit hadn't even opened his eyes yet. He looked like he might slip off to sleep at any time. How could one person be so at ease while naked in the back of a cop car?

"Great. That's good to know. It'll save me a lot of investigation time."

Gemini smiled, though he still didn't open his eyes.

"So," Willy continued, "when this all gets cleared up, you heading back to the house to resume your missionary work?"

"No," Gemini said. "Moving on. Have to keep spreading the word."

Was it wrong that Willy felt a measure of relief? He'd gone up against all manner of petty criminals throughout his career, even a couple of serious ones, but he'd never tested himself against the leader of a religious cult. He hated the idea of handing his mess off to some other unfortunate town, but if he hit the point where there was nothing further to be done, who could blame him? His job was to protect the citizens in Barlow, not save the world.

"Where you headed?"

"I'm thinking the Cimarron trailer park," Gemini said. "It seems like the kind of place that might be ready to hear what I've got to say."
Shit. Moving on? To the Cimarron Trailer Park? The same Cimarron that sat well within the borders of the Barlow city limits and was policed by the very same Barlow police force, including one Willy A. Grieves? So much for other peoples' messes. He was right, though, Willy had to admit. If there was anyplace populated by people dense enough to buy Gemini's message at full price, it would be the Cimarron Trailer Park. Willy considered a solid fifty percent of the adults in the trailer park his most loyal customers and the kids weren't much better. On a late night run to break up a domestic disturbance in one of the trailers, some feral elementary-aged coot shot out from behind a futon and bit Willy's knee, growling like a rabid possum the whole time. When he checked on the wound later, Willy discovered that the bite had torn through his pants and broken the skin in two places. It was all he could do to restrain himself from heading to Barlow General for a rabies test afterward.

"You're not going to go starting trouble in Cimarron now, are you? Because that would make me very sad."

"I haven't made any trouble," Gemini replied.

"So you say," Willy said.

"Innocent until proven guilty, right?" Gemini asked.

Those words, held at the ready on the lips of every single red-handed shitbag that Willy had ever arrested, caused him physical pain every time he heard them. Not because he disagreed, but because he agreed, and he usually found himself in agreement just as he was acting as though he didn't agree. Willy sucked in a long breath and sighed, refocused himself, and started over.

"I'm going to bring you to the police station. We can't hold you for long, maybe twenty-four hours, but it probably won't even be that long. I'm going to have a look at what we find in
your tent and go from there. If there's nothing connecting you, then you're free to go. More power to you. I hope that's the case, in fact."

That was a lie. Willy hoped the exact opposite; he hoped to find a piece of easy, incontrovertible evidence to parade in front of a judge to convince them that polite, naked Gemini Lovegood should be locked away, safe in a metal cage, for several years to come, lest he attempt to lead another conspiracy of lemurs through the wood-chipper. You didn't always get what you want, Willy knew, but he felt it important to be honest with himself, if no one else.

"It is the case," Gemini replied. "Doesn't matter. Dain's got a plan and we're all just working in accordance with it."

"I thought you were Dain," Willy replied.

Gemini's eyes narrowed. "You read our brochures?"

"Nah," Willy lied. "No time. Heard it from the guy that survived the house."

He played it cool, Willy had to admit. There might have been one second of spastic surprise that bounced over his face, but it had come and gone so quickly that willy wasn't sure he'd seen it in the first place. The eyes, though, they told the whole story. They shifted back and forth, not nervous really, but hinting at suppressed anxiety. He was thinking now, wondering who had made it out of the house and what they might know.

"Did Orran Dain tell you that someone made it out of the house?" Willy asked.

Gemini laid his head back on the seat and closed his eyes again.

"He's awake now, too," Willy continued. "Hasn't had much to say so far, but we'll see how long that lasts."

"He can say whatever he wants," Gemini replied. "I've been in the woods."
"Sure, sure. I didn't mean to imply anything," Willy said. "I just can't help but think that it seems like something set these people off. I wonder how long it'll be before I figure out what it was?"

"Couldn't tell you," Gemini replied.

"I know you can't, but if someone could, I'd tell them to consider coming clean. It's hard to keep up with all the lies when you really get into the weeds, and there are deals to be made for people that fess up. That's all."

Gemini said nothing, so Willy turned on the radio. More twangy country, more absentee wives and gut-shot cheating husbands. He reached for the knob, ready to change it to talk radio, but stopped at the last second. This was the kind of music an enemy soldier might use to sweat information out of a captive. He'd let Gemini marinate in it for a while, hopefully long enough to keep it bouncing around the interior of his head while he spent a few hours in a cell awaiting release. Maybe it would soften him up. Maybe it wouldn't. Maybe it would just irritate Lovegood. That would be enough.

#

A knock on the door of his office startled Willy out of a confused daydream. Or had it been a real dream? He wasn't sure. His head felt heavy, like maybe he'd dropped out for a minute or two there. He'd been thinking of Gemini, locked down in the basement of the station. Rita would be on the other side of the door, standing with her arms crossed, ready to remind him that the twenty-four hours (closer to thirty-two) were up and that they'd have to let Gemini go or charge him with something. But of course it was really only one option - let him go. The last day
and a half had been a fruitless quest for some kind of evidence that turned up a whole mound of Jack Shit's finest.

Rita hammered the door. Willy grumbled.

"Door's open," he said, flicking on the light and shielding his eyes. What time was it? The absence of windows made it impossible to tell. Time didn't exist in Willy's moldy broom closet.

Rita came in, holding her clipboard. She only held it when she had to give Willy bad news. She presented it as a symbol of the futility of the universe, the presence of reality intruding in Willy's fantasy world. That clipboard shielded Rita from Willy's tantrums, because the clipboard had the facts and it didn't matter how anyone felt about the facts. "We're well over our twenty-four hours. Time to set the precious butterfly free," she said.

"I don't want to," Willy replied.

"I'll do it," Rita said.

"No. I don't want it done."

"Tough tits," Rita replied. "It's happening. We both know it."

They did. Willy had given the computer over to the meager Barlow municipal IT department, which consisted of one sweaty guy named Herbert. Herbert, smelled like cheese-doodles and damp basements. Having recently recovered from a lifetime of morbid obesity, Herbert had the look of a man with far too much skin and a wardrobe inherited from a much larger relative. Everything hung off him. Losing the weight didn't give him a look of health, it gave him the look of a ham left out in the rain. Nevertheless, Herbert knew his work and after a cursory examination of the computer he pronounced it bricked and handed it back to Willy.

"Bricked?" Willy asked.
"Bricked," Herbert replied. "Dead. Useless. Fried. It has been transmogrified from device to paperweight."

There had also been a thorough search of the camping area and lake Monticon, both of which turned up nothing. Though that wasn't exactly true; it had turned up an interview with a couple of late-season campers in the area that had verified speaking with Gemini on the day of the mass suicide. Willy couldn't even call it worthless in all honesty; worthless would have been a step up.

To make matters worse, according to the downstairs guard that kept an eye on the inmates, Gemini had struck up a fast inter-cell friendship with local shitbag Fred Mertz, who was sweating off a handful of days for unpaid public urination tickets.

By Willy's best guess, that put the score of whatever ambiguous game he was playing somewhere in the neighborhood of a thousand to one in Gemini's favor. He had an alibi and a new best friend now. Willy had nothing, with the exception of the aforementioned Jack Shit.

"Could we arrange to have him fall down some stairs?" Willy asked.

"One story building," Rita replied. "There's only four or five stairs on either side of the landing going down to the basement. Couldn't really count on it killing him. Maybe if we pushed him off the roof, but that might look suspicious. The best way might be to bring him in here and let him sit in your office until the mold gives him Mesothelioma. Probably take a few years, but it'll get him."

"It'll get me first," Willy replied.

"Maybe."

They sat in silence for a moment. Willy cycled through the same futile loop of thoughts that had been playing in his head since he got in to the office that morning. Sad schemes to keep
Lovegood locked up for a bit longer, checklists upon checklists within checklists about where he might have missed some crucial piece of evidence, and finally, drab daydreams of escaping to some island paradise where Willy would, upon arrival, realize how much he hated sand and heat before returning to Wisconsin a sweaty and broken man.

No point it putting it off any longer.

"Fine. Let him go."

"Okay," Rita replied. Her bottom lip stuck out and she gave Willy sad-puppy eyes. "Sorry we couldn't kill him. You gonna be okay?"

"I guess," Willy replied.

"Would it make you feel any better to go chase some people away from Lovegood's house?"

"Maybe," Willy replied.

"A few of the neighbors have called. Local news and maybe some regional news are there, waiting to see if Lovegood shows up. You could go clear them out."

"Fine," Willy said. At least he could do that much.

News vans lined either side of the street, forcing Willy to park around the corner. All the local guys were there: Bill Bradley, with his worn suit-coat and his crumb-filled mustache; Kurt Ballingsrud, ever-dressed in the jeans and blazer combo that made him look like he might ask you if you knew where he could score some grass; and Willy's new friend, Tatiana Maslowski, dressed in a pantsuit even more pristine than the one she'd been wearing in their last encounter. A different color, too. This one was a somber burgundy that looked like it might complement a sunset. Maybe she owned one for every contingency? Even the public access folks were there,
lined up with their compact digital cameras and bargain basement microphones. Whenever a mid-profile crime occurred in Barlow, they would be there, sticking their noses in the tragedy as far as they’d go. The Barlow media didn't miss a beat.

The vans that Willy didn't recognize were more disconcerting. Some of them bore logos from bigger networks, even a cable news channel or two. Their anchors were easy to pick out in the crowd, wearing tailored and pressed clothes that hadn't been purchased at the local Barlow Savesalot, or the Super Walmart at the edge of the city. Willy recognized that, because he'd been buying his clothes at those places for decades and had developed a deep knowledge of their respective inventories.

He kept a megaphone in the car, but decided to leave it there. Bad enough that the neighbors had to suffer through a horde of reporters, many of whom looked like spray tanned sausage-meat packed in to business casual dress. Suffering through Willy's dusty pissing and moaning would only salt the wounds.

He stepped out of the car and walked to Tatiana and her camera man, who was still wearing his Taco shirt. Willy eyeballed the taco, feeling certain its smile had faded somewhat over the course of the intervening days. The eyes looked a little deader too, if he wasn't mistaken.

"'Scuse me," Willy said. "I'm gonna need you people to clear out."

Tatiana snorted and covered her mouth. "You again. I don't think so. Gemini might be here at any minute and we want to get an interview."

"Yeah, granted, but you're blocking traffic here and this is a residential area. It's getting a bit late. Maybe you take off and come back tomorrow, okay?"
"Can you get out of my shot, bud?" The cameraman asked, waving Willy out of the way with his free hand. It was the gesture someone would give a dog blocking a television.

Willy glanced at the man. The taco stared back, offering a silent apology. He doesn't speak for us, it said.

"Wave me away like that again, Taco, and I might tase you."

"You'll what?" The man's head poked up from behind the camera, all sunglasses and curly hair. Flakes of dandruff covered the shoulders of his shirt.

Willy liked him less and less with each passing second.

"Tase you. I don't like carrying a gun, but I love carrying a taser. In a lot of ways, it's way worse than a gun, because it doesn't take much to get me to use it. I could tase you six or seven times and still sleep easy tonight, but I'd probably feel a little bad if I shot you."

The man stared at Willy, his mouth open. Willy didn't let it go to his head. By the look of it, that was a mouth that spent a lot of time hanging open, so shock and awe probably didn't play a part in this.

"Can't say I've ever tased a woman," Willy continued. "So good news for you, I guess, ma'am."

"Like I said before, we've got a right to be here," Tatiana replied. She chewed her gum with such force that Willy feared for the structural integrity of her skull. She appeared to be on the verge of a very legendary rant if he didn't play his cards right.

"Whoa," Willy said, raising his hands. "I didn't say you don't have a right, but as for right now, you all need to go. Come back tomorrow, I don't care. But right now, it's getting to be evening, and people will want some breathing room on this street."

"I want your badge number," Tatiana said.
"Sure," Willy replied, retrieving his badge from the inside of his coat. He held the badge out to her for inspection, then showed it to the camera for good measure. "Good enough?" he asked.

Tatiana studied the badge for several seconds, making a grand show of memorizing each number. He didn't have a heart to tell her that he was the senior ranking officer in the Barlow police department and that any complaints she lodged would wind up on his desk first and foremost. He indulged himself with a brief fantasy of responding to her complaint with the utmost sincerity, going so far as to fill out a report with her all while referring to himself in the third person. And the officer then made jokes, you say? He threatened to tase you? Can't say I'm surprised. That one has always been a loose cannon. He bit the inside of his mouth to keep the laughter at bay

"Your superiors will hear from me," she said, giving Willy a frosty look.

"Great," Willy replied, choking back a snort. "I'm sure they'll appreciate the feedback."

"Let's go, Richard," the woman said to the cameraman.

One down, multitudes to go. Willy moved down the street, first one side, then the other, having much the same conversation with each and every camera and anchorman that he came across. Many of them took it with stride, particularly those that were from the local stations; others, particularly the bigger-name stations, took it very badly and demanded badge numbers, contact information, and on a few occasions, even the name of Willy's boss. It gave Willy great pleasure to offer his own name.

By the time full darkness had fallen, the street was quiet and empty once again. It wouldn't last, Willy knew. In fact, it would likely get much worse before it got better. Still, for the moment, things were serene.
He approached the house to take a final look before leaving. A mound of mail poured out of the letterbox by the front door, collecting on the porch beneath. Everything looked just as Willy left it during his investigation. He wondered whether Gemini would come back here at all, given his new plans.

Despite the fact that he knew, each and every step of the way, that what he was about to do was highly unethical--illegal even, a federal offense if the half-cocked legal advice of the guys at the Barlow watering hole was to be believed--Willy picked through the stack of mail on the porch.


He collected several of the letters and stuffed them in to the pocket of his waistcoat. Everyone slipped up and made poor moral decisions sometime or another, and Willy suspected he was due one now. Doubly so because of the circumstances. A person like Gemini Lovegood posed an enormous threat to a city like Barlow. People here were bored, jaded, angry, unemployed, and broke. Many of them looked to politicians for a solution, but you could only drink from that well for so long. Sooner or later you started looking closer to home and you'd either find someone to help or someone to blame. Marry that need to religion and you had a pretty potent brew. That couldn't happen. People had to see reason, and Willy would make sure they did.

Even if he had to do some unreasonable things to make it happen.
Back at the car, Willy called Rita. Still gun-shy from the possibility that the reporters might be monitoring police scanners, he used his phone.

"What is it?" Rita asked.

"You let him go?"

"Yep. Him and Mertz both. I think they left together."

"Let all the patrols know that if they see Lovegood, I want to know where he is, okay?"

"Sure, but why?"

"Because I don't want him out of my sight just yet. Call them direct, don't use the radios, okay?"

"Sounds dishonest."

"It's not one hundred percent honest, but I'd give it a healthy forty percent honesty."

"Enough for me, I guess. I'll let them know."

"Perfect. Thanks."
Chapter Nine

The first call came in the next morning as Willy was on his way to the police station. One of the patrol cars spotted Gemini in the Cimarron Trailer Park the prior night with Fred Mertz. As it happened, the trailer park was on Willy's way to work, so he decided to stop in and take a look for himself.

Fred Mertz lived in a rusted out trailer set in a yard festooned with beer cans. The windows were dark, the shades drawn. This early in the morning Fred would be sleeping off the prior night's bender. He never failed to work up a thirst after a few days in jail. A soggy wooden plank with the word "Mertz" burned in to the side sat cockeyed on a pile of garbage bags next to the door. Even through the cold Willy could smell the smell of wet rot wafting from the bags, though the smell of the tin milk-can that served as an overflowing ashtray managed to elbow its way past the garbage to take the first shot at Willy's nostrils.

The old El Camino was there, too. Covered in blanket of rust and God knew how many winters of accumulated road salt, the car looked like it might collapse to dust at any minute, but Willy knew better. He and the car went way back. Willy had given Fred his first, second, third, and fifth DUI's in that car (the fourth was a stolen mobility scooter). If the car was here, Mertz was here. Simple as that. The only alternate mode of transportation he had was a bicycle which Willy could see tangled in some bushes near the back of the edge of the lot. He rolled down his window and waited for a moment to see whether he could pick up any whispers of life.

Birds chirping, the buzz of the power-lines overhead, and the scraping footsteps of two boys walking past Willy's car. One of the kids was tall and skinny, native by the look of him; the other was short and scrawny, a feral runt with hair the color of a penny found in a drain and crooked teeth that didn't look like his lips could cover them no matter how he arranged his face.
The tiny red goblin eyeballed Willy as he walked past, giving him a look that suggested he might like to see Willy hung, burned, and torn apart by horses for no particular reason.

Willy rolled down his window. "Shouldn't you guys be in school?"

"What do you give a shit?" The taller boy asked. His voice was tight-jawed and much deeper than Willy had expected.

"I'm a cop," Willy replied.

"So am I," replied the malignant ginger. "I'm just in deep cover."

"You'll be in deep shit if you keep cracking jokes."

"I'll crack your ass," the kid replied.

"Get to school," Willy said.

The older boy shook his head. "Yeah, sure. We were just headed there."

Though they were headed in the complete opposite direction of the school, Willy appreciated the fact that the boys at least respected him enough to lie to him about what they were doing.

"Hey, wait a minute," Willy said. "You guys want to make a quick buck?"

The taller boy's eyes widened.

"No," Willy replied. "No. No, no, no."

"What?" The younger boy asked, his sleep-crusted blue eyes jogging back and forth between the two. "What the fuck did I miss?"

"I need some information."

"What kind of information," The taller boy asked.

"I'm looking for someone."

"We don't snitch," the tall kid replied. "Park rules."

"Yeah, cute," the redhead replied.

Willy pulled a five out of his wallet. "You guys ever heard of Gemini Lovegood? If you can tell me whether or not he's in that trailer, I'll give you this."

"Five bucks don't go very far at the toy store these days," The redhead replied.

Willy fished out another twenty and passed it through the window.

"He's in there," the tall kid replied. "Showed up last night. Was out here drinking with Fred last night. Looked like he was making himself comfortable."

"So much for not snitching," Willy replied.

"He's not park so it's not snitching," red replied. "No clear out before I go tell my dad you tried to touch me."

Willy pulled forward along the narrow lane that lead between the trailers. This was good. If he couldn't hold Gemini Lovegood in custody, he at least wanted to keep some kind of tabs on him. Now he was here, with Fred Mertz. Living with Fred Mertz meant living close to crime. Fred hadn't spent an entire year out of jail since Willy could remember, and he'd known Fred for most of Fred's life. He'd fuck up again, no doubt. Hopefully Gemini would be a part of it.

#

Back at the Station, Rita met Willy at the door to his office.

"Morning, Rita," Willy said, raising his hands. "Before you get started, let me just say, I have a meeting with the city council today, so if you're here to complain about the calls again-"
"No," Rita interrupted. "I'm not. But thanks for making me feel like the world's most predictable Harpy. I was going to remind you of that, though, and let you know that you have a visitor."

"A visitor?" Willy replied. "Who?"

"Karl Noll. Says he's related to one of the people from the house."

"Send him in," Willy replied.

Moments later a tall, gray-haired man in a threadbare t-shirt and jeans stepped into Willy's office. He was so tall he had to duck to come under the door-frame. His glasses magnified his blue eyes, making them look broad and sad.

"Have a seat," Willy said, gesturing at the single folding metal chair on the opposite side of his desk. The man nodded and eased into the seat, looking as though he was afraid he might shatter the frame and crash to the floor at any minute. "So, Rita said that you lost someone in the mass-suicide. I'm sorry to hear that. How can I help?"

"I didn't lose anyone," the man replied. His knees were at such an extreme angle that when Willy looked at him his mind played tricks on him and he wondered for a split second whether the man was gigantic or the chair was tiny. "You saved my nephew's life that morning in the house."

"Oh," Willy replied. He'd already completely forgotten that Noll was Arthur's last name. "Oh, him. Yeah. All in the line of work, I suppose. Can't say I've ever been called upon to make someone puke before, or that I hope it happens again, but it needed doing at the time."

"My nephew is an idiot," the man replied.

"Yes," Willy replied. "Jesus Christ, yes. I'm glad you said it because I thought I'd have to sit here and bullshit you for the next hour while you talked about what a smart kid he is."
"He's not smart," the man replied. He looked at the walls of the office and squinted, tracing the water stains with his eyes. "He is in a way, but in a lot of ways he's just a lost dog. He wants a master. Know what I mean?"

"I think so."

"Yeah. But anyway, you saved him and I appreciate that, even if I still think he's a dumbass."

Willy nodded, smiled. "Well, there's always hope, right? Maybe he gets his shit together now."

"Not likely," Karl replied. "He already called me, hitting me up for money because their cult-house is in trouble."

"Recently?"

"Yeah. Last night, even."

"I saw a letter to that effect," Willy replied. "It was a pretty big past due balance, though..." He let the implication waft through the air, rather than pasting it to Karl's forehead. Fact was, Karl didn't strike Willy as the type of guy that had that kind of money laying around the house for borrowing.

"Not my money," Karl replied. "His money. He's one of the wealthiest idiots in this town, when you add it all up. He's got a few million socked away, just waiting for him, but he can't have it until I say so."

"Why?" Willy asked.

"Parents made me the executor. No money changes until I say Arthur is fit to hold it. And as long as he's hitting me up for money to save the house of his former suicide cult, that ain't happening."
Willy pulled the Orran Dain brochure from his desk drawer and slid it across the desk. "Has he been hitting you up like that for a while? Looks like they're not bashful about pursuing the charity of others."

As he thought, Karl closed his eyes and mumbled, counting maybe. "Yeah, going on seven years now," he replied. "Ever since the very first few days he was in the house. Maybe even before that. Though back then he could hit up his parents directly rather than bothering me with his creepy bullshit."

"What happened with the parents?"

"Dead. Ice fishing accident. You remember Noll manufacturing? Arthur's dad, my brother, owned the place. They manufactured farm equipment. He decided to make himself an icehouse one year, went way overboard. The thing had a heater, refrigerator, all that shit. Kept it out a little too close to spring and one evening it went under with him and my sister in law in it. They pulled them out a few hours later. They'd updated their will some time before that apparently, putting all of the money and assets under my name, to be passed on to their sole heir once I felt him to be of sound mind. Back then, In the beginning, it probably seemed like a phase he was going through or something."

"And if that never happened?" Willy asked.

"I don't know. I doubt they ever planned for that. Parents tend to have blind spots when it comes to their kids."

Willy shrugged. "True. Very true. If you wouldn't mind, I'll give you some free advice. Don't give him any of that money. The sooner we get Gemini Lovegood put away, the better. I don't need him getting his hands on a windfall and firing up the old church again."
Karl stared at Willy, shook his head. "What next? You going to give me some sage council about not wiping my ass with a cactus, or maybe not dipping my balls in a running blender?"

"Yeah, probably a little obvious. But really, if you see anything, get in touch. I really am after Lovegood in a big way. We can't prove that he ordered the mass suicide yet, but I can tell he's behind it somehow."

Karl rose from his seat and absentmindedly rubbed the scruffy side of his cheek. "Yeah, I'll do that. Let me know if you need anything on my end. Way I see it, I owe you one for saving my nephew. Come on over to the Buckfoot if you want to talk. Or drink beer. We're good for that, too."

"I'll keep that in mind, thanks. You keep an eye on your nephew."

#

With a few moments of peace before he had to go to his meeting with the City Council, Willy accessed the criminal records system and looked over Fred Mertz's file. Nothing much new had appeared since the last time Willy had arrested Fred, but it was nice to see the old favorites: Breaking and entering, Drunk in Public, Public Urination, Possession with Intention to Sell, and on and on. Fred was nothing if not a well-rounded fellow. While Willy didn't believe in true divinity, or really any kind of religion at all for that matter, it was hard to deny the fact that Gemini couldn't have been locked up with a more perfect companion than Fred Mertz.

Fred was soft-headed, violent, strong and unscrupulous enough to put that strength to good use whenever the urge struck him. This was often the case with people that had spent a fair amount of time in jail.
Willy didn't have statistics to back up his theory, but he had enough practical experience to know that he was pretty close to the mark in guessing that there were three kinds of people in America. The first group was comprised of everyday people, just like Willy. They would wake up in the morning, get dressed, go to work, come home and watch football, or build model trains, or read a book. They rarely if ever wound up in jail.

The second group were the people that did all of those things, but they also had some shady side-habit that landed them in the hoose gow for one reason or another. The people in the second group usually only needed the one warning to become what Willy referred to as shitless abiders, or, put in simple English, people that were scared so shitless by their one brush with the law that they decided to stay on the straight and narrow from that point forward. Willy was also good with these people, even though he might occasionally have to arrest them. They were the small portion for whom the sputtering and broken American penal system actually worked.

The final group was comprised of people like Fred Mertz. Strong dipshits that had failed in every way that life had to offer and didn't really care. They would fuck up in every aspect of life, which meant that sooner or later their fucking-up would fall within Willy's jurisdiction and he would have to put them away. But rather than learning their lesson, this crew would spend some time in jail, get out, and do it all over again because it was all they knew. For them, it got so jail wasn't so bad. Willy'd heard it a million times. Prison? Hey, man, three hots and a cot.

To make matters worse, they treated prison like a summer camp for crime. They would spend their days working out, pumping iron, and associating with the other lowlifes. Willy had no idea what they talked about, but he'd seen enough to guess that sharing best-practices had to be a small part of it. All of which is to say, by the time these fuckers made it out of jail, or
prison, or whatever the case may be, they would be in peak physical condition and have a head full of fresh new crime just waiting to be released upon society.

This last group, Fred's group, were generally lost causes. About the best to be hoped for was a late-in-life conversion to Christianity. Not that Willy was an advocate for religion, but facts were facts, and when the god-botherers recruited a new member to the team, the new members tended to really toe the line with great fervor.

The last thought troubled him a bit. Would Gemini's religion offer the same safe harbor to Fred? Could it give him meaning, purpose, a reason to keep his nose clean? If that was the case, Gemini had certainly picked the right place. The Cimarron Trailer Park was full of guys like Fred. The whole place had the potential to be a massive web of converts, all of whom would have a fifty-yard resume of illegal enterprise at their disposal. But Willy was getting ahead of himself now, wasn't he? Gemini hadn't done anything yet. Keep an eye on him for now, make no assumptions, grab him when the opportunity presented itself.

Exhaustion crashed over Willy and he slumped back on his desk chair. He hadn't been sleeping well, but this wasn't about sleep—not entirely, at least. More and more the days felt like he was standing with his hands against an iceberg, trying to keep it from plowing over his chunk of land, and every day the iceberg moved a little closer, chewed up a bit more of the land, and there was nothing he could do about it. He could barely even see it move, and how can you hope to stop something that you can't see move?

One by one industry had pulled out of Barlow over the course of the last half century. The railroad depot closed. The Barlow flour mill closed. More and more the city relied on their meager income from tourism, and those that didn't work in the tourism industry often kicked off long term drunks and massive, quasi-permanent (or just plain permanent) stretches of
unemployment. Idle hands and all that. Crime went up, but not any kind of meaningful crime that made being a cop a satisfying job; this kind of crime just made you feel bad, and tired, maybe a little bit mean. More and more Willy found it hard to really blame the people he arrested for doing whatever they'd done. If a guy had been unemployed for three years straight and he decided to start cooking meth, could you blame him? Sometimes you didn't feel like you had any other options. Situations like that didn't call for a cop, they called for a change. Something more fundamental than being stuck in a box.

But Lovegood, he had options. He was young. He could move. He could be somewhere else, and he decided to be here, to take advantage of people that were looking for some kind of meaning in a shitty situation. Hell, even Fred Mertz, for as bad as he was, didn't deserve to be preyed upon by a bullshit salesman.

Heat prickled over Willy's face and he felt his jaw tense. How long had it been since he'd been this pissed off about something? Too long. But now wasn't the time. He had a meeting to attend.
Barlow City Hall had been a mess for as long as anyone could remember. Fact was, stuck in the middle of a bog like it was, nothing in the world that could save the place. The city brought people in, engineers, architects, landscapers, so on and so forth, and consulted with them all on the best way to manage the property in a way that could keep it dry, keep the mold out, and keep the whole place from stinking like a wet dog when the summers got too hot.

The ideas were two for a penny. The Engineers wanted to design sump-pump systems to churn the water out of the foundation and in to a decorative duck pond. The architects wanted to create a brand new city hall that sat on a high foundation above the water line. The landscapers wanted to create a manmade hill surrounded by a mote to collect the water. The cold hard facts in the Barlow ledgers put most of these ideas in the shredder long before they left paper. With tax revenues on the downswing, the focus had to be on cost cutting. So the city did the next best thing: they abandoned the basement and first floor of the city hall building and relocated all the offices to the third and fourth floors.

Willy arrived at the building just after three o'clock that afternoon. A handful of cars, probably belonging to the City Council, littered the parking lot, which was for the most part empty. The cutting wind battered the side of Willy's pants with bits of gravel which, combined with the boarded up basement and first floor level windows of the building, made for a bleak scene. He felt, for a split second, like a man wandering through the rubble of a collapsed civilization, searching for canned corn, or bullets, or whatever people foraged for in collapsed civilizations. He was surprised to discover a sentimental twinge accompanying the feeling. As cockeyed as it was, Willy thought maybe he would prefer foraging for canned corn in a post-apocalyptic wasteland to meeting with the city council.
He climbed the stairs, past the walled off stairwell that lead to the basement, past the locked and boarded doors that lead to the bank of first floor offices. The damp stink of flood water thinned as he climbed the stairs and by the time he reached the second floor landing, he couldn't smell it. He let himself in to the council offices and took a seat in one of the plush burgundy waiting room chairs. The end table next to his seat held a collection of crumbling Field and Stream magazines, so he picked one up and began to flip through the articles as he waited.

After a few minutes, the Council's secretary, a thin balding man named Jerry, came in to the room and took a seat at the ancient steel desk that separated he waiting area from the meeting area.

"Willy Grieves?" Jerry asked, saying the words as though a crowd of people were waiting to be admitted.

"You know who I am, Jerry," Willy replied.

Jerry scowled, consulted a clipboard, then looked back at Willy. "They're ready for you. Let yourself in."

Four long tables formed a square in the council chambers. The council sat along the edge farthest from the entry, presumably so they could watch Willy as he walked in, which they did. He took a seat at the edge closest to the door in one of the old, beige office chairs.

"Afternoon everyone," Willy said. The shades behind the council were cracked, making it difficult to make out faces, but Willy had sat in this spot enough times to know each member by their lumpy silhouette. The council was at one-hundred percent attendance. The mayor at dead centers, as always, with the four council members flanking him. Daisey Bortch and Hadley Scroggins to his right, Boot Powers and Byron Cordner to his left. They each nodded to Willy as he took his spot and braced for interrogation.
"Let's get right to it," the Mayor said. "What do you know so far?"

"Not a lot," Willy replied. "The group was a cult. I won't burden you with all the details of that, but we do know they were a cult. The leader is a local kid, Jimmy Lavelle, goes by Gemini Lovegood nowadays. He was holed-up at a campsite out of town when the whole mass suicide happened."

Boot Powers twitched in his seat and leaned forward. Christ, Willy thought. The smell of gin hung in the room and Willy suspected it had to come from Boot. The guy looked like a sculpture made from sausage skins and goose down. With a nose like that, Willy thought, he could have a good job pulling Santa's sleigh every Christmas.

"You say Lovegood's the leader, right?" Boot asked.

"Yeah," Willy replied. "I don't just say it, though. It's true. He'd corroborate it, if you'd care to ask him."

"Well," Boot went on, his voice a gurgling mess of phlegm and Pall Malls, "Seems to me that if he wasn't there at the house, he ain't the guy we're looking for, right?"

"What guy is that?" Willy asked. His tone of voice sounded, even to him, like that of a man playing dumb. He wished he was played dumb, but he really had no idea who Boot was talking about.

"The trigger man. The guy that got all these poor shits to kill themselves. There had to be someone at the house leading the charge, right? Didn't you shoot him down when you got there?"

"Norm Nermin isn't a leader or a mastermind of anything. We checked in to him after the fact. He didn't have any kind of a rap sheet. Spent his entire life working in the Sulfide mines until he got laid off, then he came here and took up telemarketing. That was where he fell in with
Lovegood's crew. For the purposes of this investigation, he was just a dumb animal in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Byron Cordner leaned in to whisper something in the Mayor's ear. The Mayor nodded and turned his attention back to Willy. "You sure about all this, Willy? We really like the guy you shot for the leader of the cult. He was there, on scene, and you caught him in the act of poisoning someone. He seems like the odds-on favorite for the scapegoat, here."

"We're not really looking for a scapegoat here, are we?" Willy asked. "I thought we wanted to figure out what really happen and prosecute anyone the needed prosecuting."

Daisey Bortch gasped, rocked back in her chair. "Of course we want that, but it's important that we get the right message out to the public. We need to show the world that this kind of thing won't be tolerated in Barlow, that we're a nice town, a place for tourists and families and industry."

"That's fine," Willy replied. "But it's not my job to be the city's public relations team. I'm the guy that makes sure the right people get arrested."

The council murmured amongst themselves, keeping the conversation quiet enough to exclude Willy. On the wall behind them, watching over the proceedings, hung the enormous, half-burned bust of The Barlow Bison. A fire at the original Barlow City Hall had destroyed half its face and one horn, but nevertheless, it remained in City Hall for generations, a symbol of Barlovian tradition that dated back to the town's inception.

Time hadn't treated the Barlow Bison well. The fire left the right hand side of its jawline exposed, showing a row of blackened teeth. The eyes melted and ran, and a thin layer of pale grime dusted the remaining fur.
The first mayor of Barlow had commissioned the taxidermy of the buffalo. There was some controversy over whether he'd actually killed it himself. No one would ever truly win that argument, as no records existed with a firm answer. Despite that, he'd saw fit to keep the Bison's head in the Barlow council chamber as a matter of practice, though no one could remember the precise reason for it. Every time Willy looked at the crusty, gob-eyed thing, he felt compelled to pull it down from the wall, dust it off, and store it some place safe where it wouldn't be forced to watch these obtuse boobs go about their daily business.

"Here's the thing," the mayor said, snapping Willy back to reality. "Like I said before, we need to make sure we're in front of this thing. Right now, we're not in front of anything except maybe a train, and no one wants to be in front of a train. I, we, won't have the city of Barlow tainted with what happened here. We won't be the next Jonestown, or Waco, or anything."

Willy nodded. "I'll do whatever I can to prevent that."

"Great," said Hadley Scroggins, in his reedy scratch of a voice. "You should start by letting the news know that you got the guy in charge of the mass suicide, Norm Nermin."

Hadley owned a local bowling alley. He also owned a bowling shirt for every day of the week, and any possible color combination. A situation didn't exist in the realm of gods or men for which Hadley Scroggins didn't own a bowling shirt. He had stain resistant bowling shirts for working in the garden, waterproof bowling shirts for the damp Barlovian autumns, he had dark bowling shirts for funerals, and he had camouflage bowling shirts for hunting. You name it, Hadley Scroggins had a bowling shirt for it.

Willy considered the suggestion. Based on what he saw on the day of the suicide, and based on what Arthur Noll told him in the hospital, it didn't seem far-fetched to assume that Norm Nermin really was the architect of the mass suicide. The only problem was that it felt too
easy, too convenient. Particularly for Gemini Lovegood. Wasn't the entire allure of a cult the complete absence of independent decision making? That might be oversimplifying it, but when Willy went over it in his mind, he couldn't get beyond the notion that some people were interested in being a part of a hive mind, rather than risking life on their own. They didn't want to swim across a deep lake, opting instead to be scooted along in the current of a shallow river, where they could back float and smile, and not worry too much about drowning or getting lost. To make an executive decision that everyone in your church would kill themselves on a given day was not the act of a person that wanted to lead, not a person that wanted to be lead. Gemini Lovegood enjoyed leading people.

And more than that, was anyone really ever in charge of a mass suicide? That seemed silly. People were in charge of sleepovers, of organizing parties, of making snacks. No one was in charge of a mass suicide. Someone might initiate it, but no one was in charge.

"I don't think it would be smart-" Willy paused, as Byron Cordner leaned in and released a long stream of hissing whispers in to the Mayor's ear. The mayor nodded, blinked, frowned, and cleared his throat.

"We think we should put this to bed as soon as possible. Now. That way we can forget the whole thing and move on, cross our fingers that this thing doesn't stick with us."

"I can't do that," Willy replied. "If Gemini made this happen, and I think he did, then he not only can do it, but he wants to do it. If I'm right, this might be the only opportunity we have to stop him from doing it all over again. And if this happens twice, there's definitely no way we're ever going to live it down. Barlow will officially be known is mass-suicide city USA. Not to mention the more important matter of letting a crazy pied-piper get away with this twice."
The council members leaned in and spoke with one another in hushed voices. Boot Powers occasionally poked his head above the group to shoot Willy a frosty glare. When they finally broke, Willy noticed the mayor was shellacked in a new film of sweat.

"We're going to issue a statement to the local stations," The Mayor said. "Explaining the situation as we see it."

"And if we don't see it the same way?"

"That's fine," The mayor said. "When you find something new, we can inform the stations as needed."

"You do realize that if we do this, public interest in the story is going to drop. Someone that has information might not want to come forward. People will forget things. We could lose out on Lovegood."

"That's a risk we're willing to take," The mayor replied.

#

Willy took another sip of the drink Karl poured for him and scowled. It tasted like turpentine and each gulp contained some kind of pulp, or grain. According to Karl it was artisanal. They sat across the bar from one another in Karl's bar, the Buckfoot. The previous owners had built the place to look like a log cabin, and it stayed that way through each subsequent owner, none of whom had enough ambition to remodel the place. The guy that owned it before Karl had been the most extravagant, going so far as to put a stuffed Jackalope in a glass case behind the bar. Beyond that, a thicket of mounted antlers accumulated along the
molding, coming in from God knew where, which provided the only atmosphere the place had to offer. There wasn't a single buck foot.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Karl said, downing his third glass of artisanal turpentine.

"Nope. They want me to wrap it all up with Norm the moron as the guy that orchestrated everything."

"You can't do that."

"I know."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

Willy drained the remainder of his drink. Was it corn liquor? It felt like something that could strike a man blind if he drank too much of it. It didn't even have a smell, so much as it had a sensation--a subtle burning that worked its way deep into the nostrils whenever Willy strayed too close to the fog of Karl's breath.

"We could kill him," Karl said.

Willy chuckled, hoping it was a joke. "My coworkers in law enforcement might frown on that."

Karl nodded, deep in thought.

"I have something more insidious in mind," Willy said.

Karl perked up. "More insidious than murder?"

"Maybe not more insidious, but insidious in a different way. What do you think of using your nephew as a plant?"
Karl cringed. "Christ, I don't know. He might be too soft headed. And that's not even considering whether Gemini would take him back. He might see him as too dangerous. Like a loose end from the last time around."

"That's all true, but I think I might ask him about it when he gets out of the hospital, see where his head's at about the whole thing. Any ideas about how to approach it?"

Karl shook his head, then filled his glass a fourth time. "I wouldn't be the guy to ask about that. The damn kid isn't interested in talking to me anymore. All I ever do is piss him off by insisting that he maybe shouldn't join suicide cults."

"Kids, huh?"

"Yeah."
Part II: December
Chapter Eleven

A man in a pair of jean-shorts pitched over the railing of the porch and puked into the snow. Willy recognized the guy, but couldn't place him. One of the trailer park locals, probably. After hauling himself back up to a standing position, the man wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and brushed back the stray hairs draped over his forehead. He took some deep breaths, sucking in cold air, and then went back in the house. Willy jotted a note in his pad, leaving a reminder to figure out who the guy was.

A couple of months prior, in early October, Willy had caught Angus Tillworth peeping in windows all over East Barlow. The old man was in an Oak tree at the time, peering in to the oldest Larson boy's window. The boy, Jerry, was a local football star that Willy had busted for underage drinking no less than nine times in the last few months. Jerry was also one of the most hirsute and obese kids that Willy had the misfortune of ticketing. He never wore a shirt, and this was no exception. In his window, pumping his hand weights and sweating like a radiator, Jerry had no idea that Angus Tillworth was scoped in on his jiggling mantits with a pair of birdwatching binoculars. And Angus, for his part, had no idea that he wasn't looking in the right window; The Larson's daughter Caroline's window was just to the left.

Treed like a raccoon, Angus didn't have much option but to shimmy back down the tree and relinquish his binoculars to Willy, who now peered through the very same binoculars at the doorway of Fred's house. Taking a cue from Angus, Willy parked his car in one of the Cimarron Trailer Park's vacant lots. Brush, snow, and the remains of a porch kept him somewhat covered from prying eyes, and a bank of bare trees stood between him and the long stretch of space that lead to Fred Mertz's trailer. Today was a sunny day, which posed a problem since the sun glared
off the white snow creating a dazzling white flash that threatened to scorch Willy's eyes to charcoal whenever he angled the binoculars in the wrong direction.

People came and went throughout the day, or at least throughout the times Willy was watching. Mostly assorted scum from around Barlow: Tommy Knobb, Stupid Mike, Charlie Bucket, and a few others including, at one point, Angus Tillworth, which made Willy ponder the circular nature of the universe.

Given his workload at the police station it wasn't possible for Willy to be in the park all day every day, and he couldn't spare any of the patrol officers to sit and watch in his place. He had to settle for being here when he could, for as long as he could, with the hope that luck would have him at the right place at the right time.

He had a laptop and a cell-phone, which made it easy to keep on working even while he was away from his desk. He went through his emails, followed up on old casework, and updated all the appropriate schedules for the patrol officers, just like he did during any other week. Between doing those things, he would peer at Fred's trailer through the binoculars to see what was happening.

For the most part, nothing happened. People would come and go, but Gemini never left. He remained inside the house, hidden from sight. Fred would leave the house, sometimes treading a bit too close to the vacant lot for Willy's comfort. In order to watch a person like this, particularly one that hadn't been convicted of a crime and didn't appear to be in any danger of being convicted of a crime in the near future, warrants and permissions were required. Without those things, what Willy was doing essentially amounted to what Angus Tillworth had been up to, but in a more constitutionally ambiguous sense.
Willy looked through the binoculars again and this time his gaze fell upon a pair of enormous green eyes looking back at him. Startled, he dropped the binoculars and squinted in the direction of the playground, where a redheaded teenage girl in a long black coat stood, giving him the finger. He thought for a moment about flipping on his lights to scare her off, then reconsidered once he remembered that he was here not as a cop, but as a peeping tom.

The girl stared him down, walking across the playground to his window. She stopped a few feet away, scowling at him. Willy didn't open the door, mostly out of shock, so the girl jerked her hand in a circular motion, making the international symbol for roll down your old-timey window.

"Yes?" Willy asked.

"What are you doing here?" The girl asked.

"None of your business, Pippi. Now clear out. I'm busy."

The girl shrugged, walked to the front of Willy's car, and sat on the hood. "I got all day," she yelled over her shoulder.

Willy started the car and she jumped. He backed out, got on the main road, and headed back in the direction of town. He'd drive far enough to hit the Barlow State Bank parking lot, turn around, and come back. By then, she'd be gone back to her house to do whatever teenage girls did nowadays.

Only she wasn't gone. She was there, on the playground equipment, perched at the top of the highest slide. She had her own pair of binoculars and she peered through them at Willy, jotting things down in a little square legal pad. Willy drove away again, this time resolving to stay away for a few days at least.
When he arrived back at the park four days later, the coast was clear. He hunkered in to his spot, powered on his laptop, and lifted the binoculars to his eyes. He'd been watching for less than five minutes when the girl appeared again, waved at him, and took her spot on top of the slide with her binoculars and her legal pad.

Willy opened the door and waved her over to the car. She hopped down and walked over.

"Get in," Willy said.

"Are you crazy?" the girl asked. "I don't know you. You could be some kind of rogue finger-bandit that drives around preying on young girls. This isn't the wild west, buddy. We've got rules."

Willy gestured to the laptop, the police radio, and the shotgun in the back seat of the car.

"I'm a cop," he said. "Come on. I'll tell you what I'm doing here."

"Let me see your badge," the girl replied.

Willy pulled his badge from the interior of his coat and held it out for her inspection.

"Willy Grieves," the girl said, reading from the badge. "You a Barlow detective?"

"I am the Barlow detective," Willy replied.

"Great. Buy me some pie then?"

"Sure. Pie sounds okay. Hop in."

They picked a corner booth at the Downtowner Cafe in Barlow, right under a huge painting of bears dancing in the forest. The painting unnerved Willy, always had. He'd come to the Downtowner since he was a toddler and the painting had always hung in the exact same spot on the wall. Other paintings came and went, but the bear painting never left. They were always watching, those two vaguely human bears, doing things that bears should never be able to do. It
made Willy uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the Downtowner had the best pie in all of Barlow. It was the one and only thing they did right anymore.

Willy ordered the French Silk, the girl ordered Banana Cream and Coconut Cream. When Willy raised his eyebrows, she shrugged and glared at him. "You a pie detective too?"

Willy shook his head and sipped his coffee until her gaze fell back to the unfortunate slices of pie on her plate, which she wolfed down as though she suspected that they may try to escape at any second.

"What's your name?" Willy asked.

"Donna," the girl replied. "Nugent."

"Clara Nugent's granddaughter?"

"Yes," Donna replied, wiping a stray glob of cream from her chin.

"You think your grandma would be happy knowing you're out of school?" Willy asked.

"I'm not out of school," Donna replied. "I'm in school right now. I do Internet school. Straight A's. I'm kind of gifted, but no bigs. So grandma would probably be fine."

Watching her eat, it occurred to Willy that the girl was possibly not getting enough food. Clara Nugent was old enough to safely be considered a relic in most archaeological circles, and she was probably on a fixed income. It was certainly possible that she couldn't make ends meet, and that her and the girl both were malnourished due to a lack of appropriate grocery funds.

"You want anything else?" Willy asked. She was already closing in on the finish line for both of her pieces of pie.

"Burger and fries would be good," Donna replied.

"The food here-"

"I know," Donna interrupted. "But I've got an iron stomach."
"Okie dokie." Willy placed the order with the tiny old man behind the counter and headed back to the table. As he went, he considered how exactly he should play this conversation. He could be honest with the girl, but Barlow was a small town and word traveled fast; if she was the big-mouthed type--and judging by her pie-eating, it certainly looked like she was--word would get around quickly.

"Can I trust you?" Willy asked.

"Depends," Donna replied. "What with?"

"With what I'm doing in Cimarron trailer park," Willy replied.

"You're watching Fred and that guy that's staying with him," Donna said. "I know that. I've been watching you for a while."

The realization that he had been duped into buying a meal felt like an icicle in Willy's eye.

"Fair enough. Do you know why?"

"I assume because Fred's a criminal and a piece of crap," Donna replied. "But if there's more, I'm all ears."

"You're close," Willy replied. "Did you ever read about the mass suicide that happened a few days back?"

"Yeah," Donna replied. She paused for a moment, frowned, then her eyes widened. "It's that guy, isn't it? From the house? With Fred?"

"Yeah," Willy said. "And I'm watching to make sure that he doesn't do it again. Make sense?"

"So far," Donna replied.
"Good. My question for you, then, is can you keep it quiet? If you plan on telling Fred, I'd rather just know right now. I'll stay out of Cimarron if that's the case and we can all take the risk that Gemini will do what he does all over again."

"Can I?" Donna asked. "Sure. The question is, will I keep it quiet."

"Will you?" Willy asked.

"Sure," Donna replied. "The only thing I want is for you to let me help."

"Help how?" Willy asked.

"By watching. If you arrest that guy from the cult, I want Fred to be arrested right alongside him. I'm in the park all day every day, so I can keep a better watch than you. I know people there. I can get pictures. I can be your eyes in the sky."

Now, Willy knew, was the part in the movie where he tells the young girl thanks, but no, it's simply too dangerous for you to get involved. Problem was, she made a strong offer. She lived in the park and spent most of her time there. That not only put her in an ideal spot to keep an eye on things and free Willy up, it also gave her a dog in the fight. That was her home. No one would want a snake-oil salesman like Gemini Lovegood setting up shop in their back yard. Finally, and maybe most important of all, she was an inside in the park. It was only a matter of time before someone else noticed Willy and spread work that he was spying on the park residents. No one would take kindly to that, not the residents, not the management, not anyone else in law enforcement that caught wind of Willy's un-warranted stakeout.

Informants, on the other hand, didn't need a warrant.

"Okay," Willy replied. "Would your grandmother approve, though?"

"My grandmother is ninety-four years old. I could tell her that Elvis was alive and well, living in a cave under our trailer and she'd just nod and smile. She's good. In case you haven't
already guessed, I'm taking more care of her than she is of me. Like I said, I'm gifted, so, you know. I'm kind of independent, or a free spirit, or whatever."

"Well okay," Willy replied. "You've got yourself a deal."

#

They spent the remaining time, measured only by the amount of food Donna inhaled, working out the specifics of their plan. During her burger and fries, they established that one of the conditions of their arrangement was that Donna remain up to date on her school work. Willy had no way of verifying this of course, so everything was on the honor system. Next, as she destroyed another slice of pie, Willy added the stipulation that if her grandmother ever had anything to say about her working with Willy, her suggestions had to be heard and accepted as law. What grandma says, goes. And finally, as Donna drained a quart or more of Cherry Coke, they cobbled together a schedule of phone and in-person updates that would take place on a recurring basis each and every week.

By the time they finished working out the details of their plan, the sky was full of dark clouds with patches of bruised purple horizon pouring through. According to the Downtowner's enormous fish thermometer, the temperature outside was hovering somewhere around zero and every time someone else came in for dinner a fresh wash of cold air followed them. Donna looked outside at the growing darkness and placed both hands on the table.

"I better get back," Grandma's going to have dinner finished soon.

The old man behind the counter gasped, held his chest, and rolled his eyes. Willy swallowed.

"You going to be okay, kid?" Willy asked. "Either you got a tapeworm or you're not eating enough."
"I'm growing, you fucker. I'm also a lady."

"Sorry," Willy replied, feeling his face go as red as Donna's hair. To hide his new complexion, Willy fished around in his coat-pockets until he found a business card, which he slid across the table.

"All my contact information is on there. Email, office phone, cell-phone, home phone, all that. Call whenever. And if Fred or Gemini catches on and comes at you in any way, call me directly, no matter the hour. But more than that, just stay far enough away to make sure that never happens. Frankly, I don't need to carry around guilt for getting you smacked around by a pair of lowlife assholes, okay?"

"Sure," Donna replied. "Two days, right?"

"Right," Willy replied.
Chapter Twelve

Willy resolved to spend his weekend in the house alone, thinking about nothing beyond what he would eat or drink at a given moment. The stress of dealing with Gemini Lovegood got to him. His head throbbed shot pain down the back of his neck, and his stomach gurgled with acid. Orran Dain had turned him in to the picture of health. He had even gone so far as to consider, just for one brief second, that he should go next door and talk to Gordon about partaking in some of his wares. The shit was legal in California, after all; they prescribed it as a means to cure whatever ailed a person at a given time, from depression to anxiety to nausea to Glaucoma to the fact that maybe you didn't appreciate the record collection you'd inherited from your uncle as much as you should. But what he needed now wasn't a trip outside of his skull so much as a little silence to get his skull back in order.

He had turned his cell-phone off, laid down on the couch and turned on the most mindless thing he could find (professional wrestling) when someone pounded on his back door. No one ever came to the back door. Willy rubbed his temples, then hoisted himself up onto his elbows. He spotted Gordon through the frosty glass of the back door window, bobbing his head back and forth and waving. Willy hadn't ever seen him so worked-up. Not that Gordon walked around giggling with half-closed, bloodshot eyes. Even for Willy, who had a lifetime of ferreting out stoned teenagers and drunk drivers, catching Gordon in an altered state was a chore. Still, there was a certain even-keeled quality about Gordon that hinted at the cannabis base-coat he maintained throughout the day.

Willy opened the door and let Gordon inside. A burnt earth smell followed him in, somewhere between patchouli oil and autumn leaves. Gordon rubbed his hands together, blew on them, then nodded to Willy's living room.
"Channel six. You're going to want to check it out."

"Hey, if you don't mind, I'm not really in the mood today," Willy replied. "It's been a long week and I just want to shut down for a few hours."

Gordon shook his head. "I'll hit the road if you want, but you ought to turn it on. It's that dude from the house."

So much for a peaceful weekend.

Willy lead Gordon to the living room and pointed him in the direction of a chair as he switched over to channel six where lead anchor Tom Carter sat behind the news desk with his oily toupee glistening in the studio light. The channel clicked over just in time to catch Tom in the middle of a rambling sentence about the Cimarron Trailer park, his somber voice chewing through the words on the tele-prompter in the same robotic cadence that had made Willy want to fall asleep for the last twenty years.

"And now," Tom said, letting the silence between the words spread, "Over to Roy Crumpus, live at the Cimarron Trailer park."

Roy Crumpus stood in front of the Barlow Trailer Park Office, dressed in a brown, wide-collared suit that looked like it belonged to a long dead grandpa. Somehow, despite the fact that he was decades younger than Tom Carter, Roy Crumpus managed to out-grandpa his counterpart who actually was a grandpa. He smiled into the camera and greeted the viewers.

"We're here with Gemini Lovegood, who recently became a bit of a local celebrity after the members of his house committed mass suicide while he was on a camping trip."

Gemini nodded, waved to the camera.

"You look surprisingly upbeat for a man with so many dead friends," Roy said
A smile played across Gemini's lips as he looked at the reporter. " Depends on how you look at it, I guess. From my perspective those people went home. They achieved a transcendence that will carry them far, far from this world and into an entirely new world. Honestly, more than anything, I'm sad that I didn't get to go along myself."

"And why didn't you?" Roy shot back. "Seems pretty lucky that you were gone, doesn't it?"

The look that Gemini put on, eyes closed, head tilted into the sun as he considered the question, made Willy want to puke. *How could anyone buy this trash*, he wondered.

"I wound up surviving only by the grace of Orran Dain," Gemini replied. "He nudged me out of the house and into a vision quest. Because of that, I wasn't there when the suicide took place. I'm still here to finish up the work I started."

"And how do you intend to do that?"

"I'm going to start over from scratch, right here in the Cimarron trailer park, provided the neighborhood is cool with it. We're going to raise some money, spread the word, and try to make this community into a spiritual haven for those that feel at odds with the world and need something more."

"And do you think Barlow is ready for something like that?" the reporter asked.

"No. No place is ever ready for things like this. That's the beauty of the whole thing. No one has to be ready. If we open ourselves to the universe, it suddenly becomes clear that our perceived reality means very little. The most important thing is to be tuned in, to follow your golden rope through life. So I don't worry about people being ready. I just want to get this message out there."

"Where do you start?"
"We're going to start this Saturday in the Cimarron community center. I'm going to set up a table and offer all kinds of readings and consultations on spirituality. We're also going to have a cornhole tournament for the kids. Come on down. All proceeds will go towards the community as a gesture of good will. If that works out, we might take it a step further. Losing all those people was painful, but I think that's what they'd want me to do," Gemini replied.

"Local celebrity Gemini Lovegood?" Willy repeated the phrase for the umpteenth time, as he rubbed the heels of his palms on his forehead. "Christamighty. How'd it go this far?"

Gordon shook his head. Given that Willy had been flopped face down on the couch, rubbing his eyes and repeating himself over and over for the last fifteen minutes, it was probably a safe assumption that much of whatever shit Willy had once possessed had fled the scene at about the point where Gemini described his intent to have a fund raiser for his perverse religion in the Cimarron community center. A community center. In a trailer park which was situated on the outskirts of the town that Willy had grown up in and come to protect as an adult.

"You going to be all right?" Gordon asked.

"No. A while back one of the blues picked up a kid on a speeding offense. Searched his car and came up with this massive joint. Biggest damned thing you ever saw. Huge. Looked like a smaller version of one of those horns a plenty you see on thanksgiving pictures, all full of fruit and pressed hams, or whatever. The kid said he was headed to a party. Hell, he was the party with a joint like that. We looked at that damn thing for hours, wondering how in the hell the thousands, millions of years of human evolution had created it."

Gordon nodded and gave Willy his best philosophical gaze. "You think Gemini's like that? An anomaly created after a million branching paths of evolution?"
"Sure, I guess," Willy replied. "But I was more just thinking that I could probably use one of those joints right now. You keep shit like that on hand at your place?"

"No," Gordon replied. "Sorry. If you made one of those with the dope I grow, it'd kill you. Shit like that only works for youngsters buying buttweed."

Willy dug his chew out of the couch cushions and filled his lower lip. It was a poor substitute, he guessed. It was legal, at least.

"What are you going to do?" Gordon asked.

"Good question. The City Council is going to shit a brick over this. I told them. I knew this would happen. They deserve this, but those poor bastards at the trailer park don't deserve having to live with that asshole."

Sitting up straight, Willy spotted his cell-phone lying dormant on the coffee table. The idea of turning it on sickened him. There would be messages from the council, complaints, demands. They would find a way to pin this on Willy, as though he'd done something wrong, rather than seeing the situation as a product of their dull-headed short sightedness. No time like the present.

Light bloomed in the phone's screen, informing Willy that he had several missed messages, all of which were from a number he didn't recognize. He cycled through them, puzzling over the messages. Call me. Where are you? What's taking so long. My god I'll die before you reply.

The last message read, simply, What the fuck?

Donna. Willy dialed the number and waited as the other end of the line buzzed.

"Hello," Donna answered. "Thanks for getting back to me, asshole. Good thing this wasn't an emergency."
"Yeah, sorry about that," Willy replied. "I'm kind of dealing with a few things at the moment. What's up?"

"You see the news?" Donna asked.

"Yeah. Shit. Yeah, hey, are you there now?"

"Yep. Watching the news crew pack up."

"Seen him up to anything illegal, so maybe I can come and arrest him before this spirals any further out of control?" Willy asked.

"No, sorry." Donna replied. "But I thought you'd like to know what was happening. Unfortunately, you can't pick up your phone, so..." she let the thought trail off.

"Do me a favor," Willy said. "Keep an eye on things there, okay? I've got to see what kind of beast I'm going to be facing with the city council. Once that's done, I'll swing by and meet you somewhere."

"Listen. I'm not on the payroll here, so don't think I'm going to be dicking around all day, watching this guy like some kind of pervert."

"Pervert? No. Of course not. I'd consider it a favor, though."

"Fine. Whatever. Just hurry up with your other bullshit, because this Gemini guy creeps me out and he keeps making weird eye contact with me."

"Whatever you do, don't talk to him. Before you know it he'll be trying to make camping plans with you."

"Camping plans?"

"Never mind. Just keep an eye on things. I'll call you when I'm getting close."

#
After shooing Gordon out of his house, Willy hopped in his car and headed for City Hall. The council didn't meet on Friday's, but he knew the mayor would be in his office, tying one on to ring in the weekend. According to the friends Willy had at City Hall, this was a weekly tradition that the mayor never missed. Just to be sure, he called ahead and asked to speak to the mayor. The secretary to the mayor and the council answered and patiently explained that the mayor was not in his office today, and that Willy would have to call back on Monday to speak with him. Willy didn't fault the guy for trying, but the simple truth of the matter was that if the secretary was there, the mayor was there too.

Upon reaching the City Council offices, Willy parked his squad car in a handicap spot near the door. Who would ticket him? He didn't often advocate for abuses of power like that, but in this case, well, it'd been a week and he didn't see any need to walk across an empty span of pavement on the off-chance that a handicapped person might possibly stop by to lodge a complaint with the mayor.

The secretary was there, perched behind his green steal desk engaged in a high-stakes game of Solitaire. Catching a glimpse of Willy, he swept the cards into an open drawer, adjusted his tie, and put on his best impression of a human smile.

"Good afternoon," the secretary began. Willy suspected it was reflex at this point. Sure enough, as soon as he took in Willy's face, the smile disappeared. "It's you. Didn't I just tell you that the Mayor isn't in his office?"

"You're here, he's here," Willy replied, swinging past the desk towards the mayor's door.

"Hold on," the secretary replied, rising from his desk. Willy turned and took one accidental, stuttering step away from the secretary. He was a big man, maybe six-four, carrying far more weight than Willy. In fact, taken in his current state, with his potentially compromised
bone density, it was entirely possible that the secretary was comprised of enough flesh to complete two full copies of Willy Grieves.

"Hold on there, fella," Willy replied. "I've got a Taser."

"No, you hold on. You don't get to just barge in. I'll call the-

"Cops?" Willy asked, smiling.

"Blow it out your ass," the secretary replied.

Willy opened the door to the mayor's office and stepped inside. The air was warmer in there, especially compared to area just beyond the entryway where the secretary sat. In that area Willy had been able to see the ghost of his breath in the air as he walked. He didn't find it beyond belief that the mayor might run a heater in his office while letting everyone else freeze to save a few pennies. He needed to be kept warm and moist like a beached jellyfish after all.

The mayor was just finishing up a call as Willy took a seat on the opposite side of the desk.

"Sure," The mayor replied into the phone. "Yes. Absolutely. No, thank you. I hope it keeps on working out so well for you. It's very good to hear." The mayor paused for a moment now, nodded along with the words Willy couldn't hear, then smiled. "Perfect. Thanks. You too."

He hung up the phone and smiled at Willy.

"I hope you aren't here to bum me out, Grieves, because I'm finally having a good day."

"Sorry, but I am. It sounds like our boy in Cimarron is doing a fundraiser on Saturday. He wants to set up another shop, now that he cut off his other group at the roots."

The mayor crossed his arms and gave Willy a satisfied look. "Do you know who that was on the phone just now, Grieves?"

"No. Does it matter? This is serious."
"I know. It is serious. Very serious. I was just talking to the manager of the Barlovian Suites hotel. They've sold out every room for the next week straight. They were calling to ask if they could use the city lot next to the hotel for extra parking if they need it."

Was there a reason the mayor was telling him this? If so, Willy couldn't imagine what it might be. He struggled to see the purpose for the story or why he might give a shit about a hotel when he was here to discuss the re-emergence of a suicide cult in Barlow.

"Fill me in," Willy replied. "Why do I give a shit about the Barlovian Suites hotel?"

"They sold out those rooms because of Gemini Lovegood, or Jimmy Lavelle, or whatever in the Hell his name is. People are coming from far and wide to interview him, talk to him, get a... what did he call them... a Magic Measurement, or whatever the Hell."

The room spun and Willy felt like he might pass out.

"We can't let this happen. These people, if they show up and he makes money, he's going to start this shit all over again."

"Listen. No one is going to let him arrange a mass suicide, Grieves. And I'll remind you that we never caught him in the act the first time around. Judging by the evidence, he didn't have anything to do with it."

"You know that's not true," Willy replied, slamming his fists on the mayor's desk. The mayor leaned back for a moment startled.

"No. What I know is that Norm Nermin, a known criminal and moron, was found in a house with a shitload of dead bodies. Hero cop Willy Grieves shot him down and saved the town from any further injury. Gemini had nothing to do with it."

"If you won't stop him, I will. He's going to do something sooner or later and I'll catch him."
"What is it with you, Grieves? Why do you have it out so bad for this guy?"

"Because he convinced a bunch of people from our city to kill themselves. Because he's trying to do it again, I know it, and you're suggesting that we just let it go because he's generating a few extra bucks in tourist revenue with his bullshit."

The mayor sighed and rubbed his forehead. "You can't do anything. He hasn't broken the law. And we are a tourist town. By bringing people here he's helping us. He's creating jobs, sustaining the economy."

"Sustaining the economy?" Willy asked. "Jesus. Are you drunk? He's only sustaining his ego."

"Whatever. It doesn't matter. He hasn't broken a law, so you'll leave him alone. Got it?"

"No. I don't got it."

"What's that mean?"

"I'd tell you to figure it out, but you'd probably sweat yourself to death in the process."

#

The Cimarron trailer park still buzzed with activity when Willy arrived. He could just make out the silhouettes of the news crew loading the cameras into the back of the news van amid a gathered crowd of park residents in the failing light. He parked alongside the road the entered the park and headed for the rear of the office where he spotted Donna standing with her hands shoved in her pockets and a cigarette dangling from her mouth. The cold stung his face and every step he took made a tremendous crunching in the snow, which was freezing to a crust as night fell. Everything would freeze from here on out. Pipes, lakes, ditches, locks, everything. He walked to Donna and leaned against the building next to her.

"What's new?" he asked.
"Not much. New sex offender moved in to the beige trailer at the east end of the park. Also, you might have heard about this new religion popping up."

"I did hear something about that," Willy replied.

Donna polished off her cigarette and flicked the butt into the rubber-fluff that lined the ground around the playground equipment. She nodded in the direction of a cluster of vans swarming with people.

"Two other news outlets showed up today. Apparently they didn't want to be outdone by KBLO. He's been talking about his cornhole tournament to everyone that would listen."

"I'd like to put him behind bars," Willy replied. "Cornhole tournament has an entirely different meaning in there."

"Jesus," Donna replied. "How much are you paying Leno's writers for your material."

"God damn kids can't respect a good cornhole joke anymore."

Near the line of trailers, Gemini made his way through the throng of news teams and onlookers, shaking hands and patting shoulders, all smiles, happy as a megalomaniac clam. As he pivoted around a pair of flannel shirted crew members loading tri-pods, he noticed Donna and Willy by the park office. He gave them a broad smile and about the biggest wave one person ever offered another. Willy returned the wave, minus four or so fingers, which only made Gemini smile wider.

"Asshole," Willy said.

"Correct," Donna replied.

Someone shouted from across the street. Fred Mertz materialized from the darkness between trailers and pointed a finger at Willy.

"What are you doing here?" Fred shouted, quickening his pace toward Willy.
"Just spending some time admiring the scenic Cimarron trailer park," Willy replied.

"Park's got rules, Dickhead," Fred said, eying Willy. They were nearly chest to chest now.

"Rules. That's rich."

"Yeah. Rules. And the rules say that the recreation area is for park residents and their guests only."

"He's my guest," Donna replied.

"Stay out of this, you ginger dipshit."

Donna leaned back, a horrible phlegm-filled noise scraping up from the back of her throat. She came forward full throttling with a grunting "PFAH" that left a viscous green wad hanging from Fred's pant-leg.

The color left Fred's face as Donna smiled and lit another cigarette. "Call me a ginger dipshit again and the next one's going straight in your mouth," she said. "And yeah, I am that good. Don't test me."

"Now Fred," Willy replied, placing himself between the two, "why are you so eager to get rid of me? You and your friend Jimmy aren't planning anything illegal are you? I was just telling the guys back at the station all about how you two were finally making good with all of this fund-raising bullshit, and how you were going to become pillars of the community. I'd hate to think that I'd misjudged you two somehow."

"Keep talking. Maybe sooner or later you'll convince me that a few days in jail would be worth it to shatter both of those delicate hips of yours. Then maybe you could stop harassing Gemini, huh? If I broke your hips?"
"I drink lots of milk," Willy replied. "My hips are good. You, on the other hand, should probably be careful. I've got a Billy club and I doubt the years of whiskey, cheap beer, and kippered snacks have left your innards in good shape. One good crack and you'd probably spend the rest of your life shitting in a bag, which probably wouldn't be a big change for you. Are you already shitting in bags? You probably are. And that's fine. I don't judge."

"Fucking comedian." Fred replied. "Good for you. Too bad you've got no reason to arrest us."

"Now that is too bad," Willy replied.

"It really is a shame," Donna added.

Fred spun and headed back for his house, where the vans were now dispersing. "Smart," he said over his shoulder. "Too smart for your own good, you ask me."

"Good thing we didn't," Donna replied. If Willy had been wearing a hat, he would have tipped it. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen someone handle Fred Mertz quite so well.

Fred stopped, turned back with his teeth bared as though he wanted to snarl and snap his jaws, then forced himself to smile instead. Judging by the strain in his face, the conversion from Grimace to smile took nothing short of a tremendous force of will.

"Jesus," Willy said. "That guy really is something straight from the caves of yore, isn't he?"

"Oh, yeah," Donna replied.

"Let me walk you home," Willy said. "I feel bad for putting you in this position. Fred's an idiot, but that really only makes him more dangerous. From here on out you should probably keep clear."
"I'm fine," Donna replied. "My dad got me this last Christmas because he travels a lot," she fished around in her purse for a moment and retrieved a large matte-black canister with a yellow ring handle and a picture of a bear on the side. She passed it to Willy for examination.

"Bear mace," she continued. "You can get it at BarloMart for real cheap. He bought me a case. I've been itching to give it a try."

"That's twisted," Willy replied. "I like it."

"Thanks. So, I'm good. You go get some soup, or whatever it is you normally do on Friday nights. I'll call you if I see that guy, or if anything else interesting starts happening."
Chapter Thirteen

Willy leaned in to the warm air blowing from the dashboard heater. The seasons shifted fast in the Midwest and what had been autumn a few weeks back was now full bore winter. A plow truck scraped past his parking spot, its blade shooting a fan of sparks off the pavement. The snow had continued on and off since his visit to the Cimarron trailer park four days back, and the brittle crust of frozen snow had accumulated and grown in to plowed-up ridges along sidewalks and roads. After the snow cleared up, they'd be due for the first sub-zero stretch of the year. The temperature was perfect inside the car, though.

One hundred yards to Willy's left sat Barlow General. The head nurse on duty had called him earlier on in the evening, per his request, to let him know that Arthur Noll was due to be released tonight. Will thanked them, hung up, and drove right over. He picked the farthest corner, out back by a set of dumpsters for the restaurant next door, which still afforded him a decent view of the front hospital doors.

His phone, balanced on the dash board in front of him, clicked as the other end picked up.

"Hello?" Arthur asked.

"Arthur, hey. Willy grieves. Just curious. I'd heard you were getting out of the hospital tonight and I wanted to check in to see whether you needed a ride or a place to stay or anything like that. I'd love to help in any way that I can."

Silence persisted for a few seconds, interrupted only by the sounds of Arthur's breath.

"How did you know I was being released?"


"I'm good. I've made some arrangements."

"Oh?" Willy said. "With who?"
Arthur coughed. Not a real cough, but the kind of outraged cough people used when they were asked questions that they didn't feel were fair, or that crossed a line.

"None of your business," Arthur replied. Willy could sense the huffy edge in his voice.

"I respect that," Willy replied. "I just had some words with your uncle earlier on this evening and he was concerned about you. I told him I'd check in, make sure you had all of your affairs in order before you left the hospital."

"My uncle?" Arthur asked. "For your information, I already asked for his help, but he wasn't interested. So as far as I'm concerned, whether I'm good or not is none of his-"

Willy felt Arthur struggling for the word and smiled.

"Concern?" Willy asked.

"Yes. None of his concern."

"Fine by me," Willy replied. "I'm not the type to get involved in family squabbles. Not old Willy Grieves. So who's picking you up from the hospital? Do you need a ride? I could come and get you."

Arthur sputtered through his impotent outrage, starting and abandoning a dozen thoughts before he finally settled on a simple no. "No. I'm fine. No. And please, please leave me alone. I don't want anything to do with you. Or my uncle. Please tell him I said that."


Arthur offered no response to that, so Willy continued. "Well, shit. I guess. I've gotta go cut some recipes out of the paper, so I'll catch you later, okay Arthur? Keep your nose clean, son, and don't be afraid to reach out if you've got any problems."
"Whatever," Arthur replied. The line went dead. Willy dropped his cell phone on the passenger seat and checked the time. Eight-thirty PM. He looked through his binoculars and made sure he had a solid angle of the front door of the hospital. Satisfied that he did, he opened the greasy sandwich he'd picked up from the Barlow Stop N' Save and kicked back to watch the snow fall.

#

The car arrived at eleven-thirty, which was fortunate because the grease bomb gas station sandwich was playing kickball in Willy's innards and he wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out in his car before he'd be forced to locate the nearest antacid, or bathroom, or both.

Fred Mertz's rusted out El Camino shitbox stuck out like a sore thumb in any environment. As a rolling piece of garbage, it was a testament to the fact that while El Camino cars may have been hideous malformed bastard children of cars and trucks that lacked the primary functionality of either parent, they were also, in certain circumstances, unkillable juggernauts that would outlast even the cockroaches in the event of a nuclear holocaust.

The hospital doors slid apart. Willy hoisted his binoculars and watches as Arthur walked into the snowy evening and got into the car. The back window of the car had a slight tint to it that prevented Willy from getting a clear view of who was in the cockpit, but he knew it could only be one other person, given that El Caminos only had two seats. The car idled for a moment, then belched a load of black smoke into the cold air and grumbled out of the parking lot.

At this distance, Willy didn't suspect that they'd be able to spot him; nevertheless, he ducked into his seat and tried to keep his face out of the dash lights. After giving his prey a few
seconds of lead time, he put his car into drive and left the parking lot, keeping Fred's taillights in his view from a safe distance.

Willy didn't spend a lot of time guessing where this chase might lead. The only place Arthur had to go was Fred's house. The only place Fred had to go was Fred's house. Gemini was at Fred's house. It was a slam dunk. Given that, Willy felt a tremor of unease when Fred didn't slow or a signal a turn at the entrance to the Cimarron park.

"Okay, fellas. Where are we going now?" Willy asked. They kept moving, taking back roads, and Willy wondered whether they'd figured out he was following them and this was their half-hearted attempt at shaking him. But even in his beaten and bruised El Camino, Fred could have made a more solid attempt.

After twenty or so minutes, the car ahead slowed and eased off the road into a parking lot. Willy's jaw dropped. The Buckfoot.

"You crazy bastard," Willy said. Arthur was going to pay his uncle a visit.

Willy parked in the corner of the lot in a place where he could see the comings and goings of the building through his rear view mirror. The El Camino continued to idle as Arthur and--who was it? Someone else, got out and went separate directions. The build was similar to Fred, but between the low-slung stocking cap covering the hair and the scarf covering the lower half of the face, it was impossible to tell for sure. A moment of elation passed through Willy as he considered the possibility that it might be Gemini Lovegood. But what would Lovegood be doing here?

Only one thing that Willy could guess. Two men, at the same place, one going in one direction, one in another, it looked an awful lot like a lookout and a thief. Gemini, or Fred, would sit at the bar and nurse a beer while Arthur crept up the back stairs. If Karl gave any hint of
heading up to his apartment, the downstairs man could cause a distraction or notify Arthur via cell-phone, giving him enough warning to vamoose before the net closed around him. Was Arthur really stupid enough to try and rob his uncle? Maybe. Almost definitely. If he was stupid enough to join a suicide cult anything was possible. Though in all fairness, Willy supposed he didn't know that it was a suicide cult when he joined. That part came later, and at the very least Noll had the good sense to try and fight it out, rather than just drinking his poison like a good little lamb.

Willy's gun was in the glove-box where he'd left it after the incident with Norm Nermin. He also had his walky in the car, just in case. Rita wouldn't be online at this hour, but Greta, the night dispatcher, would be on answering calls and Rita had probably briefed her on the whole Lovegood situation. If Willy wanted to move now, he could, but was that wise? If he let them go a bit further, just a few more steps, they might tie their own noose.

Arthur made the decision for him a moment later when he emerged from around the edge of the building and got in the passenger side of the car. Once inside, he didn't do anything, just sat staring out the front window at the side-wall of the bar, waiting for whatever else had to happen for this obscure plan to come together. Willy waited with him.

After several minutes, the driver, his face still covered, came out of the bar and got back behind the wheel. Peering through his binoculars, Willy couldn't make out what the two were doing. A fog had formed on the windshield obscuring the interior, preventing him from seeing anything more than the subtle head movements that suggested conversation. They stayed like that for the span of two or three minutes, then eased the car back on to the road and left with Willy trailing behind at a safe distance.
This time, they didn't disappoint. They drove straight back to the Cimarron trailer park to Fred's trailer. Worried that they might spot him, Willy didn't bother pulling in. He drove past, looped back around and headed for the Buckfoot bar.

#

Karl was closing the place up by the time Willy arrived. The snow showed no signs of letting up, and the accumulation left the roads slick. Barlow's three plow drivers were waiting near the door of the bar when Willy arrived, each of them swaying in the breeze, looking a little green around the gills. The roads wouldn't be plowed tonight, that much was certain.

"Willy Grieves," Karl said. "You're a little late, aren't you?"

"Got a question for you."

"Fire away," Karl replied. He moved fast, shuffling from table to table, gathering bottles, wiping up spills, and sliding chairs in to place. Willy followed along at a distance, considering how he'd approach the subject. After a few seconds of silence, Karl slowed, glanced at Willy, then stopped all together. "What's on your mind, Grieves?"

"Arthur was here earlier. Not even that much earlier. Maybe a half an hour ago."

Karl glanced around the bar. "Here? No. Not here. I would've seen him."

"He didn't come in here. I think he may have gone up to your apartment."

"What? No. He couldn't-" Karl paused. "Son of a bitch. The spare. Give me a minute to lock up."

Leaving several of the tables littered with an evening's worth of trash, Karl jogged to the front door, shooed the plow drivers out into the snow, muttering an apology to them in the process, and then returned to Willy.
"Come on, we'll go up through the back."

The Buckfoot bar had surprised Willy. The clean, warm atmosphere was uncharacteristic for Barlow, which tended to favor a colder, slightly dusty aesthetic with cheap liquor and a smoky, stale beer smell that seemed to be woven into the fabric of the buildings. Karl's apartment, however, held no surprises. From the bare windows, to the moldering TV dinners, to the mounds of laundry on the couch, it the quintessential above-bar bachelor pad.

"Jesus Christ," Willy said. "We'll never know whether anyone came in here."

"Whoa," Karl replied, padding the air with his hands. "Whoa. I didn't bring you up here as a consultant. You're a guest, you crude son of a bitch. Now just sit down on the bare patch of couch and don't touch anything. I know where things are supposed to be. Give me a minute to look around and see what's what."

Willy did as he was asked and watched Karl make a slow circuit of the apartment, examining everything as he went. He paused in the kitchen, hunched down on long, spidery legs to examine several driblets of dirty water. In the midst of his intense investigation, a fat black mouse charged out of a trash heap and through his legs, though Karl either didn't notice or didn't care. He crept along the counters, checking each surface, then disappeared into the bedroom on the far side of the living room.

When Karl emerged, his mouth was a tight white line in the center of his face. "The key to the safe deposit box is gone."

"What was in the safe deposit box?" Willy asked.
"A few valuables from Arthur's parents. His mom's jewelry, a couple of antique handguns from his dad, that kind of stuff."

"No cash?"

"No. No cash."

"Okay. That's good. There's nothing in there that he can get to now, so we're good for the moment. What bank is the deposit box in?"

"Timber State."

"Perfect. That's near my house," Willy said. "What time do you get moving in the morning?"

"Round 9:00AM or so, I guess?"

"Perfect. Bank opens at 9:00AM. We're going to be waiting for Arthur. We'll nab him on his way in and confront him about the missing key."

Karl shook his head. "I don't think so. He broke in to my house. I don't think that should wait. I need to confront him now. Tonight."

Willy stood. "Trust me. It's in our best interest to wait. Besides, we've only got two pawn shops in the whole damn city and they're both tight with the local PD. I'll give them his name and tell them to jerk him around if he tries to show up selling anything. This won't work out for him."

Confusion flashed over Karl's face as he struggled with whether it would be more ethical to scare the shit out of his nephew tonight with physical threats, or cool off and wait another ten hours, at which point Willy could make an official threat and hopefully scare Arthur straight. He took a seat on the far end of the couch and opened the window. "Fine," he said. "We'll wait. What's the plan?"

#
Willy stood in the entryway to the bank, attempting to knock the slush off of his shoes. His socks were soaked and freezing. Why the fuck wouldn't the bank hire one of the local kids to come and clear off the sidewalks? Instead, they had Horace Garland, a pig-faced numbskull that failed the twelfth grade three times and decided that rather than going back, he'd invest the money he'd made during his career as Barlow's shittiest paper boy and open up his own construction firm. Problem was, Horace didn't know anything about construction and his money was only enough to buy a used Bobcat. Once the cruel reality of his near-complete lack of useful skills set in, Horace decide to parlay the Bobcat in to a snow removal service in the hopes of recouping some of his lost capital. Willy could see him, leaned against the bobcat at the back of the lot right now, rolling cigarette after cigarette and dropping them in a pouch full of tobacco. Meanwhile, customers poured in to the lot in droves, only to have their feet soaked to the bone because Horace didn't have time to practice plowing when there were smokes to be rolled. Ah well, Willy thought. Live life to the fullest, Horace, because those roll-your-owns are going to keep the party short.

He'd been here since early morning, keeping an eye on the comings and goings of the bank. He'd created a circuit: slush, sidewalk, car. Repeat, repeat, repeat, ad nauseum, as he kept himself moving and inconspicuous, just another consumer in need of fiduciary services, at least until he caught sight of Arthur having a go at the safe deposit boxes. He'd though long and hard about it and decided that Arthur would be here today or never.

The reasoning was simple: Gemini needed money. Arthur wasn't a thief and hadn't ever stolen anything in an official sense--or, if he had, he'd at least had the courtesy to not get caught. Thinking about it from Gemini's prospective, Arthur was a rube with a pair of very loaded, very dead parents that had left him a fortune to which the only obstacle was an estranged uncle. If he
put his mind to making Arthur pay to get back in to the church, and if Arthur was enough of a dupe to accept the terms, he could be Gemini's new golden goose. This was the first step in that path, a simple temperature check to see how far Arthur would go for his faith. And it would work, or Arthur wouldn't have invaded his uncle's apartment and stolen the key in the first place.

The bell attached to the door rang. Willy stared at the entryway wall, shuffling through a few random pamphlets someone had left on the counter. Once the person was past him, he risked a look. Arthur waited at the end of the line that was forming just inside the door. His hands worked furiously, passing something back and forth and Willy caught a hint of brass between his fingers.

Willy stepped in to the bank behind Arthur.

"Well, Arthur Noll. I'll be damned. Doing a little banking?"

A sound came from Arthur's mouth, a hiss accompanied by a choked gurgle. His face became absolutely white and he plunged both hands in to the pocket of his coat. The coat looked second hand, old and patched, probably borrowed from his good buddy Fred. It was a few sizes too large for Arthur.

"What are you doing here?" Arthur asked. "I didn't do anything."

"This is a bank, not a holding cell," Willy replied. "I'm just here banking. Unless you've got something you'd like to tell me."

Arthur looked at the door with longing in his eyes. He wanted to run, Willy could see it in his face.

"I don't have anything to say," Arthur replied. "I didn't do anything. Please leave me alone."

Arthur turned away from Willy facing forward in the line, doing his best to not see Willy, even in the periphery of his vision.

"Here's a weird thing, though," Willy said. "Someone broke in to your uncle's place last night. They didn't force their way in, which is strange, and they didn't toss the place, which is also strange. And to deepen the mystery even further, there was only one thing missing from the house. Crazy, right? I don't suppose you'd know anything about that, would you?"

For once, Arthur turned and faced Willy head-on. In that initial split second of wide-eyed anger, Willy wondered whether Arthur would try to punch him. He wasn't the punching type, though and Willy knew it. An open-handed slap, maybe, but never a punch.

"Son of a bitch," Arthur whispered. "It's mine! For me. From my parents. My fucking uncle wants to keep everything from me as some kind of lesson, so I had to do this." He kept his voice low enough to not attract the attention of the whole building, for which Willy was grateful. Still, the angry hiss was enough to draw anxious glances from a few nearby customers.

"Calm down," Willy replied. "I'm not asking you to turn yourself in and serve time here. I'm just asking you to do the right thing. For me and for your uncle."

"Oh? And what's the right thing, exactly?" Arthur asked.

"Give that key back to your uncle. Don't let Gemini make you buy your way back in to his good graces by stealing from your parents and don't do this to your uncle, because he's looking out for you."

Arthur scoffed, sneered at Willy. "My best interests. He doesn't care about me at all."

"He does. He's here right now, in fact. Now are you with anyone, or did you come by yourself."
The quick glance to the door, questioning whether he could make it, whether he could outrun this gray-haired old man and just get out of town, far, far away from the reach of the geriatric wing of the Barlow police department. Willy saw it all play out in Arthur's eyes. He suspected the fact that his uncle was in the parking lot was the deciding factor. Arthur might be able to outrun Willy, but it would take a considerable amount of work to escape from his family.

"I don't drive. Fred is waiting in the car," Arthur replied.

"Right. And you were supposed to come in here, clean out the safety deposit box, and then head over to one of the local pawn shops to pick up some quick cash."

"More or less. We wouldn't have used a local pawn shop, though. Fred says they all work with the police department."

Well played, Mertz, Willy thought. He hadn't suspected such forethought from the goon. *Teaches me to underestimate my opponents.*

"Okay. I thought so. Now let me ask you a question. You believe in whatever Orran Dain's message is, right?"

"Yes," Arthur replied, cocking an eyebrow at Willy.

"Perfect. So would you say that he's a forgiving god? I guess I should precede that by asking whether he is actually a god or not, right?"

"Yes, you should. And yes, he is."

"Fantastic," Willy replied. "We're on the right track. Bear with me here."

Arthur nodded.

"By that logic," Willy continued. "Isn't it reasonable to say that since Gemini is an avatar of Orran Dain, that he should also be pretty forgiving?"
He had Arthur's attention now. The younger man's posture loosened and fell a bit as he considered the question. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Excellent. So what I want you to do is walk out there and tell Fred that you didn't get anything out of the safety deposit box."

A perplexed look passed over Arthur's face as he considered that. "Why? I don't see how that would help either of us."

"Call it an experiment," Willy replied. "To see whether Gemini acts in accordance with this religion he's created. If he does, he'll take you back even without whatever's in that safety deposit box. If he doesn't, he's going to tell you to take a hike, at which point you and I can discuss our options further, okay?"

Arthur nodded. "Fine, but he won't just put me on the street, you know that right? There's a reason that he arranged to have someone pick me up at the hospital."

"I know that," Willy replied. "But I'm not sure you do. I don't think we're coming up with the same reasons, you and I."

"And what if I just go get the safe deposit box and take what's in it? What then?" Arthur asked.

Good for him, playing hardball, Willy thought. "Then you go that way and I go the other way into the parking lot to tell your uncle about it. Hopefully it takes it reasonably well and just calls the cops, because at his size, I got to tell you, I'd hate to see him get physically angry."

"The stuff in that box is mine," Arthur replied. "Mine."

"You said that, and I know it's true, but the thing is, you don't have a leg to stand on with that. Karl's got executive control of all the assets until you reach a point where he feels safe handing the reins over to you."
A significant gap had formed in the line during the course of their argument. Customers had filed out, leaving only a short line of two people to see the tellers. Arthur cast a sad glance at the lines, then at the door, then back to Willy.

"Fine. Let's do it. Don't hold your breath, though. You're underestimating Gemini and how he'll react to this, so don't hold your breath, asshole."

"I won't," Willy replied. "Now get going before Fred starts to think you got lost."

Arthur headed for the door but Willy stopped him one last time. "Hey, don't forget this," he said, passing a business card to Arthur. "I'll talk to you soon."

Back in the car, the heat fogged Willy's glasses preventing him from taking any pleasure in the scrunch-ended look on Karl's face as he watched his nephew get in the car with Fred Mertz.

"Are you kidding me?" Karl asked. "I can't believe how right you were about this. He's gone from cult to suicide to burglary to cult in the span of a few days."

"He'll come over before too long," Willy replied. Truthfully, he didn't know. Arthur had spent a lot of time searching for the exits during his conversation with Willy. If the desire to flee was that strong, who knows when or in what way it could kick off. He remained optimistic that Arthur would get it right this time, given a chance. "I told him to go back empty-handed and see how well that went over. If I know anything that I'm talking about, the smart money is on Lovegood kicking his ass to the curb until he can come up with some way to buy his way back in."

"And what then?" Karl asked.

"Then we help him back in," Willy replied.
Chapter Fourteen

Willy checked the address on his phone against the address on the envelope. They still matched, despite this being the fourth time he checked. According to the envelope, this was the location of the Black Lake Planned Parenthood clinic, the only Planned Parenthood clinic in the tri-county region, and the source of a stack of medical bills that Willy had stolen from the Orran Dain house during his last visit.

He knew that what he had done was unquestionably illegal. Never mind the obvious federal offense of mail-theft, there were also numerous privacy violations not to mention constitutional violations wrapped up in the fact that he had opened the letters and gone over them to see what they had to offer. As it turned out, they were a treasure trove of information, particularly if you were interested in abortions.

By Willy's count, the ladies of The Church of the Long-Dead Ever-Living Orran Dain had sought the services of this particular planned parenthood clinic at least five times in as many years. And not just one or two women, but five separate women. The invoices didn't offer much with regards to the services rendered, aside from the black and white indication that it had been the termination of a pregnancy. There was no mention of the fathers, though Willy thought he might be able to venture a guess about who might be fathering all those children.

Willy got out of his car and checked the front entrance of the brick building sporting the fire numbers that coincided with the envelope. The storefront itself was empty, everything inside was black, save for a white sign hanging in the front window that said "Closed Eternally," which felt entirely too existential for his comfort.

The residents on either side of the building had kept their sidewalks clean and clear of snow, and it looked like they met in the middle and cleared off the storefront's sidewalk as well,
though a massive drift had blown in and settled against the doorway. No one had entered this building in quite some time.

Willy looked up and down the empty street. A few yards down the block a handful of bundled up kids were tossing snowballs at one another from the protection of a pair of snow forts on either side of the sidewalk. There was a gas station down the street in the other direction, though it also looked somewhat dark. He didn't feel like it would be appropriate to ask the kids if they knew where the local abortion clinic was, and he also didn't feel like dealing with another asshole gas station attendant giving him bad directions. How did they always know he was a cop, anyway?

He cracked the door of his car and took one last look around, hoping for some stroke of brilliance that would help him to realize where he'd gone wrong. A crash behind the building pulled his attention to the alley, where he saw a woman in scrubs throwing a garbage bag into a dumpster. Willy closed his car door and headed for the alley.

A long concrete stairwell with a metal handrail sloped between the buildings to the alley below. It had been shoveled once at some time earlier on in the season, but subsequent ignored snowfalls and foot traffic created a slick layer of ice on each step. Willy clung to the handrail and worked his way down the stairs, doing his best to avoid slipping and braining himself.

Someone had shoveled, swept, and littered the walking space behind the building with chunks of blue salt. A small sign, not much bigger than a license plate, hung on the back door: *Black Lake Planned Parenthood.*

The door opened to a reception area with a desk cordoned off by a sliding sheet of thick glass, behind which a gray-haired woman in light-purple scrubs squinted through her spectacles
at the glowing computer monitor on the desk. Beyond that, a tiny windowless, wood-paneled waiting room.

"One minute," the secretary said, holding up a hand to Willy. Her name tag said Rhonda.

Willy kicked the snow off his shoes to pass the time.

After Rhonda had finished typing, she turned in her chair and gave Willy a warm smile.

"Sorry. How can I help you?"

Willy flashed his badge. "I wanted to ask some questions about some, em..."

"Abortions?" Rhonda asked.

"Yes. Those. That happened here a while back."

"Okay," Rhonda replied. "But that won't be possible. We can't release any patient information. It's all federally protected. So unless you've got a warrant, you're up shit crick."

"That a technical term?" Willy asked.

"No," Rhonda replied. "But I like saying it anyway."

Willy nodded. "Can I speak with the doctor, at least?"

"Sure. She'll be free in a few minutes here if you don't mind waiting."

"Not at all," Willy replied.

#

The wait stretched for five minutes, then ten minutes, then thirty minutes. Willy found himself getting drowsy in the thick waiting room chairs. He wondered why they were so comfortable. Every time he'd ever visited the hospital for anything, they'd put him on a chair that might as well have been made from recovered pallets and railroad spikes. This was a real, chair. This was living.
He dozed, then woke with a start, feeling something running down his chin. Drool. He'd only slipped off for a second, how could he have drooled already? He wiped his chin and glanced at the clock. It had been two full hours. He glanced at Rhonda, who smiled back at him.

"Rest well?" she asked.

"Best sleep I've had in a while," Willy replied.

"Doctor's free now."

"Just now?"

"No. About an hour ago. But you looked so relaxed we just left you. I hope you didn't have any other appointments today."

"Not really," Willy replied.

Rhonda brought him back through the door by the office and into a warren of hallways. Willy counted six closed doors on their way to the doctor.

"How many doctors do you have here?" Willy asked.

"Depends," Rhonda replied. "Some days more, some days less. Only the one today, but she's a good one. Been here longer than most of the others."

Rhonda knocked on the last door in the hallway and waited for a response from within. When it finally came, she opened the door and gestured for Willy to enter.

The doctor was very young. Not at all what Willy expected. Given that she was the longest tenured doctor on the staff, he had expected a war-torn battle-axe, the glassy-eyed captain of a thousand abortions. Instead, he found himself standing across from a fresh faced woman, with dark skin and beautiful brown eyes. She smiled at him from across her desk and gestured for him to sit.

"Officer...?"
"Grieves," Willy replied. "Call me Willy."

"Okay, Willy. I'm Doctor Wells, but you can call me Michelle. Rhonda said you had questions."

"Right," Willy replied, withdrawing the papers from his pocket. "I'm looking into a mass suicide that happened in my city, Barlow. We found some documentation on the premises that says a few of the women that lived in the house where the suicide occurred had come here to have pregnancies terminated."

"Okay. And do you have a warrant?"

"No. I don't." Willy replied.

"Then I can't tell you anything," Michelle replied.

Willy tapped his papers on the desk and smiled. "Listen, really. This situation is very, very bad, and if I can't get the information I need-

Michelle held up a hand and stopped him. "I'm sorry. Nothing I can do. I'd get torn apart if I gave up protected information without a warrant."

"It's kind of urgent," Willy replied.

"I respect that. But if it's that urgent and that important, you won't have any problems getting a warrant, right?"

Willy shrugged. "Not likely. I kind of stole this mail, so I honestly don't have much of a leg to stand on in terms of legality here."

Doctor Wells stared across the desk at him, blinking.

"I only told you that because I want you to understand the severity of what's happening,"

Willy continued. "The people that lived in that house were a cult, and I believe the leader
orchestrated everything. He's still alive now, and if I'm right about him, he might be working towards doing all of this again."

"Stop," the doctor replied. "Stop talking. I don't want to hear any more. Leave now, please."

"This is serious," Willy replied. "He might have killed all of those people and I think he was bringing women here, girls really, to have abortions earlier than that. If I can just get this cracked open, figure out what he's been up to, I never have to mention it as part of the actual case-"

"Stop," Michelle replied with more force. "Get out. If I see you here again, I'll call the police department and report you to your superiors,"

"I don't have any superiors," Willy replied. "I am the superiors." The words weren't meant as a threat, but rather a plea to Michelle to understand his position, to understand just how far he was out on the limb on this one and that there was no one to help him, no one to advise him, no one to tell him how far to take things. He was one man, in pursuit of what he believes to be right, and he was getting absolutely nowhere.

"That's it," she replied. "I'm calling security."

"No," Willy replied. "No. It's fine. I'll go. But please, if you think of anything you can tell me," he tossed a business card on her desk, then walked back out the way he'd came.

On his way past the front desk, Rhonda smiled at him. "Hope you got what you needed!"

#

Willy sat in his car staring at the windshield. Over the course of the five minutes he'd been sitting there, it had covered with a layer of fog. He wondered whether it had anything to do with the waves of heat that were pouring off of his face.
He'd never been so embarrassed. It would have been enough to insist on the information. He'd always loathed cops that were too forceful about getting people to admit things or hand over information. It was their right to give it, he knew that. He knew it. He supported it. But something in him had snapped, and he compounded the pain by doubling down and admitting that he had stolen the mail on top of everything else.

This was why he was a cop, rather than a criminal. When he was a kid, he would do something, break a rule, and then run to his father with a tearful confession. *I did it dad; I ate the whole cake. I don't know what's wrong with me. Maybe I'm addicted to cake. I've got a degenerate cake addiction.* His father would smile, ruffle Willy's hair and say *don't count on being a criminal son, keep that day job.* Willy wondered how much influence those conversations had on his decision to become an officer of the law.

The fact was, Dr. Michelle Wells wasn't his father. She didn't owe him any pleasant smiles in the face of what he had done, and he had done something that a cop shouldn't do. Granted, he had done it for the right reasons, but didn't all shitty criminals think that? Ninety-nine percent of the people that Willy had arrested over the years all seemed convinced that what they were doing was the right thing for them to do, even if the law didn't agree.

Hell, even Jimmy Knobbs, caught breaking in to cabins and stealing hunting rifles, told Willy "I need to feed my family," despite the fact that rather than selling the guns, he'd used them to rob a local pot dealer for his cash and stash. If anything, Willy suspected that Jimmy's adventure had probably only exacerbated his wife's hunger; at least until Willy broke in on them in their hazy camper and arrested the pair for breaking and entry.

Willy put the car in drive and headed for the highway. When he got back to the office, he planned on tossing the letters into the shred bin and forgetting about them. After a few days of
being hard on himself about the whole embarrassing thing, he suspected he'd be good as gold. Thinking about it made him wince. What did he hope to accomplish? Even if Gemini had rented a bus once a year, filled every seat with a woman he'd impregnated, and driven the whole thing to the abortion clinic, it wouldn't have mattered; none of that was illegal. Not a single thing.

Did it prove that Gemini was an asshole? Yes, of course, but Willy had already known that. No further evidence was necessary.

He turned on the heat, hoping the vents would help ease some sensation back in to his numb hands.

This had been a dead end. He be more careful in the future.
On the day of the Orran Dain Winter Frolic, the temperature dropped to forty degrees below zero. Good, Willy thought. Maybe no one will show up. Standing in front of the cracked mirror on the back of his bedroom door, he buttoned the last few buttons of a worn, blue dress-shirt and gave himself a final check. He looked old, gray, worn out. Good enough.

He'd left his car running in the driveway for the last twenty minutes, hoping the heat would thaw the ice from the engine and let the cab reach a habitable temperature. Wishful thinking. Not only was the cab still freezing, but the engine still clunked along as though it was full of frost and a thick carpet of ice blanketed the windshield. Willy cranked the defrost and turned the heat up as far as it would go. Nothing to do but wait.

Earlier that morning he'd made arrangements with Karl to meet at the trailer park and visit the festivities together. He knew Karl shared his sense of curiosity about what exactly Gemini was up to with all this business, and he also knew that despite being a respected businessman, Karl was also known around town as a scrapper with a strong temper. Having him along for the ride might help deter any crazy ideas that Fred or Gemini had about keeping them away from the party. Willy loved a good party, after all.

Of all the things that could be bothering him, the one that nagged at him most as he sat in the driveway was the notion that people might actually attend this thing. There was nothing overtly cultish about it—not yet, at least—but he refused to believe that there wasn't some kind of ambiguous ulterior motives at play. Lovegood wouldn't do this for the benefit of the community, because community didn't mean diddly shit to him. If community meant diddly shit to him, his community, the one he spent years building in the house, would still be alive, rather than buried in city-sponsored graves in the municipal cemetery. Given that, and the fact that the people of
Barlow just couldn't resist a reason to celebrate--particularly in winter, when the days were increasingly short and the cold kept everyone indoors most of the time--Willy was sure there would be people there. He had no idea who and how many, but they would be there.

Willy recalled a television show he'd watched once a long time ago, in which a series of judges watched people performing in an auditorium. After a span of time, the judges would vote yes or no and the performers would move on to the next round or not. Beyond that, there was no rhyme or reason to the structure of the show; it didn't focus on music, or dancing, or anything like that. It took all comers, including acts that Willy couldn't believe anyone would think of as a viable performance career. One such act was a man that spun plates.

Ernesto, Willy remembered, was the man's name. An older gentleman, Ernesto would enter from stage left wearing a fitted black tuxedo and carrying a stack of plates and a bundle of long, white poles. He began by spinning one or two plates on his hand. After a few seconds, Ernesto transferred those plates to the tops of balanced poles and started two fresh plates. This went on for perhaps a minute and a half until a fair number of plates were spinning. He capered back and forth between them, spinning the wobbly plates to keep the momentum up.

Then something went wrong. One of the plates tilted back and forth, and as Ernesto moved to straighten it another plate began to spin in a widening gyre. Ernesto took note and sprung back to fix the plate, but by that time it was too late. Before the plates came crashing down, Willy noticed a subtle change come over Ernesto. Moments prior, he had been entranced by the spinning of his own plates, not giving them a thought, operating on pure instinct. The next minute, forced to think about his plates and confront the impossibility of plates spinning at the ends of thin white spindles, Ernesto simply shut down. To put it in terms Willy's father might have understood, Ernesto shit the bed, right in the middle of his act. He blasted through a subtle
wall of instinct into a realm of anxiety, followed by a world of anguish, all in the blink of an eye. And as the plates fell, Ernesto didn't watch them, but rather watched the audience watching him. He drank in their disappointment, internalized it. Ernesto shit the bed.

Willy shuddered, not from the cold, and huddled deeper in his coat. He was spinning a lot of plates at the moment. How long could he keep it up before the entire thing shit the bed? Sooner or later something had to give, hopefully not on his end, and the sooner the better.

Near the Cimarron Trailer Park Willy felt his stomach clench and roll. Cars lined either side of the snowy road and clogged the entrances and exits to the park. Ed and one of the other patrol officers stood, looking hopelessly outgunned, at the entrance trying to direct the traffic and shoo visitors along so the residents could come and go. Willy eased to a stop in front of the men and rolled down his window. Ed leaned down to the window and smiled.

"Do you believe this?" Ed asked.

"No," Willy said. "I don't. Please tell me it's a figment of my imagination."

"If it is, it's a figment of mine too."

One of the cars behind Willy began to honk and rev its engine. He put the car in park, killed the engine, and stepped out. He flashed his badge to the impatient driver, who suddenly looked like he had about a million better places to be. The stream of cars eased around Willy's parked town car, searching for greener pastures.

"You just leaving this here?" Ed asked, nodding at Willy's car.
"Yeah, sure. What good is it being a cop if you don't get preferred parking." He flipped Ed the keys. "Don't scratch it or anything. I'll be back in a bit."

The intense cold burned through his coat as he walked along the main road of the trailer park toward the community center. He didn't recognize most of the people he saw, though he could tell that a great deal of them were out of town geeks, probably here to meet the morbid new superstar, Gemini Lovegood.

Back in the nineties Willy had busted some kids under one of the Barlow overpasses. They weren't doing anything seriously wrong: they had stolen a couple of their parents' beers and somehow scraped together a pinch of what looked to be mostly stems and seeds from someone else's weed collection. The oldest of them was maybe fourteen.

Each of the kids had on their best nonconformist uniform: black shirts, enormous pants with straps and buckles—the type of shit that made Willy physically uncomfortable to look at. The logistics of wearing pants like that were far beyond him. Wouldn't you be stepping on the cuffs constantly? One of the kids, the leader of the group, wore a jet black shirt with a white portrait of Charles Manson's face on the front.

More out of curiosity than an urge to scold, Willy asked the kid why he'd wear something like that. Even as far as cult leaders went, Charlie Manson was a little bit of a dud. He didn't have any interesting motives for his acts, like a desire to please Satan or the urgings of a talking dog. His only will to insanity was an unsuccessful career as a hippie folk-singer and burning hatred of one of the beach boys. Willy understood the last part somewhat; if he heard Kokomo one more time, he too might consider sending a murder party to find whoever was left of the group.

In response, the kid had given him a look of bald disgust. "You wouldn't get it."
He had a feeling now, walking through this crowd, that a lot of these people would probably tell him he didn't get it.

The community center was by far the largest building in the trailer park. Made from cracked cinder block walls, painted beige with a green steel roof, it sat in the center of the park behind the local playground. A line had formed at the doorway, though it snaked well away from the building itself, nearly to the front of the playground. Willy followed the line to the doorway, where Fred sat behind a card table with a lock box. He was wearing a suit that looked to be four or five orders of magnitude too small, as though it'd been given to him as a present when he was a teenager and he hadn't bothered to get another suit since. He looked like a big stupid ogre, painted up and sprayed with cologne to appear less threatening.

"Back of the line, Grieves," Fred said.

"Nice suit, Fred. Where's the Organ Grinder? I'm here on official business," Willy replied.

"And what business is that?"

"Crowd control. Lots of people here. Need to make sure that we're not exceeding any maximum capacity limits."

"Fuck off. You've got no right to be here."

"Fred," Willy gasped, holding a hand over his heart. "Such hostility! I'm a civil servant, here to protect and serve, okay?"

Fred made no move to roll out a red carpet for Willy, though he didn't obstruct his way. Good enough, for the time being. Willy stepped inside the Community Center's main room.

The heat nearly knocked him back through the door. The tremendous number of people inside made the air a soupy mixture of humidity and the damp stink of sweat, a perfect opposite
to the clean, dust-dry cold of the winter air outside. People packed the room edge to edge like clowns in a car, smiling and talking to one another. Willy wondered if maybe he hadn't hit the nail on the head when he said he was here to make sure that no maximum capacities were being violated; if a fire broke out in this mess, it'd be a tragedy for the ages.

He cut a path to the far wall and looked over the place to get a sense of what was happening. Along each wall, tables were filled with snacks, bowls of popcorn, open bags of potato chips: the Midwestern version of hors d'oeuvres. Had there been a hot dish, it would have been a party. There wasn't exactly a focal point, though most people congregated closer to the front of the building where a folding screen cordoned off one corner. People waited outside of the screen, where Jimmy Knobbs held a red velvet rope, probably a stolen leftover from a local high-school plays. Willy smiled at that. He'd caught Jimmy Knobbs breaking in to the school a few years back. Jimmy, like Fred, wore a haggard suit, probably something purchased from the Barlow Goodwill as a last minute attempt to not look like the shitty small-town hood that he was. He'd even managed to tease a part in to his greasy hair and if Willy wasn't mistaken, his beard had been trimmed within the past day or two. Never mind the fact that it looked like he'd trimmed his it with a lid from a can of soup.

As he scanned the crowd wondering what the line was for, Willy spotted Karl towering over the crowd. He made his way to Willy and took a spot next to him on the wall.

"You believe this shit?" he asked.

"No," Willy replied. "I don't. Any idea what the line is about?"

"Yeah. Lovegood's back there, reading palms or some shit. Apparently people are pretty excited about the opportunity to rub shoulders with a mass murderer."
"Last time I looked on the cult's website, they wanted like five hundred bucks for one of his cosmos vibrator readings. You think people are willing to pay that much for this shit?"

"No," Karl replied. "This is all on a donation basis. People pay whatever they feel is worth it for the privilege of having Lovegood bullshit them for a while. It's all for community improvements, whatever that means. Probably makes people feel better to think they're donating to a community rather than just funding another cult."

Willy watched as a young man in a pair of enormous black pants and a Charlie Manson shirt walked by, sipping from a Styrofoam cup of purple juice. The number of intersections occurring in the vision made him feel special, as though the universe had poked him in the forehead.

"Jesus," Willy said. "I think maybe I'd like to get one. I'm curious as to what Gemini sees in my cosmic vibrations."

"You're going to donate to this nutbag?"

"I have a feeling it'll be money well spent."

#

Behind the curtain Gemini had set up a card table, a couple of folding metal chairs, and a lamp. He didn't have any cards, or tea leaves, or chicken innards or any of the other things that Willy associated with fortune telling or whatever in the hell he was in for back behind the curtain. He slipped in to the chair opposite Gemini and smiled.

Gemini returned the smile. Lacking the courtesy to appear stunned.
"Afternoon," Willy said. "Quite a party you've got happening here today, huh?"

"Better than I could have expected," Gemini replied.

"You and me both."

Willy pushed a crumpled dollar in to the jar Gemini had set out on the table, then relaxed into his chair.

"I'm ready. Read my cosmic vibrations."

"Okay," Gemini replied.

"Do I need to close my eyes, or focus on the sound of your voice or anything?"

"No. Nothing like that. Just listen."

Gemini closed his eyes and let his body relax into the chair. His face went soft and slack, as though he'd fallen asleep and he tilted his head in one direction. Willy wondered if he'd start speaking in tongues, or maybe twist himself into a pretzel and climb the walls or something. Maybe if that happened, Willy could make a convincing case for shooting him dead. *It was self-defense, your honor. Mr. Lovegood was clearly possessed by one of Satan's lieutenants. He left me no choice.*

"You've got this movement around you, like a kind of shield. Like you're a protector."

"Gee, really? Could it be a badge? You really are amazing."

"Not a badge. It's got nothing to do with your work as a cop. I'm not reading your employment history here; I'm reading your cosmic vibrations. This is deeper. Older. It relates to your cosmic soul that's with you forever, through many bodies and many lifetimes."

"Okie dokie."

"You're doomed to fail."
Willy felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He sat up straight in the chair and leaned in towards Gemini. The other man still had his eyes closed and his head cocked, listening, not paying attention to Willy seething on the opposite side of the table.

"Fail what, exactly?" Willy asked.

"I don't know. I'm not a fortune teller. All I can see is that you're broken. You want to stop something, protect something, but you're not up to the task. Too bitter, too old. Behind the times. You're a leftover from an age that never ever happened. This is the life that you'll live forever. You just aren't a match for the forces that are arrayed against you."

"See anything else I should know about?" Willy asked.

"No," Gemini replied, opening his eyes. "I think that covers the high-points."

"Great. Now let me do you." Will closed his eyes and let his hands hover in tight circles above the surface of the table."

"Your movements suggest that you think you're invincible, like maybe you've got a three-foot pecker and a skull made of brass. You also think everyone believes you. You're a snake oil salesman, a bullshit artist--you're the guy that sends me emails telling me that I can add inches to my dick by taking a pill, but your pill is a fake god you've made up. And you won't get away with any of this, because I'm going to stop you."

Gemini smiled and laid his hand over Willy's. "Really, I don't know where this anger comes from," Gemini said. "All I've ever wanted was to help the people that follow me, and that's exactly what I've done. I've helped them all and I'll help everyone else that follows me because that's why they follow me. I'd be remiss if I didn't help them."

Willy pulled his hand back and scowled. "Over my dead body."

Something must've shown on Willy's face when he came out from behind the curtain, because Karl's eyes got wide when he saw him.

"How'd it go in there," Karl asked.

"About how you'd expect," Willy replied.

"Not good, then?"

"Nope. I kind of wonder why I let myself do these things," Willy replied. "I think it's probably bad for my hypertension."

Willy felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to find Jimmy Knobbs staring him down.

"Mr. Grieves," Jimmy said. "Gemini would like you to have a complimentary copy of our literature as a momentum of this veritable occasion. He asked me to deliver it to you forthwith."

Willy accepted the tiny white book that Jimmy offered him. The 100 Precepts of Orran Dain, as compiled by Gemini Lovegood, Living Avatar of the Long-Dead Ever Living Orran Dain. First Edition. Judging by the make of the book, Gemini had arranged to have it published himself. The cover looked like that packaging on the government-dole foods that Willy's family got during the spans of his father's unemployment. Peanut Butter brand peanut butter in a white plastic jar with a black stripe around the center. Cereal brand cereal, and so on and so forth. This book could have fit right in, between the peanut butter, cereal and the milk - Bullshit brand bullshit, brought to you by the long-dead ever living Orran Dain.

"Tell you what, Jimmy," Willy replied. "I'll do you one better. Why don't you keep this book and shove it straight up your ass for me, so I don't have to go through the trouble of shoving it up your ass myself."
"See now, Grieves, that's the kinda thing where before I'd probably have tried to kick your ass or do something stupid. But no more. That Jimmy Knobbs is dead. What you see before you is a resurrected Jimmy Knobbs, risen from the ashes like a glorious peacock. So there you have it."

"There you have it, Willy," Karl replied. Jimmy nodded, validated.

"Did Gemini by you a thesaurus, Jimmy?" Willy asked. "I haven't heard you string together such a variety of words in a long time."

"Oh, yes, Grieves. Poke your uncouth fun at Jimmy Knobbs. Go ahead. I'm a changed man, now, so I'm turning the other cheek and not kicking your wrinkled ass, which I could assuredly do. Now, if you'll be so kind, I must be on my way. And since I will be certainly not shove that book up my ass, I'm going to have to insist you keep it."

Willy tried to shove the book back in to Jimmy's hands, but Jimmy was already backing away through the crowd, heading back to whatever rat hole he'd crawled out of.

"That guy gives me the creeps," Karl said.

"You and me both," Willy replied. "I can't even tell you how many times I've caught that guy breaking in to the school. God knows what he was in there for. As far as we could tell, he never stole anything. He was just wandering around."

"Well, at least you got a free book out of it. Can't beat a free book, right?"

Willy gave his best approximation of a smile and slipped the book into his pocket.

"I need some fresh air, before I lose it," Willy said.

"Seems like a good time to hit the road," Karl replied.

They headed for the door, cutting through the tight crowd. Something clicked over the PA system and the crowd went silent around them, turning to the front of the room, where
Gemini stood, tapping a microphone. Once he was sure he had everyone's attention, he addressed the crowd.

"Community is important," Gemini said. "I know that now more than ever, after I lost my own community. They've gone on to a better place, leaving me here to continue my business and spread my message. It means the world to have you all here, accepting me into this community. I mean that. And I want to thank you and let you know that we've raised a total of five thousand dollars today, which me and my people are going to put to good use in creating a space for community togetherness. I hope you accept that from me, as an entirely insufficient thank you for what you've done for me."

The crowd offered a meager smattering of applause, though a few overzealous attendees more than made up for those that didn't quite know how to respond. Once the applause had settled, Gemini spent a moment surveying the crowd as though searching for something. When he's eyes settled on Willy, he smiled.

"I can't tell you how much I look forward to making a home for myself here, with all of you."
Chapter Sixteen

From his booth in the corner of the diner, Willy could see everyone coming and going. He'd arrived in the afternoon. The windows had gone dark now, most of the dinner rush came and went, and Willy sat, frozen in time, staring at a page of incomprehensible notes and wondering how he could move forward. The legal pad was covered with a mishmash of lines and circled words, connections made and erased, then made again, then erased again. It had all made sense once, but like the lunch rush, that time had come and gone, and how Willy saw nothing but a cockeyed spider web.

The absence of the Noll kid was getting to him. Desperate to get a handle on things, Willy had tapped Donna to check around the park and see if anyone had spotted Arthur. She called Willy back a few hours later and assured him that he wasn't in the park. She offered no further explanation about the nature of her search or how deep she'd gone. Willy accepted that. As far as the Cimarron Trailer Park was concerned, Arthur Noll had fallen off the face of the Earth. If he was hiding out there, Donna would know, or she would know someone that knew.

The troubling thing was that Gemini had the sense to keep his hands clean, but Fred was dumb enough to do just about anything, especially to a person that he might consider a snitch. If they had caught wind of Arthur's conversations with Willy, things could have gone downhill very quickly. Hiding bodies wasn't difficult in a town surrounded by swamp, even in winter.

Taking a pull of fresh coffee, Willy shooed the thought away. He couldn't obsess over the negatives right now. It wouldn't do him or Arthur any good. Instead, he sifted through his notes, looking for some angle that he might have missed the first hundred times he'd read them. His eyes, hot and sticky, couldn't make sense of the words. His entire body shook, which in turn
shook the pages of the yellow legal pad. How much coffee had he drank? Too much. Far too much. His jaw burned from clenching it.

He dropped the notebook and sat up straight. Time for a break. Time for fresh air. He raised his hand, summoning the waitress, who was sitting on one of the stools at the counter, reading. The place was completely empty. When had that happened? She closed her book and walked over to Willy's table.

"What now?" she asked.

Willy frowned. "I do something wrong?"

"You didn't break a rule or nothing, if that's what you mean. It's just that you've been here for hours and I'm getting a little perturbed at the thought of wearing out a pair of shoes walking over here to fill your coffee only to have you leave me a quarter tip when you go."

"I wouldn't do that."

"You've done it every damn time you come in here, Grieves. This isn't our first rodeo. Fifteen percent isn't just a nice suggestion to you, it's the god damn word of the law, handed down from god himself. Buck fifty for a cup of coffee is twenty-two and a half cents. I suspect you round up so you can feel like a gentleman, even though you've got me running around here like your personal gee-dee servant."

Willy lowered his hand. "Jeez, Carol. You this warm to all the customers?"

"What in the hell do you want, Willy?"

"Just a glass of water. I'll leave a better tip this time, I promise. I'm just having trouble trying to figure out this damned-" he froze, distrustful of his eyes. The thing he'd saw, just barely spotted from the corner of his vision, froze him in his tracks. He had to be wrong. He had to be wrong.
"What are you reading?" Willy asked.

"Oh," the waitress replied, blushing. "Nothing, really. I got it at that meeting in Cimarron over the weekend. From that guy. The Orran Dain guy. This is his book. He wrote it, I guess. It's not really that bad, believe it or not. Kind of interesting actually."

"You're reading that?" Willy asked.

"Yeah. I read. I like philosophy. This reminds me of the I Ching a little bit."

"You've read the I Ching?" Willy asked. It wasn't until after the words left his mouth that he realized how outraged and incredulous he'd sounded. The blush left the waitress's face and she scowled down at him.

"Yes, asshole. I read books. Lots of them. I don't just waitress twenty-four hours a day for fun. Lots of people are reading this right now, for your information. They gave out copies for free. You should try reading a book some time, Grieves. Maybe you wouldn't be such a dick if you did. I'll be back with your water in a minute."

She left with purpose, the force of her departure ruffling Willy's thinning hair.

"Jesus," he muttered to himself. "Touchy."

One person didn't make a movement, true enough, but one person could possibly mark the beginnings of a movement. There had to be one guy that looked at a situation, nodded, and said yes, okay, I agree with this and I support it. Seeing the waitress reading Gemini's book rattled Willy. She was the first person he'd seen, hopefully the last. But what if she wasn't? The thought made him shiver. Someone had to put a stop to this. The further it spread, the harder it would be to contain. Willy didn't know how much more difficulty he could stomach at this point.

When Carol returned with his water, Willy raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. He put on his best sad old man look, though truth be told he wasn't very good at looking like a sad
old man. He'd spent far too much time alone, learning to be comfortable and independent in his own habits. Sad old men never played well with him, so he wondered whether Carol would buy the routine.

"Listen," Willy said. "I'm sorry I haven't been a great tipper. I'll be better okay? Just answer me one question."

Carol chewed her gum and stared back at Willy. He suspected that if she had the capability to burn him alive with her eyes, she might very well do so. He cleared his throat and pressed on.

"What exactly do you see in the book?" he asked.

Carol shrugged. "Like I said, it's kind of like a philosophy. It's like I'm being told something, but it's up to me to figure out what I'm being told. When I figure it out, it's like I solved a puzzle. I feel smart. Does that make sense? I've never been one of those Sudoku people, so I guess this is the next best thing or something."

"How do you mean you figure it out?" will asked.

Carol pulled the book out of her apron and opened it to a random page. "Here's an example. Page eighty-six. It says here 'Wise is the worm that defers to the owl,' Does that make sense to you?"

"No," Willy replied. "A worm would have to be a dumbass to defer to an owl. Owls eat worms."

Carol smiled. "Would he? Because if the worm defers to the owl, he's putting his faith in something far smarter than him. He's also acknowledging that the world belongs to the owl and that he, the worm, just lives in it. That's a smart thing to do if you're a worm, you ask me."
Willy nodded. Carol would really provide some fierce competition when it came to taking home that cultist of the month trophy.

"What about this," Willy replied. "What if it's a personality test? What if the different answers we just gave showed that we're two fundamentally different kind of people. That I don't trust authority and that you do, and what if the person that wrote it was banking on that and using it as a means of figuring out who he wanted to surround himself with?"

Carol pondered that for a moment, staring out the window and chewing her gum in wet, slopping chomps.

"I doubt it," she replied. "I'll be back shortly with your check."

#

Standing in the flickering street light of the diner's parking lot, it took Willy a moment of dazed searching to remember that he'd walked today. He had convinced himself that the fresh air and exercise would be good for mind and body and perhaps help shake loose the mental blocks that prevented an appropriate response to Gemini Lovegood. So much for that. If anything, he felt even more confused now, and there was a generous helping of anger sprinkled over the confusion because he really, really didn't want to walk home in the sub-zero weather with a stomach so full of coffee and water that it sloshed with each step.

He crossed Conifer street and headed for Barlow's main drag. He'd been working for so many days straight at this point that he didn't know what day it was. Sunday, maybe? That would make sense. Most of the nearby businesses were dark, with the exception of the horizontal Bowling Alley sign that buzzed two blocks down. He checked his watch and noted that the leagues would be getting out soon.
As Willy passed by the alley, a group of bowlers flooded through the front door, heading for running cars. A few of the hardier souls braved the temperature and stayed behind on the sidewalk, wrapping up last minute conversations that carried over from inside. Willy happened to pass by two older men bundled up in thick coats as they engaged one another in animated conversation.

"Sounds like a bunch of horse-shit to me," the old man on the left said.

"I know. A day ago, I'd have agreed with you," replied the old man on the right. "But damned if there's not something pretty interesting about that fellow."

No, Willy thought. Nope. They aren't talking about what I think they're talking about. He sped up, just in case, hoping to reach a safe distance where the droning of the warming cars would shut out the conversation.

"I heard he maybe told all them poor people to kill themselves," said the old man on the left.

"My son in law told me that's a bunch of BS," right-side replied. "He wasn't nowhere near the house when it all happened. He was off camping somewhere. It was that donkey Norm Nermin that did the real damage. He probably saw that Gemini was going to be gone and took advantage of the situation."

"Pardon me," Willy replied. "Are you guys talking about Gemini Lovegood?"

"Yeah," the left old man replied. "Jerry says he met him at that party in Cimarron the other night. Wants me to meet him, too. But like I said, I already got religion. Jesus Christ makes me feel plenty guilty. I don't need any other extraterrestrial or spiritual beings making me feel bad about shit."

Willy nodded to the man on the right, to Jerry. "You liked him?" he asked.
"Sure. Seemed like a nice enough guy."

"Even though he's made up a religion?" Willy asked.

"Jesus Christ made up a religion too," Jerry replied. "But no one bats an eyelash about him, do they?"

"Last I checked he didn't convince the apostles to kill themselves either," Willy replied.

Jerry took a step back, squinted as though searching Willy for some hitherto unnoticed detail that might explain his purpose for invading an otherwise pleasant and private conversation between two friends.

"Last I checked, the Lovegood fellow wasn't convicted of any crime at all," Jerry replied. "And I'll tell you something else. He might be a bit kooky with his made up religion, but he's doing a lot of damn good for that trailer park. I heard he's going to use the money he raised to help fix up the community center there so the kids have a place to play. And everyone knows what a shitbag that Fred Mertz character used to be, but he's all wrapped up in Gemini's world now and behaving himself because of it. So, if you ask me, I think maybe we ought to thank Gemini for what he's done, considering there isn't any evidence that he did a damned thing wrong."

By the time is tirade came to a halt, patches of Jerry's face had turned an alarming shade of maroon. He'd advanced as he spoke, coming close enough for Willy to smell the evening's Budweiser and hot dogs on his breath with each rapid-fire defense of Gemini Lovegood.

"Fair enough," Willy replied. He hated himself almost immediately for backing down, but the idea of protecting and serving still meant a great deal to him and he felt a responsibility to the people of Barlow. He might think Jerry was a shit head, but he also didn't feel it was his place to call him on it--at least, not in a law enforcement capacity. And after as many years as
he'd logged on the job, Willy's default state of being was classified as law enforcement capacity. Old men were entitled to their opinions and Willy was the interloper in this conversation. To engage the argument would be to give up what little grace he still carried as a person and he wasn't quite curmudgeon enough to do that just yet.

Rather than being placated by Willy's attitude, Jerry only became more agitated. "Look. People in this town got a problem with everything. Some people are pissed because we've got a library and they don't think we should spend money on it. Some people are pissed because they think we don't spend enough money on a library. Some people are mad that other people spend so much time thinking about libraries period. Now you've got a guy like Lovegood, who actually tries to do something and people want to take a dump on him. It just doesn't seem right. The guy isn't hurting anyone, is he?" To punctuate the question, Jerry toggled his glance between Willy and the other old man, neither of whom offered any counterpoints. Willy clenched his jaw closed as tight as he could, as a resounded yet echoed through his head.

"That's all. He's a good guy. And when I see a good guy I want to treat him like a part of the community."

"You guys have a good night," Willy said, nodding to each man in turn. Jerry said something else, but Willy let it slide off his ears and offered only a brief departing wave in response. The old men murmured on behind him as he passed out of the bowling alley's light and back in to the freezing dim of the evening.

#

By the time he reached his house, Willy was more perplexed than he'd been at the start of the day. He'd never believed in omens, but meeting two people sympathetic to Gemini Lovegood on the same day unnerved him. He considered himself a man of, if not logic and reason, at least
good sense. And sense dictated that if he could run in to two people that were open to Gemini Lovegood's messages in the space of one day, there had to be several more somewhere out there. It was really just a simple question of odds.

He cranked the thermostat up from the crisp sixty-two degrees and waited for the furnace to kick on. After warming his feet, he dropped onto the couch and turned on the orange lamp on the end table. A foggy cloud of fruit flies twitch in the light, scared up from whatever stain they had been feasting on prior to Willy's arrival. Definitely something on the couch, since Willy could feel the ass of his pants sticking to the cushion like a glue-trap as he tried to adjust himself.

How could he be expected to confront something as sinister as Gemini Lovegood when he couldn't even keep his ass from sticking to the cushions of his couch? Through most of Willy's career, his job had been simple: break-ins, vandalisms, the occasional fight, plenty of petty thefts. Dealing with a manipulator on the level of Lovegood was a completely new ball park. What did he really have, aside from a complete lack of evidence tying Gemini to the mass suicide? Nothing. A gut feeling which, while important, wouldn't bring a conviction or convince a judge, jury, or even an old man in front of a bowling alley of anything without some kind of proof.

Was he approaching it in the wrong way? He thought of the entire thing in terms of a crime to be solved. Gemini as the suspect, with will gunning for the conviction. Yet, he couldn't name a specific crime. Murder? No. Not if they did it of their own free will. Arthur was the exception there, but even he said Gemini wasn't on hand to issue the order. Norm Nermin had hosted the party, and thanks to Willy, he was currently unavailable for prosecution.

The question then became: if Willy couldn't convict Gemini of a crime, then what exactly was his purpose in all of this? He couldn't hound Gemini for the rest of his days, the rest of either...
of their days, even if it sounded like a passable way to spend his time. Was this all the revenge fantasy of a lonely detective nearing retirement? No. It seemed like more than that. But what?

      Protect and serve. The words bounced around in Willy's head. His job wasn't to convict criminals, though that was a part of it. His real job was to protect and serve. Thinking in terms of that, his confused feelings about Gemini Lovegood snapped in to focus; his obsession with Gemini wasn't based on what came before. It was about what would come next. It was about protecting the city from Gemini, from what he had done, and from what he would do again if given the opportunity. And if he had made this work once, he would try it again. He would dupe another flock and bend them to his will somehow, because that's what people like him needed to do. The only difference was that this time around Willy would be there to stop him. He had to be there to stop him.
Chapter Seventeen

Rubicon Mortgage LLC issued a letter, dated December 1st, stating that the occupants of 1545 Conifer Street in Barlow were officially out of time. Willy had to laugh at that. They were out of time, all right. They'd been out of time since November first, with the exception of two occupants, one of whom was busy building a new cult in the local trailer park and the other of whom was missing-in-action. Given that time was up, Rubicon Mortgage requested the aid of the Barlow police department in accessing the property and conducting a physical eviction of any remaining tenants. As he was the most familiar with the case, Willy volunteered for the duty and spared the blues the trouble of having to go sweep a cold dark house on a snowy afternoon.

Foreclosures in Wisconsin winters rarely fared well. The cult had lapsed on their utility bills, which caused the power to be cut sometime in early November. This wasn't an uncommon scenario in foreclosures, as most of the former tenants had long since hit the road before the physical eviction came due. Smart mortgage companies--and Willy had yet to find one--would fork over the cash to get the gas, water, and electricity flowing again. The stupid mortgage companies would let the utilities stay off, hoping to save a buck. This would inevitably freeze whatever water remained in the pipes and toilets, which would then burst or crack.

In the case of Rubicon Mortgage, they were both smart and stupid. Smart in the fact that they had a local repairman on retainer to look over the house and make sure it was winterized. Stupid in that winterization in Wisconsin took place long before December 1st, which was typically well below freezing, and had been so for some time. The name of the repairman was Calvin Stenson. Willy made arrangements to meet him at the property on December 1st so he could check things over and Willy could sweep the place and make sure no stray cult members were hiding in the walls.
Willy arrived at 2:00 in the afternoon, and found Calvin sitting on the front steps with a mound of gear at his feet and a headlamp strapped to his forehead.

"How's it going?" Willy asked.

"Good," Calvin replied. "Looks like someone kicked in this door."

"I did," Willy replied. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah, but your guys did a shit job of fixing it back up. Mortgage company won't be happy about that. Door like this, squatters, animals, anyone really, could get in."

"I can live with that," Willy replied. "Animals would probably be better neighbors than the people that used to live here. You ready to head in?"

Calvin nodded and picked up his gear.

The door on the job really was a bad one, Willy noticed. He punched the code in to the lockbox dangling from the crooked knob. The whole front door could've been pushed open with one hand, even with the lockbox engaged.

"You go first," Willy said. "I don't want to get hurt."

Calvin didn't get the joke. He stared at Willy, jaw hanging open.

"Catch a lot of flies in there?" Willy asked. Still nothing.

"Okie-dokie," Willy said. He pushed the door open and stepped in to the front entryway. Everything was in place, just where it had been during Willy's last visit, with the exception of the wardrobe, which had been emptied of coats and the remaining copies of *The 100 Precepts of Orran Dain*. Willy didn't imagine thieves breaking in to steal books; the thieves in Barlow weren't well educated enough to care about books. More likely that Gemini had made a return visit, or had Fred make a return visit, to gather up some of his prized tomes. Perhaps several self-
published copies of the 100 Precepts of Orran Dain. The place had been lousy with them on
Willy's first visit, but he didn't see a single copy this time around.

Calvin paused behind Willy, watched him as he searched the living room.

"We good here? Can I go check the toilets now?"

"Sure," Willy replied without looking back.

"Great."

Calvin trundled to the stairway and Willy listened to his thudding steps travel the second
floor hallway.

The pictures still hung on the walls of the living room, so Gemini--or whoever had paid a
visit to the house--hadn't cared much for sentimental tokens. Willy leaned in to get a better look
at a group of clustered faces in one of the larger photos and heard a thud and a scream from
upstairs. Calvin's footsteps scrambled across the hard wood and Willy heard him ricochet off
several of the walls as he went.

"Calvin? What's going on up there?" Willy asked, reaching for his gun.

Calvin hit the landing at the bottom of the stairs in a full roll and pin wheeled into the
kitchen. His headlamp fluttered at the final impact.

"There's a bum up there, hiding out in one of the rooms. He tried to jump me when I
stepped inside." Seeing Calvin stand up, Willy sighed. He had worried that the handyman may
have broken a bone or ten in the fall.

"A bum? We haven't had bums in Barlow since the great Depression. Are you sure you
didn't just hear a raccoon or something?"

"Hear it? I saw him up there. A guy. In the bedroom. He attacked me."
"Okay. Okay. Calm down. You wait here. I'll go up and take a look around and see if there's someone up there."

Calvin nodded, then frowned. "No. Hell no. I'm not sitting down here alone. What if he doubles back and comes down the stairs with a thirst for blood?"

"So now he's a hobo with a thirst for blood?" Willy asked.

"Maybe? How should I know. You're the cop."

"Fine. Get behind me."

The mid-afternoon sun left enough light in the stairwell to keep Willy from feeling too apprehensive as he made his way up. The incessant creaking of the old boards didn't help, but he assumed whoever or whatever was on the second floor probably guessed he was coming anyway. Stealth was a moot point. He paused at the top of the stairs and looked at Calvin, who pointed towards the door on the far left hand side of the hallway.

Willy eased forward, gun up, and called toward the room. "This is the Barlow police. Come on out with your hands up. We're here to evict any existing members of the house due to foreclosure. If you're here, I'm just going to assume that you're a friend of someone that lived here because, let's face it, I don't really care. But one way or another, you've got to leave. Now."

A noise came from behind the door. Not a word, or any kind of an answer, but a whimper. A sob. Willy put his gun away and pushed the door open.

Someone had done a job on the man slumped against the far wall of the room. His right eye had swollen shut and the left looked like it wouldn't open all the way. Black circles ringed both eyes and his nose was swollen and crooked, as though broken. A long, livid cut curved along the upper part of his forehead, above a crust of dried blood spreading down his face.

Willy struggled to piece together who he was staring at.
"Jesus. Arthur, is that you?"

Once Arthur cleared the blood from his face, the wounds didn't look as bad. Still, there was serious damage.

Calvin went about his business, still shaken, and left as soon as possible. The pipes in the house were frozen and two of the toilets had cracked. He filled Willy in, saying he was surprised that the damage wasn't far worse considering how deep into winter it was, and said he'd forward a report on to the mortgage company. They would be re-activating the utilities based on that report. They would also be repairing the door and changing the locks in short order. Given that this was the physical eviction, and that Arthur had been a resident of the house, no laws had been broken. Calvin agreed to let bygones be bygones.

Arthur looked like he'd been in the house for a few days at least. The clothes were the same that he'd been wearing in the bank, and judging by the smell that cut through the cold air of the house, he hadn't showered in at least a week. Willy took him out to the car and ran the heat on full blast until it looked like Arthur was beginning to thaw. He offered him a bottle of water and a washcloth taken from the kitchen of the house, and had him clean up his face.

"So. Who did this?" Willy asked.

"Fred," Arthur replied. "I thought the repair man was him. That's why I ran off and scared him."

"Has Fred visited you here before?" Willy asked.

"Yeah. Every few days. To check in on me and see whether I'm ready to come back to the cult."

"Do you still want to go back?" Willy asked.
"I can't. Not anymore."

"Why?"

Arthur adjusted himself in the seat and put his hands in front of the vents. The skin was blotchy and red, as though he'd been freezing for some time.

"Because I need to pay my way back in. I'd need to steal from uncle Karl and give the money to Gemini. And as scary as Fred is, uncle Karl is worse. And I also just can't steal from him. I felt like dying the first time I did it. Good thing you stopped me, I guess."

"You're welcome," Willy replied. "Did Gemini tell you himself that you had to buy your way back in?"

"No. He didn't tell me anything. He left it all to Fred. I haven't see Gemini in days."


"I don't really have anywhere else to go," Arthur replied.

"I know."

"You going to throw me in jail, then?"

"Throw you in? No. But I'll let you stay there. It's warm, plus you get three meals every day."

"Okay," Arthur replied.

Nothing like a few days in the cold to soften a person up, Willy thought.

"I'm also going to ask you a favor," Willy said.

"What?"

"I'm going to need you to go back to the cult."

"No. I just told you, they won't take me back and I don't have any way to buy my way back in."
"We'll figure that out in due time. For now, let's get back to the police station and we'll get shit figured out."

#

Willy arranged for Arthur to have the very last holding cell in the Barlow Police Station cell-block. It was around a corner at the far end of the row of cells, designed to be a kind of solitary confinement cell for the drunk and disorderly until they could be shipped to the detox in the county seat. It was the most privacy Willy could offer, but given the lack of prisoners at the moment, it worked pretty well. They even left the door open so Arthur could come and go as he pleased and use the first floor bathrooms with the other cops, rather than shitting in the desolate steel bucket that passed for a toilet in the holding cells.

"Now," Willy said, leaning against the stained brick of the hallway outside Arthur's cell. "I'm only asking this of you because you aren't under arrest. But please, please don't leave here without letting me know, okay? I don't want Fred or Gemini knowing that you were here. It might muck up some of my plans."

"Fine," Arthur said. "My face could use a rest anyway. Steering clear of Fred for a bit my do me some good."

"Great. And there's always cops here, up on the first floor. So if you need anything, just go up and let one of them know. They're all sworn to secrecy now, and they're good guys. They won't sell you out."

"Thanks," Arthur replied. "Hey, one question."

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to tell my uncle Karl about this?"
Chapter Eighteen

Barlow didn't need a large evidence room. In all of Willy's years as a detective on the police force, he'd had maybe ten cases that required any kind of physical evidence to be stored in the police station. Most of the crimes were simple break-ins that only required short term storage until the perpetrator was locked up and the goods could be returned to the rightful owner. It was a rare occasion for the Barlow Police Department to seize cash in an arrest, but it did happen. On those occasions, the cash went in to a lockbox in the evidence room.

Willy unlocked the evidence room door. The lock squealed as he turned the key and he could feel something gritty as it turned—rust, most likely. He hadn't opened the room in months, maybe more than a year. The inside, like everything else in the police station, smelled like a wet dog. Some long dead city administrator had press-ganged off-duty cops into hanging shelves. To their credit, the same shelves were still standing, as crooked and dusty as ever. They provided a wonderful accompaniment to the table in the center of the room, assembled from cinder blocks topped with a sheet of particle board.

There hadn't ever been a proper cataloging system for the evidence placement. Willy was the only person that cataloged the evidence, as the former chief had been before him. And like the chief before him, Willy operated on a strict find an open spot, put it there philosophy. He found the lock-box where he'd left it: in the corner farthest from the door, behind a brown box that contained the homemade tear-away jeans that Garvy Markham wore during the three-week flashing spree that scarred countless cashiers and wait staff.

The money wasn't off-limits, but there were guidelines for how it could be used. For instance, it could be used during budget shortfalls, or when overtime was necessary. So it wasn't off limits. What Willy was doing wasn't wrong. Not really, in a technical sense.
He counted up the bills in the lock box. There wasn't much there, even though this was the first time he'd ever considered touching the money. It amounted to a little over two-thousand dollars. Twenty-three hundred to be exact. He put the money in a manila envelope, which made him feel a little bit like a mobster in a movie, and went to the holding cells to get Arthur.

The kid was rolled over, his back to the door, his forehead pressed against the cinder-block wall. Willy could sympathize. After a bender, the cool caress of a linoleum floor wasn't always unwelcome; he supposed the same could apply to a beating and the cold wall of a jail cell.

"Wake up, kid."

Arthur stirred, rolled over. His eyes were still swollen, but he was looking better. Sleep and access to a shower had done him good. He swung his legs over the edge of the cot and rubbed his face, which caused him to wince.

"Shit. My face hurts."

"Looks like it hurts," Willy replied.

"What's up?"

"Come on. We're going out for the evening."

"Out?"

"Yeah. To dinner."

"Just you and me?"

"Nope. You and me and your uncle."

Arthur rolled his eyes and laid back down on the cot. "No thanks. He's going to go ballistic when he hears I tried to go back to Gemini."

"But you said you didn't want to do that anymore, right?"
"Right, but Karl doesn't forget shit, like, ever."

"Well, he's going to have to forgive and forget, because we've got bigger fish to fry."

Arthur covered his head with his pillow. "You don't listen, Grieves. If I go back to Gemini, he's just going to have Fred Mertz beat the shit out of me again. Understand?"

"Oh, I understand, but I think he'll take you back. We're going to make sure of that. And this is going to help you figure out your shit with your uncle. We're all going to win. It's going to be great, I tell you. Now get your shit, Karl's waiting."

#

The back office of the Buckfoot was a long, windowless room that doubled as a storage for the bar. Shelves filled with plastic bottles of rum, vodka, and whiskey, most covered in a fine layer of dust, hung from each wall. The smell of cigarettes and beer filled the room and stuck to the insides of the nostrils. It was the sort of smell that made you want to burn your clothes. Willy imagined that he would have to burn his after this, and he didn't even mind the smell of cigarettes and beer; the severity of the smell was just too much. It could have smelled like money or success, but at such a level, anything was nauseating.

Karl took his place on the opposite side of the desk, partially hidden behind an enormous cube of a computer monitor stained yellow by years of exposure to the incredible funk that permeated the bar. He dropped a pizza box on the desk and flipped the lid open. Pepperoni. Willy's stomach rolled at the idea of eating in the office. Everything would taste like the smell.

"Dinner's served," Karl said, separating a slice from the flock.

"Great," Willy replied. He looked at Arthur, who stared down the pizza while scrunching his nose. He too battled the smell.
"Listen," Willy said. "I'm going to get right to it. I want Arthur to go back to Gemini. If we're ever going to put him away, or at the very least make sure that he can't do what he did all over again, I'm going to need someone close to him."

"How's that going to work?" Karl asked. Willy had filled Karl in on the parts he'd missed earlier on in the evening. His reactions to the news had been strong. On one hand, he expressed his extraordinary disappointment in Arthur through a series of sighs, groans, and pointed looks in all the right places; on the other hand, when he heard about how Arthur had come to look like he'd been using his head as a tack-hammer, it'd taken all of Willy's strength to keep Karl in the office, rather than allowing him to rampage his way to the Cimarron trailer park to tear Fred Mertz, Gemini, and anyone else that looked at him crooked to pieces. Willy still wasn't sure if that was the right move.

"Well, that's the tricky part. That's what we need to talk about."

"I'm not forking over any of his parents' money to give to Lovegood, if that's what you want. I can't do that. He can have it when he earns it, but until then, it's locked up tight."

"I know," Willy replied. "I get it. That's why I figured I could handle that part. If I ask Arthur to do this, I should have to kick something in myself, right? So that's what I'll do, on behalf of Barlow, in the name of getting rid of Gemini Lovegood."

Willy fished the manila envelope out of his coat pocket and dropped it on the table.

"There's money in there," he said.

"I figured," Karl replied. "How much?"

"About twenty-three hundred," Willy replied. "You think that'll be enough to get Gemini's attention, Arthur?"
"I think that's enough to make Gemini's pants tight," Arthur replied. "If he's got a weakness, it's money."

"Perfect. So here's what I'm thinking. You take this tomorrow. Tell Gemini, or Fred, or whoever, that you stole a coin collection from Karl's house and sold it to get this. Tell Gemini it's just a taste and that you can get more, as long as he's willing to bless you back in to Orran Dain's good graces, or whatever the hell Orran Dain does for you people."

Arthur cleared his throat. "Were you thinking maybe you'd ask me if I want to do this?"

"Sure," Willy replied. "Do you? I figure you'd want the opportunity to set shit right with Gemini. He fucked you and your people over pretty hard. Hopefully, we do this, you can fuck him for once. Maybe Fred Mertz, too."

This was a moment that Willy had been anticipating with varying degrees of excitement and dread. Right now, with this question, he was asking Arthur to make a formal declaration of his opposition to Gemini Lovegood. He'd talked about it briefly before, mostly after the beating, but a beating was a complex thing and it precipitated an emotional response. As beatings healed, those emotions withered away, and sometimes people forgot. If Arthur forgot, Willy knew that it could be catastrophic for the case against Gemini. Particularly if he decided that he wanted to run to Gemini and fill him in on the plan. There was no contingency for something like that.

"Well," Arthur said. "I've been thinking about it. I'm still not sure what I think about Orran Dain, but my feelings on Gemini have definitely come in to focus more lately. Mostly because he had Fred Kick my ass, as weird as that sounds. Seems like a guy that's the embodiment of a centuries old cosmic being could handle that kind of thing himself, rather than delegating. So one way or another, regardless of my feelings on Orran Dain, which are separate, I don't mind helping you out with Gemini."
"Perfect," Willy replied. "Karl, you good with this?"

"Seems like the right thing to me," Karl replied. "The kid's going to have to face this sooner or later anyway. Might as well be here and now."

#

Somehow, what had started as a brief check-in devolved in to a game of toilet basketball. Willy sat on an upturned bucket by the door to Arthur's cell and Arthur was on the bed; they alternated throwing peanuts at the toilet, comparing their accuracy. Thus far the kid had Willy beat in a bad way. Willy suspected that he'd find his rhythm soon, though.

"Is it true what Karl said?"

"Which part?" Arthur replied.

"About your parents being rich."

"Oh yeah," Arthur nodded. "I've never seen a balance sheet or anything, but seems like they were pretty loaded. Karl would know even better than me, I guess."

"So why'd you take off then?" Willy asked.

"It's stupid," Arthur replied. He'd been asked this question so many times over the last few years that his answer was a matter of muscle memory. There was no proper way to answer the question without making himself sound like an entitled asshole.

"I can handle stupid," Willy replied. "Go on."

"People think that rich parents mean you've got a great life," Arthur replied. "That's not the case. Obviously it's not a bad life. Lots of people have it worse than I did, because I didn't really have it bad at all. But the thing is, it's all relative. So you grow up in that environment and it's just normal. Normal in the same sense as what everyone else has, where you kind of hate it
because it's the same shit every day. The difference is, that when you're normal is exceptional, you have to really turn the crazy bullshit up to eleven when you try to escape it."

Willy let that sink in for a minute, trying to wrap his mind around the idea. Arthur saw his confusion and continued.

"Let me put it this way: You ever see a poor person join a crazy cult?"

"Pat Robertson count?" Willy asked. "Poor people seem to love him."

"Fair enough," Arthur replied. "With the exception of Christianity, it's always privileged white people that join suicide cults or become serial killers or cannibals or whatever. That's me. I'm one of those people."

The dichotomy of the kid's intense self-awareness seemed at odds with the fact that he still did stupid shit. Then again, as Willy considered his own life he realized that it wasn't out of place at all. He knew that chewing tobacco was bad for him, but he did it anyway. He knew that heavy drinking probably caused all manner of harm to his body, but he still did that occasionally, too. And no matter how aware he was of the expiration dates on the months-old boxes of raisin bran in his cupboard, he would stroll into the kitchen on some mornings and eat them anyways, because he just didn't care. He wondered for a moment if he had stumbled upon the root of every human problem, but decided to not think too much more about it.

"So boredom. Ennui. That shit drove you to hook up with Gemini?"

"Yep. He felt like he was getting at something deeper and I liked that."

"Seems hard to believe."

"I was a teenager, too. Teenagers are prepared to believe pretty much anything if it makes their parents angry."
Willy nodded. Arthur continued. "So I found him, we started talking, I liked what he had to say, and that was about it. I went to live in the house a few months later. I was one of the original members, too. Me and this one girl, Maddy. At the time I thought I was in love with her, too. Now that I'm a little older and more mature, I realize I just really wanted to sleep with her. Funny how that works, huh? She died in the house on that last day. I'm pretty sure she was pregnant with Gemini's kid."

She had been, probably. Per the coroner's report, at least three of the women there were pregnant with kids from the same father. No telling who that father was, but Willy suspected he knew. The kid had gone through enough, though. There was no need to give him every gory detail.

"You think your parents' money had anything to do with it?" Willy asked.

"With what?"

"With Gemini finding you."

"Oh," Arthur replied. He cocked his head, then shifted in his seat and squinted toward the wall of his cell. He seemed to want to speak, but the words wouldn't come. "I don't-" he paused again, shot a peanut at the toilet and grimaced as it ricocheted off the rim and landed in the sink. "Yeah. Probably. How much of an idiot am I? That had never occurred to me until just now. Obviously I know he's trying to get a hold of it now, but back then I thought that maybe we had actually connected somehow. It would explain a lot."

"How so?" Willy asked.

"I remember going to my parents for money once and they turned me down. They didn't like what I was doing and they knew the money would go to Gemini, so they didn't give it to me. I thought I'd come up with the idea to ask them on my own, but if I think about it, Gemini kind
of steered me into doing it. He also told me I should cut my parents off after they refused. Christ, he was kind of holding me hostage, wasn't he?"

True enough, but Willy wouldn't say so. The kid was reaching the right conclusions. Help would only hurt him at this point.

"Then my parents got killed," Arthur continued. "Drowned in their ice-house. Can you believe that? Two at once. How unlucky is that?"

They sat silent for a moment. The only sound was the occasional plink of a peanut off the stainless steel toilet bowl or the splash of a direct hit.

"Well, now I'm officially depressed," Arthur said.

"You and me both," Willy said. "You're a real goddamn ray of sunshine, kid."

"I guess. It all worked out for the best, though," Arthur replied. "I'm alive. I never gave Gemini my parents' money, or even any of my own money for that matter, since I never had any. That's more than a lot of those dead sad sacks can say."

"Yeah."

#

Arthur left for Cimarron Trailer park the next day. A blizzard blew in early that morning, covering the ground in fresh snow and creating white-outs every few minutes. According to local weather, the snow would keep at it for twenty-four hours or so and then die off gradually. In order to be circumspect, Willy drove Arthur out to the edge of town beyond the park and dropped him off on the side of the road, so no one would see that they had been together. The agreed upon story was that Arthur had been hiding in a vacant house on the south side of Barlow for the last few days, trying to keep away from his uncle Karl and the cops, both of whom were
searching for him because of some missing coins. Willy also provided Arthur with a cell-phone to be used in case of emergencies.

Rather than meeting directly, Arthur would meet with Donna every couple of days and fill her in on what, if anything, was happening. Donna would then pass the information along to Willy.

As Arthur stepped out of the car and on to the side of the road, Willy reminded him of the details.

"Now don't forget. If it starts looking grim, just get out. Run for Donna's house, or wherever you can get to and call the cops. They're all going to know you're here. Don't fuck around and get your ass kicked again."

"I'll be fine," Arthur replied.

"I hope so."

The truth was, Willy didn't believe Arthur would be okay. The thought of anything happening to the kid made him sick, but the question nagged at him: was there really anything to stop Gemini from having Fred break Arthur's neck after he handed over the money? Would Gemini suspect that Karl knew Arthur stole the coins and consider Arthur a liability because of it? He couldn't say. He didn't know anything.

He'd told Arthur as much that morning and reminded him, again, that he didn't have to do this. The more Willy thought about it, the worse the idea became; and the worse the idea became to Willy, the more Arthur seemed resolved to stick with it. By the time they reached the edge of town, they had almost completely shifted positions on the subject.

"Remember," Willy said. "Donna Nugent. Trailer Five Sixteen."

"I got it," Arthur replied. "It'll be fine. I'll be in touch soon."
Willy closed the door to the car and watched Arthur disappear through the blinding snow. If all went well, two days from today Willy would hear from Donna confirming that Arthur was alive and well and that he was back under Gemini's wing. That was the best case scenario. Worst case scenario he'd hear that Arthur never made it to Donna.

But now wasn't the time to think about that.
Chapter Nineteen

By the time Arthur made it to the trailer park the snow was above his shoes. He blazed a trail through the pristine snow to Fred's trailer and waded up the un-shoveled walk to the doorway. The porch light was on, illuminating the fat snowflakes that fell and stuck to everything. Arthur appreciated the weather; it felt clean, even if he could smell the wet, charred stink of tin bucket Fred used as a massive outdoor ashtray. It wouldn't be dark enough to necessitate a porch light for some time yet, but the snow muffled the sunlight enough to make the afternoon feel later than it was.

Arthur took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

Someone thumped across the floor of the house, their steps stuttering and erratic. Fred pulled the curtain covering the door's window aside and peered out at Arthur. His eyes were bloodshot from sleep. Arthur waved and smiled.

Fred opened the door, frowning. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to Gemini."

"Talk to me first. And quick, otherwise I'll slap you around again."

The air from the house felt thick and hot, just like the air in the Orran Dain house had always felt. A smell, thick and sweet like raisins, came with the air. Not the smell of something cooking, but the sickly smell of rotting trash.

"I got in to my uncle's place and stole some stuff. I've got some money. Enough to get back in, if you guys will have me."

Frankly, whether or not Fred accepted him back in meant very little to Arthur. Fred would jump through whatever hoops Gemini setup for him, most likely.

"You serious?" Fred asked, finding some new interest in the subject.
"Yeah. Get Gemini and I'll tell you guys all about it."

"Come on in. We'll talk inside."

The smells that greeted Arthur at Fred's front door didn't do the rest of the house justice. Bags of trash lined the walls and the sink was lost under a mound of dishes, each of which had a jagged carapace of molding food. Someone had used the couch cushions to make a small nest on the floor of the living room and the space where the cushions had once occupied was now a graveyard of crumbs and dropped food. And in the center of everything, the circular kitchen table brimmed with an incredible arsenal of cleaning supplies for any and every situation.

Arthur tried to keep his gaze neutral, to not look as taken aback by the state of the house as he was, but no matter where he turned his eyes there was a new spectacle of trash or a terrible smell that threatened to put his nose in a headlock.

"Yeah, it's shit, but I'm working on it," Fred said, a hint of anger creeping in to his voice. "At least I've got my own place to live."

"I didn't say anything," Arthur replied. He nodded at the nest of blankets and cushions on the floor. "You got Gemini set up in here?"

Fred shook his head. "No, I gave Gemini my room. It didn't seem fair to have him out here while I'm still getting shit straight. Once I get the place cleaned out, he'll take the guest bedroom."

"Is he here?"

"Yeah. Hold on."

Fred disappeared down the hall that lead to the back of the trailer, allowing Arthur to take in the disgusting wasteland in which he found himself. Judging by the state of things, he
wondered if the military grade supply of cleaning supplies that Fred had amassed would even be enough. The mess might be so bad that the only thing the only cure would be a match and a couple gallons of gasoline.

Moments passed and Fred emerged from the hallway. He jerked his head in the direction of the back bedroom and scowled at Arthur.

"Says he wants to talk to you alone. Go ahead."

#

A light had burned out in the hallway, leaving it completely black. Once upon a time there had been a window along the wall, but it had shattered at some point and rather than fixing it Fred had closed it up with insulation and particle board. Despite the cover, Arthur felt a cold blast of winter air hit him as he passed by. The two doors on the left hand side were closed. Those would be the guest room and the bathroom, Arthur guessed. The door to the master bedroom at the end of the hall was open a crack, which allowed a pale slash of light to fall on the wall near one of the doors. Arthur kept his eye on the slash, doing his best to avoid the debris that crinkled under each step he took.

When he reached the door, he knocked lightly.

"Come in," came Gemini's voice.

Arthur opened the door and slipped inside. The master bedroom was felt like an entirely different house. New carpet covered the floor, complementing the fresh paint. A new bed sat in one corner, covered in a thick comforter and a pair of bookshelves hung on the wall opposite the closet. Gemini sat cross-legged in a rocking chair, paging through a book. Arthur couldn't see the
cover, but he was willing to bet that it was Gemini's own book - *The One Hundred Precepts of Orran Dain*.

"Arthur. Take a seat," Gemini said, gesturing to a small bench next to the door.

"Thanks," Arthur said. The bench was low and small, possibly some kind of chest and not really a bench at all. Sitting on it reminded Arthur of when his mother used to put him in time out as a child.

"So why did you come to visit me?" Gemini asked.

Arthur took a breath and gathered his thoughts. "Last time we talked, you said that you needed a show of faith for me to get back in."

"Yes," Gemini replied.

"Well I think I've got something good," Arthur said. He removed the money, still in the same brown envelope Willy had used to smuggle it out of the evidence room, and passed it to Gemini. "There's about twenty-three hundred bucks in there all together. I did what you guys wanted. I made it in to my uncle's house again when he wasn't there and this time it worked. I stole the key, sold some stuff, then snuck in while he was gone and put the key back. He'll never know anything is missing. At least not any time soon."

Gemini counted the money then slipped the envelop into the drawer of his night stand.

"Let's be honest, okay?" Gemini asked.


"That last day. The day everyone went home to Orran Dain. You didn't go. Why do you think that is?"

Despite the fact that Arthur had imagined how this conversation would go just shy of a million times prior to knocking on the door, he never imagined that Gemini would ask him that
questions point blank. After all, Gemini was a lot of things, but he wasn't stupid. He would sense by now that Willy wanted to pin the mass suicide on him. Given that, Arthur suspected that he would avoid the topic of the mass suicide entirely, if for no other reason than to not say anything that might implicate him in any way, lest Arthur bring it back to Willy. But there it was, on the table, staring Arthur in the face and demanding to be answered.

"I've thought a lot about that," Arthur said, stalling for time as he struggled to come up with an effective answer.

"I'll bet you have. Please share your thoughts."

Somewhere in the floundering depths of Arthur's subconscious, a ray of inspiration cut through the darkness. Gemini wanted to take this conversation in a specific direction and the only way Arthur could keep things on track would be to go there first.

"Orran Dain didn't feel I was worthy yet. He sent me back so I could serve you further and help the church. Once that's done, maybe if I've done my part he'll want me. Until then, I can wait as long as it takes."

Gemini pulled his head back and squinted across the room at Arthur. There was a curiosity in his face, but also frustration. Arthur guessed that he probably didn't like his omniscience preempted.

"What about the alternative?" Gemini asked. "Maybe it's not a matter of time. Maybe instead it's a matter of character. What if you're never ready. What if you just aren't the kind of person that's meant to serve Orran Dain for eternity?"

The swallow that gripped Arthur's throat was by far the loudest thing he'd heard in his lifetime. It was a dry, rustling thing that crawled up his throat, making him shudder in the
process. He wondered whether it was concern about the plan, or fear of Gemini's rejection that prompted his body to rebel against him. Either way, Gemini was playing hardball.

"I am," Arthur replied. "I know I am. I've always been loyal to Orran Dain and I've got a lot to offer."

"Like what?" Gemini asked, his eyes widening.

"Money," Arthur replied. "My inheritance. I'll hand it all over when the time comes and we can use it for the church."

"Isn't that money your uncle's?" Gemini asked.

"No," Arthur replied. "It's mine. Rightfully. He's just the person that holds it for me until I'm ready."

"Ready for what?" Gemini asked. "What exactly do you think you're ready for?"

"Whatever you need," Arthur replied.

Gemini smiled. His teeth were broad and gleaming white, his eyes perfect blue. Arthur bit his tongue, willing himself to keep calm. Had he forgotten how striking Gemini was? Sometimes, when he talked, there was something about him that snapped into clarity and mesmerized people. Arthur had seen it a million times in the faces of the newer members of the church. These split seconds where the fabric of Gemini Lovegood thinned and you could see Orran Dain's face looking out from behind the mask.


"I'm glad you said that," Gemini replied. "Because it just so happens that I'm going to ask something of you. It's a big gesture. In a lot of ways, it's even bigger than you are. That's why I'm not going to be surprised when you tell me that you can't do it. Orran Dain doesn't have faith in
you, Arthur, I can tell. There's something there, when he sees you, and it burns in the back of my throat like a popped blister. That's not how I feel, though. Not Gemini. I believe in you, and though I almost never do this, I'm going to insist that we at least give you this one last shot to prove your true faith to the Church of the Long Dead Ever Living Orran Dain."

Sweat beaded on Arthur's forehead. He leaned in and listened, realizing that Gemini's voice had been dropping to a conspiratorial whisper over the course of the last few words. "What is it?" Arthur asks. "I'll try to do it. Anything."

"You're not asking me," Gemini replied. "You're asking Orran Dain. I'm just opening the door for you, but he's the one that's going to bring you in and show you where to sit."

"Okay. So, am I back in then?"

Gemini closed his eyes for a moment and rocked in his chair. "Yes. You're in. Let Fred know and have him set you up with some place in the house. You'll also help him get the rest of the place in to shape. Understood?"

"Yes. Thank you. Understood."

With Gemini, there was never any question of when the conversation was over. One moment you were talking and the next minute you may as well have disappeared. In this case, Gemini opened his book and began to read. Arthur was as good as gone to him.

#

Fred was sitting on the couch eating a corndog when Arthur came back. The absence of cushions kept him sitting low to the ground, looking like a child on a huge couch.

"Gemini says I'm supposed to help you clean stuff up around here," Arthur said. "Also, where should I sleep?"
"You can sleep in the kitchen," Fred replied, his attention never leaving the corn dog.

"I don't think there's enough room," Arthur replied. "There's shit all over the place."

"Right. So clean it. Careful, though. I'm pretty sure I saw a rat over there earlier."

Fantastic.

There was a space along the west wall of the kitchen, a spare strip a reasonable distance from the table and the refrigerator, where no one would need to walk or maneuver to use counters or the stove. A set of cabinets kept it blocked off from the fierce draft that plowed through the gap under the door, bringing the occasional dusting of snow with it, and there was even a vent placed a couple of feet down by the wall. It was full of trash bags, crumpled cans, and a mighty slick of sticky spilled beer at the moment, but with the arsenal of cleaning products at hand, Arthur figured he could have it clean in an hour or less. He grabbed a broom and a trash bag from the pile on the table and pondered the metaphorical possibilities. Cleaning up his life; fighting rats for his place in the world; carving out a spot for himself. For a moment, it all felt a bit poetic.

Then he started sweeping up the rat shit.
Chapter Twenty

From his chair in the front lobby, Willy counted the fly traps dangling from the ceiling of the Cimarron Trailer Park Management Office for the umpteenth time. Seven. Seven crusty orange glue traps, covered in a carpet of dead black flies. If he squinted, he could see flies on the fly-traps, crawling along the tops of the other dead flies, oblivious to the fact that they were walking on a stratum of their dead kin.

The secretary behind the desk looked up from her laptop and followed Willy's gaze to a flytrap that hung just over the top of her head. She smiled and squeaked a nervous giggle.

"I don't know where they come from," she said. "It's thick with them in here, year round. Even during winter."

Willy nodded and smiled. He understood the impulse to explain yourself when you were the only visible representation of an organization.

The decision to visit the manager of the trailer park had come from nowhere. As Willy sat at his desk that morning, completing some random budgetary paperwork that would enable the council to further fleece his department of its necessary funding, he'd decided it was time for a field-trip. Launum was a base he hadn't yet covered, and it made sense to check it out. If Launum was an easy sell and could be convinced of Lovegood's general badness, it could be a windfall for Willy. He could, quite literally, hit Gemini where he lived.

"Any idea how much longer it'll be?" Willy asked.

"Should be any time now," she replied. Her blond hair was pulled in to a pony tail so tight that Willy wondered whether her face would shrivel like a raising when she let her hair down. She looked like a young woman now, barely past her twentieth birthday; with her hair down, she could be sixty, seventy years beyond that.
The door burst open, allowing a dusting of blown snow to scatter across the carpet where it melted immediately. Malcolm Launum, the trailer park owner, kicked the remaining snow off of his boots and hung his puffy red coat from the rack by the door.

"Any calls?" he asked.

"None, though you do have a visitor."

Launum turned his attention to Willy, noticing him for the first time since his arrival.

"Christ, Grieves. What is it this time. What ancient Wisconsin law have I broken that brings you here to darken my doorstep."

"None that I know of," Willy replied. "If you'd like to just tell me, it'll make our visit that much quicker, which I'm sure we'd both appreciate."

Launum nodded. "You know me," he replied. "I mostly just go to church and work with the poor. No time for crime in a schedule like that."

True enough, Willy thought. Launum wasn't a criminal in the technical sense of the word. He didn't steal from or hurt anyone in any ways that weren't acceptable to society. Whether that made him innocent, Willy wasn't sure. His practices as a landlord, while legal, brought the issue of his humanity in to question. Launum was a criminal in the good old capitalist fashion, which really just meant he was a good businessman.

"That's great," Willy said. "Glad to hear that you're still out there hitting the streets in the name of Jesus. But really, I'm not here about you. I wanted to talk to you about Gemini Lovegood."

"Save it," Launum replied. "I know you're sniffing around about him. He told me himself and asked me to tell him if you came around asking questions. I probably won't do that,
probably, but I'm not going to tell you shit about a paying customer and risk having them get PO'd at me and cancel the checks."

"And you're okay with him improving your community center with his own money?"

"Okay with it?" Launum repeated, over-enunciating the question. "Am I okay with it? Am I okay with some rube paying for repairs that I would have otherwise needed to pay for myself? Yep. Yeah, I'm good with that. Totally good. And more than that, he's been paying Fred's rent, too. Do you have any idea how rare that is? The last time Fred sent me a check Hailey's comet was in the news. If I wasn't so scared of the asshole I would have evicted him years ago. Now he's paying up."

"Okay," Willy replied. "I get it. My time is wasted here. Thanks for taking the time."

Launum shook his head and returned to the task of rubbing warmth back in to his bright red hands. As Willy opened the door, Launum shouted and stopped him.

"A little advice, Grieves?"

"Yeah?"

"Let it go. Gemini's a weirdo, but he's not a dumbass. You keep on messing with him, he'll file a complaint or something. You'll wind up cleaning shitters at city hall while he collects half of your paycheck in restitution."

The point struck home. Not so much because Launum said it, but because Willy had wondered the same thing to himself several times over the last few days. How long could he keep this up before Gemini decided he'd taken enough shit from a small-town detective with delusions of grandeur? Willy resolved to be more circumspect in the future. He'd have to play it cool if he wanted to get anywhere without being reprimanded.
"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." He stepped out into the blustering snow and shut the door behind him, thankful to be out of the fly graveyard. He knew that somewhere, a hundred or so yards behind them in one of the narrow spokes that broke off from the main loop of the trailer park, Gemini Lovegood was going on with his day, completely unconcerned about the trivial yearnings of Willy Grieves. The temptation to stop, turn around, and walk to Fred's trailer came over Willy in a flash and it was a force of will to keep from indulging it.

He imagined knocking on the door. Slapping cuffs on Gemini. The thought gave him an inordinate amount of satisfaction. Much to his surprise, though, he didn't turn. He kept his course straight, got in his car, and headed off through the snow in the direction of the Barlow Police Department.

#

Pulling into the Police Department's parking lot, Willy laid eyes on something he never expected to see: Fred Mertz's car, parked in one of the visitor's spot, rather than its typical stall in the back lot that served as the city impound lot. There it was, covered in snow, bathed in the glory of its own rusted El-Caminoness. A true rarity. Parking in the front implied that Fred was here for some kind of visit, rather than his usual bi-annual dry-out stint in a cell downstairs. Wonder of wonders.

Willy walked inside, shook the snow off of his coat, and hung it up on the ancient wooden rack by the door. Fred sat at the end of the hall by the doorway to Rita's office, watching him. He could feel the grease ball’s eyes on his back as the swept the snow from his hair. Rather than acknowledging him, Willy simply headed in to his office and shut the door behind him. He managed to get halfway through his first email when someone hammered on his door.

"Let me in, asshole. You know I'm here to talk to you."
"Who is it?" Willy asked.

"Fred," Fred replied.

"Fred who?"

"Fuck off." Fred fumbled at the doorknob for a moment, then stepped in Willy's office. He immediately pulled back, stunned by the incredible tightness of the space.

"What is this, a janitor's closet?"

"Yeah, sure," Willy replied. "What do you want? I've told you before that I'm not going to let you bank jail hours in case you're arrested in the future."

Fred smirked, biting the corner of his lower lip. "Always a prick, man. Always. No wonder no one around town likes you."

"I beg to differ," Willy replied. "I find myself constantly in the company of your friends. Seems like they've taken a real shine to me."

"Listen," Fred said, leaning forward and placing both hands on Willy's desk. "I'm here to tell you to lay off me and Gemini. We aren't breaking any laws and this is still America last time I checked, so you can't harass us. If I keep seeing you around the park watching me, I'm going to give the mayor a piece of my mind about you."

"Got him on speed dial, do you?" Willy asked.

"You know what?" Fred said, cracking his knuckles. "I think maybe I'd rather just kick the shit out of you. That would put a real neat stop to all of this, don't you think?"

"Doubt it," Willy replied. "Beating the shit out of a cop is rarely the end of anyone's troubles. More likely it's just the beginning. Especially if you try to kick my ass, because buddy, that's not going to turn out how you want it to. I can promise you that."

Fred stood, took a deep breath. "I'm sorry," he said.
Willy flinched. Had his world just turned upside down? He had never once, in the entire history that he and Fred shared together as arrestor and arrestee, heard Fred apologize for anything he had ever done. Fear prickled along Willy's forehead and he wondered for a moment whether Fred was apologizing for something else. Slipping a slow-acting poison in to his coffee, or wearing a bomb-vest, maybe. The room spun and Willy's vision blurred. He had no idea from which direction the blow would come.

Fred repeated himself. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have acted like that. Gemini has been helping me work out a lot of the shit I carry around and he says I need to be more in control of myself."

The anger still seethed behind Fred's eyes. Willy could see it burning there like a bed of coals. He was holding it back, but it was there.

"I'm going to ask you to leave my office. Whatever it is that you think I'm doing--harassing you or spying on you--I'm not doing it. Okay? I'm out patrolling the city, which is what I'm paid to do. If you don't like that, then I encourage you to take your new found serenity and discuss it with the mayor."

The look Fred gave Willy suggested that the light veils hiding the face of his anger might not hold for much longer. He bit back a scowl and turned toward the door. In the threshold he stopped and looked back at Willy.

"I'm not fucking around, Grieves. I know I was out of line. I know I've done a lot of shit. But keep your nose out of my life. Got it?"

"Yeah, sure. You have a good one Fred. Say, you need a ride back to Cimarron? I planned on spending a few hours there this afternoon anyway, keeping an eye on things."
The door slammed shut, leaving Willy alone in his closet with the faint resonance of Fred's stomping footsteps heading for the front door. As they receded, a new set of footsteps grew in volume until Willy's door popped open a second time. Rita stood in the doorway, her hair a frizzy red mess and her face pale.

"You prick. Don't ever leave me sitting out there alone with that asshole again."

"Sorry," Willy replied. "I just didn't have the stomach to go to him. It's a guy thing I guess."

"No, it's a dick thing," Rita replied. "Meaning that whatever complex you have over your dicks makes you think in irrational and stunted ways."

"Fair enough," Willy replied. "Did he say anything to you while he was waiting?"

"Yes," Rita replied. "Yes, he said lots of things. He told me all about how Gemini could help me turn my life around. About how The Long-Dead Ever-Living Orran Dain isn't a religion, but a philosophy for a cosmic existence that's based around a true cosmic being, rather than a god, and because of that, it was perfectly compatible with my Lutheranism."

Willy blinked. "Fred said all of that?"

"Yes!" Rita replied. "The guy is like a roided-out delta force Jehovah’s Witness strike team unto himself. I don't even think he knew what a lot of the words he was saying meant, but he'd clearly practiced saying them over and over and over and over again, like a script. He gave me the whole spiel, top to bottom, while you were off doing whatever it is you do when you aren't here. Don't. Don't do that again. Be where you're supposed to be, because that guy creeps me out."
"Okay," Willy replied. "Jesus Christ. I hate to stop your roll here, but god damn I'm getting tired of people hitting me with shovels full of shit today. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry that you had to sit there with Fred."

Staring at her feet, Rita shrugged, her faux timidity back in place. "It's fine. I just, you know, don't do that. If I had known that you weren't going to be here, I would've told him to come back later. Maybe then I wouldn't have had to listen to his shit and read his little book in front of him."

"Book?" Willy asked.

"Yeah. I threw it away already, but if you want it you're welcome to it. He gave me a copy of the book that guy wrote."

"The 100 Precepts of Orran Dain?"

"Yeah."

"Son of a bitch," Willy replied. "That god damn book is really making the rounds today."

"It's everywhere," Rita replied.

"What do you mean?" Willy asked.

"I mean it's everywhere. They got them in the doorways of the grocery store, they've got them at bars, they've got them at a couple of restaurants. Hell, my sister even said that she saw some at her church the other night. She asked the priest about it and he just said that they were offering free copies of a book by a local philosopher."

"Philosopher my ass," Willy replied. "The guy is a god damn crook. I can't believe this. People are willing to let this trash happen right in front of their faces. It's like they don't want to help themselves."
Rita frowned. "Hate to break it to you, Superman, but people don't need to be helped around here for the most part. Besides, most of them could probably do with reading a book."

"So you too?"

"No, not me. Of course not. I'm just putting it out there. Giving away free books ain't against the law. You know that. You're the cop. Right?"

"I guess," Willy replied.
Arthur woke to Fred shaking him awake in his spot on the floor. It was still early, before nine AM at least. It took a special occasion to get Fred out of bed before noon, so Arthur sat up and rubbed his eyes. It had been a good night of sleep. After a good cleaning and disinfecting, and the addition of a few spare blankets and a pillow, his tiny patch of floor made for a passably comfortable sleeping arrangement. It was at least as comfortable as the time's Arthur had spent camping with his parents, though given the rat problem in Fred's trailer, the proximity to wildlife was much more intense here.

"Gemini needs you to get the mail," Fred said. "He's expecting some letter today."

"Why me?" Arthur asked.

"Because I say so," Fred replied. "He asked me, but it's colder than shit out there, so I'm sending you. I'm delegating."

Arthur considered launching an argument, but Fred wandered off towards his bedroom, removing that option.

The thermometer by the door had bottomed out, meaning that it was at least twenty-five below, though probably even lower than that. Arthur felt the cold seeping in through the cracks in the doorway like a tactile aura. He slipped on his winter coat and a pair of random mittens from the closet and stepped outside.

The cold cut through his sweatpants and made him shiver. The trailer park was silent and frozen and every step Arthur took gave such an echoing crunch that he was afraid he might actually wake up the neighbors if he walked too hard.

By the time he reached the bank of mailboxes in front of the park office, Arthur's face had gone from numb, to a dull burning, then back to numb again. He prodded his cheeks with his
mittens but felt nothing. He wondered exactly how much frozen snot had accumulated on his upper lip, but it was impossible to know at the moment.

The mailman was putting the last mail in the boxes as Arthur approached. He gave Arthur a nod and a smile and got in to his idling mail truck a few yards away. Fred's box, which had really become Gemini's box over the last few weeks, was still open. The mail delivery was of such bulk that it stuck out the front of the box and made it impossible for the door to close. Arthur grabbed everything and flipped through the first few letters to see what had come in for the day.

Most were letters to Gemini. Arthur wasn't sure which surprised him more about that: that some people still wrote letters in an increasingly digital age, or that people were writing letters to Gemini. Both seemed odd. Though really, if people were willing to come out in Wisconsin winter just for the opportunity to meet the man and for over their hard earned cash for a cosmic vibration reading, he supposed that anything was possible.

Many of the other letters were bills or invoices, most of which were addressed to Fred, though Arthur knew that Gemini was the one that had actually accrued them. It was no secret, even to Fred, that Gemini was using his host as a kind of financial buffer. Fred didn't give a shit whether he had delinquent bills in his name, so why not? It made Gemini happy and making Gemini happy made Fred happy. It was a win - win situation.

The last letter in the stack caught Arthur's eye. There was nothing remarkable about it, really: a white envelope with an imprint in blue ink that said Brigadoon Financial. There was some heft to it, as though several pages had been folder over and placed inside. Arthur put the envelop on top of the stack and stared at it for a full minute. He wanted to open it. Some small
part of his brain was fascinated by the letter and he just knew that he wanted to see whatever was inside.

He re-shuffled the letters, putting the Brigadoon letter on the bottom. Out of sight, out of mind. He made it to the end of the bank of mailboxes and stopped, brought the Brigadoon letter back to the top, and stared it down again. Why was he so interested? Was this the letter Gemini was expecting?

Arthur crept to the front corner of the park office. From that spot, if he peeked around the edge, he could just see the front door of Fred's house without making himself too obvious. No one was outside at the moment.

If this was important enough to warrant Gemini waking Fred up to get the mail, he would be waiting for it. But Arthur could buy himself a couple of extra minutes if he lied and said that the mailman had been late, or that he'd gotten sucked into another conversation with the park's talkative manager, Launum.

He tore the letter open, not caring whether he ripped the paper inside. Whatever this was, it would never make it to Gemini Lovegood. Arthur hoped it was good.

The papers inside were a riot of confusing language. Most of it seemed like generic contract-speak. There were also some numbers, a few tables, and some balance information. It was a statement for some kind of account, and if Arthur understood the paperwork, the account was changing hands. The former beneficiary had been Norm Nermin, but according to the paperwork, Norm had handed over control of the account to Gemini in the last week of October. One week before Norm had a vision that called upon the church of Orran Dain to kill themselves and join their lost god in outer space.

#
Arthur knew he couldn't hide the letter on his person. There was too much risk in that. If Gemini or Fred found it, they'd know he opened it and it would put an end to what he and Willy were trying to do. After a few seconds of searching around the area for a decent hiding spot, Arthur found one of the disused mailboxes. It was for lot 14a, which had been vacant for years; even if someone wanted to live there, the park owners would have to cut through the brush and re-clear the lot, which was unlikely, since there were already other maintained lots without houses on them. He slipped the letter inside, as far into the back as he could reach, and eased the box closed.

He reached for his phone to call Willy, but realized that it was hidden in his boots back at the trailer. In the name of speed, he'd grabbed the nearest pair of shoes, which were the crusty sneakers he used to navigate Fred's house as he cleaned out his spot the prior night. A call was out of the question for the time being. No problem, he thought. The letter would wait. It would have to, for now.

"Hey." The voice came from behind Arthur, so close that he could feel the vibrations of each word ricochet off his spinal cord. He spun, startled.

"Hi," Donna replied. "You're up early."

"We're not supposed to talk," Arthur whispered. "You could jeopardize the mission!"

"The mission? Jesus, this isn't Vietnam. No one can see us over here."

"Hey!" Arthur said, his frown replaced by a smile. "Take this letter for me. Give it to Willy. I think it's important but I can't hide it because if Gemini finds it and knows that I opened it he'll probably have Fred beat the crap out of me and throw me out of the house." He reached back into the box and retrieved the open letter.
He held the letter out to Donna, who stared at the torn envelope and crumpled pages.

"Whoa," She replied. "Did you open that?"

"Yes, take it."

"That's a federal offense."

"I know, but this is serious, take it."

"I am serious. My grandma used to be a mail lady. It would break her heart if she knew that I had stolen another person's mail."

"Are you serious?" Arthur asked. She looked serious.

"No," Donna replied. She took the letter and stuffed it into the small black bag hanging from her shoulder. "I'm just messing with you. I'm not sure if my grandma ever really had a job, other than making cookies, smoking Merits, and watching game shows on television."

"You're a life saver."

"Sure," Donna replied. "I get that a lot."
Chapter Twenty-Two

The weather had warmed a bit, offering one last melt before the deep freeze set in. Not wanting to waste the occasion, Donna rode her bike through town to the Police Department to deliver the letter to Willy. She didn't often have a good excuse to go in to town, and even if she did, she didn't really like people so she wouldn't do it anyway. Nevertheless, Donna occasionally found herself on the receiving end of the odd human desires that she thought she'd left behind when she decided to become a hermit at the age of ten. Today her desire dictated that she get some fresh air. Maybe she'd even go crazy and figure out what day it was. Attending Online high school and keeping her own hours allowed her to remain oblivious to dates and times.

Everything became dark or light, hungry or full, tired or awake. Every now and then, in the depths of a television bender, she would also slip in to keeping time based on the frequency of certain sitcom episodes. Sooner or later, though, the promise of sun and air that didn't smell like her grandmother's medicine would coax her out of the house. And the ride was pleasant enough. Barlow didn't offer much in terms of sight-seeing, but the act of being outside made her feel like she'd fulfilled an unspoken quota.

At the Police Station, she ditched her bike on the sidewalk and went inside expecting some kind of bustling reception area that would direct her to Willy's desk. Instead, she found a dim hallway, at the end of which a doorway stood open, seeping sad country music.

Donna walked to the door and found a short redhead seated behind a computer, sucking away at the longest menthol cigarette she'd ever seen. The woman looked up, startled, and stubbed the butt out in a bristling ashtray on her desk as she turned the radio down.

"Sorry, honey. Slow day. Do you need someone?"

"Willy Grieves," Donna replied.
"Oh, him. See the janitor closet door behind you? That's his office."

It sounded like the type of thing you'd say to someone at the outset of a practical joke, but the woman seemed serious. Donna walked to the door and opened it, letting herself in to a dim room that smelled like a mound of severed feet. As her eyes acclimated to the darkness, she caught sight of Willy on the opposite side of the desk, his head cradled in his hands, his jaw hanging wide open.

"Jesus. Is this-"

"Yes," Willy replied, snapping awake. "It's really my office."

He blinked, rubbed at his eyes, then jiggled the mouse on his desk. The monitor blinked on and he winced at the light.

"Arthur asked me to bring you something," Donna said.

Willy jumped from his seat, surprising Donna with his speed. "Christamighty! How long have you been there?"

"A few seconds," Donna replied. "You woke up when I came in. You answered a question, literally just now. How do you not remember this?"

"What question?" Willy replied.

"I asked if this was your real office."

"It is."

"I know. So you said."

"Tell me again why you're here."

Donna rummaged through her coat until she found the letter, then dropped it on Willy's desk. "Arthur stole this from Gemini's mailbox and asked me to bring it to you."

"He's a mail thief now?"
"I guess."

Willy eased back into his seat and pointed at the seat on the opposite side of the desk.

Donna took a seat as his eyes crawled over the paperwork.

"He say what this was about at all?" Willy asked.

"No. Just that he thought it was important. Do you know what it is?"

Willy scanned the papers for another moment, then set them on his desk. "It's a retirement plan statement for Erskine weaver. Gemini's set up as the beneficiary on it. Looks like he'll be getting a pay out now that Erskine is dead."

"So, that's a motive. Right?"

"Not quite," Willy replied. "Erskine would've had to sign this over himself, and we've got a witness that says he offed himself all on his own. What we're looking at here, rather than evidence of murder, is evidence of a moron. Erskine was a moron. Case closed. We don't even need a judge to convict him. Open and shut case."

"So it's worthless?" Donna asked. She was beginning to understand why Willy constantly looked like he was coming off the bad end of a ten-day bender. Making any kind of wrongdoing stick to Gemini was like trying to get a kitten to stick to a greased window

"No, not worthless. Erskine's got a son around here somewhere. Maybe if I look him up, he'll have something to say about this. We just keep digging in all directions until we find the bodies."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Donna replied.

"Beats shoveling shit."
Chapter Twenty-Three

The road that lead to the weaver house was barely more than a path. The road was unplowed and slick, which left Willy's bald tires helpless against the sharper turns. He drove as slow as he could, and even then found himself listing to the left and right every time he turned the wheel. As far as he could tell, the road had only been used one or twice since the last big snowfall, and was left unattended other than that. To either side, he could see patches of bare ice dotted with dead swamp-grass. He hoped the water wasn't deep, and didn't care to find out whether it was or wasn't. For all his years living in Barlow, Willy had never realized that anyone lived this far out.

He rounded another bend and the area opened up. A broad hill with a house perched at its top rose from the surrounding swamp. The house, like the road, didn't look like it saw much use. Several of the windows on the front porch were busted out and the left hand side of the building sagged into a mucky patch in the ground, like half of a nerve-dead face.

A pair of rusted pickup trucks were parked off to the right side of the house with dry saplings peeking up from the wheel-wells. There was also a garage, set slightly back from the house; in contrast to everything else, it looked new, though it too had seen some wear.

Willy parked his car in an open patch of snow and got out. Everything was dead silent with the exception of the wind blowing across the swamp. He walked to the door, his feet crunching with every step.

The place had a sick feeling about it. The normal healthy feeling of nature had fled, leaving behind a sensation close to swimming through an oil slick. It reminded Willy of a movie he'd watched a few years back about a clan of desert-dwelling cannibals that terrorized a group of tourists that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Willy wondered why his
brain would do such a thing. Backwoods Cannibals were the last thing Willy needed to have on his mind right now, when he should be concentrating.

The door to the house creaked open and a short man in smudged glasses and a dirty t-shirt and jeans stepped out into the snow. His hair was a bit mussed like maybe he'd been sleeping, and it looked like he hadn't shaved in a couple of days, but will was pleased to see that he didn't look like much of a cannibal at all.

"Can I help you, mister?" The man asked.

"Looking for Daniel Weaver," Willy said. "That you?"

"You a cop?"

"Yep."

"Ah, shit. What'd I do."

"Nothing," Willy replied. "I wanted to talk to you about your old man."

"Erskine?" the man asked. "Okay. Come on inside."

#

The exterior of the house was shit, but the inside made it look like a palace of solid gold. Everything felt soft, rotten, Willy guessed because it sat in the middle of this sprawling swamp since around the time dirt was invented. Had he felt like making a show of strength, Willy was sure that he could stumble around like some kind of roid-raged hulk, smashing through walls, joists, doors, even floors in this place until nothing was left but a pile of soggy splinters. He abstained, and Daniel Weaver lead him through the soggy porch, through a soggy foyer, and into a soggy kitchen where they he offered Willy a seat at the soggy dining table.

"How long have you been living out here?" Willy asked.
"Few years," Daniel replied. "Been trying to fix the place up a little bit. I got some new doors last year with that federal fixer-upper program for energy efficiency, but a bear broke one off and the frame swelled up on the other one and locked it shut now, but she'll open next time we have a dry year. I also got a tarp for the roof a while back too, which mostly keeps the rain out of the guest bedroom."

As Daniel stopped talking he narrowed his eyes at Willy. "That why you're here? To make sure this place is up to code?"

"No," Willy replied.

"You sure? Cause I gotta tell you. You'd be doing me a favor condemning this place. I been thinking about putting an apartment out in the old garage back there. Could burn this place down in no-time, if I wanted to."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Willy replied. "But I would like to know a bit about your dad, if you wouldn't mind."

Daniel shrugged. "Shoot. Not that I know that much about him myself. We were what you'd call estranged over these last few years, what with me and my grinding poverty and him with his cult."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

Daniel ticked off numbers on his fingers. "I'd say about two, two and a half months ago."

"He mention anything suspicious?"

"He was in a cult, so yeah. He yammered on about that book of his for a while, asked me to come and join him for the umpteenth time, then grabbed some paperwork and hit the road. Said he needed to cash out his retirement fund, because the church needed the money."
Willy jotted notes in his pad. He'd heard that Erskine had given Gemini a bunch of money, but the details were hazy.

"Any idea how much that was?"

"Twenty, thirty thousand probably. I told him we could've used that money here, but he didn't give a shit. He told me the church needed it and that I should just go there and let Orran Dain save my eternal soul or whatever. I told him that it was all a bunch of bullshit and that he should give it up, because we're Christians and believe in a real God - or I do, at least. He wasn't having it. Took his paperwork and left in a huff. Next thing I know, I hear that he drank a shitload of poison cocktails and I'm on the hook for the funeral. And you can damn sure bet that Gemini Lovegood didn't pony up any money for that funeral, either."

"You talked to Gemini?" Willy asked.

"Yep. Told him I wanted some of that money back. Told him it was only fair, 'cause I needed to bury my dad and he hadn't left me shit because it'd all gone to Gemini and the church. And Gemini pretty much told me to go fuck myself, because Orran Dain doesn't give a tin shit about corpses or burying people, so I should just let the city handle it. Which I did, by the way. So I guess I should thank you for that.

Running through some calculations in his head, Willy wondered whether Gemini could spend that amount of money in two or so months’ time. It would be difficult, yes, but not impossible. But what would he be buying? He certainly wasn't paying bills; the multitude of collection and foreclosure notices at the house spoke to that. The money couldn't be entirely gone. It had to be lurking somewhere, whether in physical form or as ones and zeroes in bank code.

"Your dad say why he was in such a hurry to cash in that retirement plan he had?"
"Nope. Just that the church needed it."

"This is a hard question, I know, but did he seem like he knew what might be coming at all?"

"Like the suicide?" Daniel asked. "No. Didn't seem like it anyway."

The entire thing seemed suspicious. Two months prior to committing suicide, Erskine Weaver comes home to his son and tells him that he needs to cash in his retirement fund because the church needs it. Hadn't Arthur also mentioned something about a few of the others handing over their money as well? Where was it all going?

"Your dad have a bank account?" Willy asked.

"Sure."

"You got any of the paperwork on it?"

"Nope. That's the other reason dad and I hadn't talked for those last couple months. After he cashed out his money, he decided that it'd be a good idea to make Gemini the executor of his estate, rather than me. Dad was too worried that I wouldn't dump a wheelbarrow of cash into Gemini's collection box. Rightfully so, too, because I wouldn't have given that shyster a wooden nickel. Now he's got it all, though. Damn near had this property too. He only backed off on that once I threatened to get my lawyer involved in the whole thing. Then he acted like he'd never really intended to take it in the first place. Seemed like he damn sure wanted to me, though."

#

Willy left the house feeling frustrated with himself. He'd spent the investigation digging up dirt on Gemini and hadn't properly vetted the people that died in the suicide. When he got back to the police station he would check over a list of names for the people involved to see who
had relatives in the area. If there were more situations like this, more retirement funds, pension funds, savings accounts, emptied prior to the suicide, he might be able to make a case for the fact that Gemini was laying groundwork to get himself a whole lot of easy cash. But even if that happened, the people would have offered it up of their own will.

Such was the way with everything that Willy could find on Gemini: unethical, yes. Shitty, yes. Illegal, no. The man was a mastermind when it came to getting what he wanted while remaining squeaky clean in the process.

But, if there was one thing that Willy had learned, not only in his years as a cop, but in his years as a person, it was that no one that played in as much dirt as Lovegood did could stay clean for very long. Sooner or later, Willy would find the stains.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Arthur woke to a foot nudging his ribs. The nudge wasn't hard enough to be classified as a kick, but close; it rocked him up on to one side and forced him against the wall. He'd been in the middle of an intense dream, something dark and nonsensical, maybe a nightmare, and waking up felt like being pulled out of deep water. He sat up, rubbed his eyes and saw Fred standing over him. Harsh winter sunlight poured in through the kitchen window and the heating register by Arthur's spot on the floor buzzed. He could feel the wash of icy air coming in from under the front door, kicking the thermostat in to action.

"I was sleeping," Arthur said.

"I know. That's why I woke you up," Fred replied. "You've got work to do."

"Work?" Arthur asked.

Fred dropped a pile of photocopied sheets on the floor by Arthur's head. Fliers, for a meeting at the community center, fronted by a picture of Gemini's smiling face. In the pictures he held a copy of The 100 Precepts in his lap. It looked like a rejected jacket photo for the book.

_Join us for an evening of discussion and fellowship_, said the flier. _Q and A with Gemini Lovegood, author of The 100 Precepts and the foremost Orran Dain scholar._

"What am I doing with these now?" Arthur asked.

"You're handing them out, genius."

"To the park?"

"Sure. And the town. And wherever else you can get to."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Gemini's ready to have meetings. He's ready to start getting the world out to explain what we're doing and where we're going. This is the first step."
Arthur pulled the covers off his body, regretting it as soon they were gone. The house was colder than he'd expected. He didn't want to leave the pleasant bubble of the heating register's air. "Today?" he asked.

"Yes today," Fred replied. "Get them out there. Then get back, because we've got to go set up the community center for the meeting."

"Already?" Arthur asked.

"You're just full of questions all of a sudden, aren't you?" Fred asked. "Yes already! The meeting is tomorrow. It's going to take you the better part of a day to get those out around town. So get to it, then we'll get the community center ready."

"What are you doing," Arthur asked. "While I go out and destroy my feet handing these out."


Fred had nothing more to say, so he sauntered off to the couch and dropped in to the stained and cushion-less wreck. It crackled under his weight. As Arthur stood from the floor, the thermometer caught his eye. Twenty-three below, and the element was in the sun. What better day to walk around town spreading religion. Maybe if he got lucky, he'd lose his ears to frostbite. Then he'd never have to listen to Fred again.

Arthur slipped on a pair of long-johns from the pile of clothing he'd salvaged from the old house. He remembered buying them, going on two years back now, for the express purpose of wandering around town, knocking door to door in subzero weather to ask for donations. Back then the whole thing seemed like a good idea; now it seemed like a righteous pain in the ass.
The original architects built the Cimarron trailer park around a central oblong circle of narrow asphalt road. The front office sat on the northernmost edge where the highway touched the not-quite-closed top of the circle. Behind that, in the dead yellow-grass center of the circle, was the Cimarron community center and a small playground for the local kids. Several smaller roads, known locally as spires, branched off from the central circle, roughly one every fifty yards or so, and the trailers were arrayed at equal intervals along each spire. Each spire ended in a dead-end bank of tall grass and straggled bushes. Viewed from above, Arthur imagined it would look like an enormous spiky dewdrop.

He spent the morning and early afternoon working his way along either edge of each spire, leaving fliers on each door. Now and then someone would come out to greet him, accept the flier, and maybe say hello. Other times, they would shake their heads and point back at the road in a manner that suggested it would be unwise for Arthur to leave his paper on their door. Most often, though, people were indifferent. They watched him come, watched him leave the paper, then watched him go, staring through their windows with slack jaws, as though they weren't quite sure what to make of him. Once, at a particularly ramshackle house, a child had menaced him through the window with something that looked very much like a real scimitar. Arthur backed away from that house without turning around.

"You shouldn't have a scimitar," he said. The kid didn't move, didn't blink.

Once the trailer park was done, he walked to town to drop the remainder of the fliers off. At first glance, Arthur would have guessed that Fred hadn't made nearly enough copies. At the trailer park, the pile had grown smaller at a nice clip, duping Arthur into the misguided notion that he might not actually be wandering around town the rest of the day, sticking fliers to
peoples' doors. At one of the last houses, a two story just off Barlow's main street, Arthur happened to be drop the flier off at the very same time the homeowner was pulling in to the driveway. A middle-aged woman with a pair of kids got out of the deep blue mini-van and approached the house looking at Arthur like he might have been in the midst of picking the locks.

"Hello?" She said.

"Hi," Arthur replied. "Just leaving a flier."

"For what?" the woman asked.

"A meeting in Cimarron tomorrow night."

"Oh. With that guy?"

"Gemini Lovegood, yeah."

The kids had already bored of the conversation and wandered past Arthur to the back of the house. The woman stared at him for a moment, looking nervous.

"I didn't mean to weird you out or anything," Arthur replied. "I'm going to all the houses."

"It's not that," she replied. "Can I ask you a question?"

"That is a question," Arthur said, giggling. The woman cocked her head.

"Just a joke," Arthur continued.

"Funny," the woman replied. Rarely had Arthur seen such half-assed mercy. At the very least she could have choked up a chuckle.

"What's the question?" Arthur asked.

"This guy. Gemini. You know him pretty well?"

"Better than most people," Arthur replied.
"Did he make those people kill themselves? I have to admit, there's something about him. He's got... charisma. I'm curious about what he has to say, but if he's a nut job then I'd rather take a pass."

"Well-" Arthur began.

"But I guess you wouldn't tell me if he was anyway, would you?" she asked. "You're obviously a part of his group."

"To be perfectly honest," Arthur continued. "Yeah, he's pretty weird. No one really knows whether he made those people kill themselves. I was there and I can't even tell you that. But I can tell you that he's not the type of guy you'd want to follow anywhere."

"Is that right?" she replied.

"Yeah. I'd appreciate it if you kept it between us, but yeah." It occurred to Arthur that he had just tipped his entire hand to a curious soccer mom. He'd make a terrible spy.

"One more question?" she asked. Arthur nodded.

"If he's that bad, why are you handing out his fliers? Why wouldn't you just throw them in the trash?"

#

Arthur spent the rest of the day at Barlow's sole coffee shop, the Barlow Bean. It was the kind of place that sold paintings and had worn hardbacks on every table. In short, it was the type of place where Fred, or anyone that associated with Fred, would never in a million years see Arthur. He'd squirreled away some of the emergency cash in his shoe before he left, and he used the money to buy a pile of scones and three large coffees. His steady diet of Fred's ramen noodles and beef-jerky was beginning to wear on his guts, so any alternative seemed delicious. He read from a war-torn copy of
The best part, though, was the conveniently located storm drain just outside the shop. A small malicious regret-goblin gnawed at Arthur's conscience about the fact that he had just committed the single most heinous act of littering of his entire life, but the soccer mom had a point. If he thought Gemini was a bad person, why should he hand out fliers. He had to admit, though, watching them flutter into the sewer page by page, eco-friendly or not, had given him a great deal of satisfaction. And on some time-frame, paper was biodegradable, right?

His only true regret was that he hadn't found the storm drain earlier, but better late than never.
Willy arrived at Donna's house early. Clara Nugent, clad in her housecoat and curlers welcomed him in to the house, which had apparently been lifted through time from the 1970's. Pea-Green shag carpet covered the living room floor, accentuating the beige floral print couch and love seat combo, naturally covered in protective plastic. An enormous wood-framed floor model television filled the area across from the couches, offering enough real-estate atop its huge screen to support Clara Nugent's formidable army of tiny knick-knack gnomes, all of whom were arrayed in scenes design to mimic Clara's best impression of what gnome life might be like.

"It looks like no one has ever lived here," Willy said, surprised by the wonder in his own voice.

"That's grandma. She grew up during the depression, which taught her to never touch or use the things she owns. I'm surprised she even lets me keep food in the refrigerator some days," Donna replied, entering from. She headed straight for the food, her hair flared in every direction as though she'd just been electrocuted.

"Good morning?" Willy said. He didn't intend for the words to come out as a question, but seeing Donna like this he had to wonder if something terrible hadn't befallen her overnight. A corona of pink lip gloss flared around her lips and one eye was still partially gummed shut from sleep. The sheets had left a landscape of red and white wrinkles on the side of her face where she'd been sleeping with incredible force.

Donna grunted and bared her teeth for a moment, the grabbed a pancake from a nearby plate. Rather than putting it on her own plate, she covered the center in syrup, rolled it into a tube, and ate the whole thing in one shot.
"Jesus Christ," Willy said. "You eat like an anaconda. Have you ever considered chewing? It's what you've got all those white things in your mouth for."

Donna glared at him and inhaled a second pancake.

Clara ushered Willy to a chair at an old school kitchen table, with silver trim and pearlescent surfacing. A rainbow of breakfast foods, from fried eggs, to pancakes, to waffles, to what appeared to be a cluster of Tupperware containers that comprised an omelet bar spread before him.

"Help yourself," Clara replied, shoving Willy tight against the table.

Willy scanned the spread, making a game-plan in his head. He was about to see what kind of omelet form sorcery he could work when a knock rattled the door. Willy went to the doorway and peered through the small frosted window on the front. Through the scales of ice, he could make out Arthur's face peering back at it. He opened the door.

"God damn, I thought you were dead."

"Not yet," Arthur replied. "Day is young, though."

Arthur sat down at the table and shoved a handful of fried eggs into his mouth. He groaned as he chewed, rocking back in his chair and closing his eyes in a state of ecstasy.

"Gross," Donna said. "Throw those eggs away."

"No," Arthur replied. "Touch those eggs and I'll murder you. They're mine. I claim them."

Willy took Arthur in for a moment, as it didn't seem feasible to ask him a question in the midst of such focused egg-eating. He didn't look as though he'd been beaten or mistreated in any way. That was a good thing. Considering the fact that Willy had, on more than one occasion,
entertained the possibility that Arthur might be dead in a ditch or chained to a pile of cinder blocks in the guest room of Fred's trailer, it was a very good thing.

"They not feeding you over there, or something?" Willy asked.

Arthur shook his head. Yes.

"Yes they aren't feeding you, are yes they are feeding you."

"The first," Arthur mumbled around a mouthful of sausages.

"Why?" Willy asked.

"Gemini says it's a purification thing. I have to stay off of food for two weeks, until the poison has worked its way out of my system."

Willy's hopes rose, high and glorious. "He talked about the poison?"

"Not that poison," Arthur replied. Spiritual poison. He says I was rejected by Orran Dain, which meant that I had betrayed him in some way. So now it's two weeks of eating no food, aside from the stuff that Gemini blesses for me. Mostly Hi-Ho crackers and that kind of stuff."

Running through the legal scenarios in his head, Willy tried to pin the situation down in his head. Was it illegal to make a person survive off of blessed Hi-Ho crackers for half a month? Maybe in certain circumstances, but almost assuredly not now. Arthur had not been beaten or coerced in any way. Gemini asked him not to eat for two weeks and Arthur accepted. No laws broken.

"What else?" Willy asked. "Any shady stuff happening?"

"Well," Arthur said, as a dusting of toast crumbs fell from his mouth. "They lied about the amount of money they pulled in on that winter thinger the other night. It was more like a thousand bucks, if that. Probably a few hundred. Nowhere near five k though."

"You sure?" Willy asked.
"Oh yeah. Fred's house is falling to bits. It's like the damn place is held together by particle board and mouse pellets. I can hear them talking at night, through the ducts. The other night I fell asleep with my face on the vent and a rat almost bit my ear off."

"Why would they lie about that?" Willy asked.

Donna, who finally appeared to have woken up completely, swallowed her food and spoke up. "Taxes, maybe? They don't want to pay more taxes than they need to on the money, so they lie about the amount?"

"Nah," Willy replied. "They don't have to pay taxes. The one place where Gemini really didn't mess around was with that. He made absolutely sure that he wouldn't have to pay a lick of taxes for his church."

They finished the meal in silence, with Clara hovering around the edges, ready to step in and replenish anything that looked as though it might run out in the near future, though the spread was so plentiful her services were never needed. The amount of food left at the end of the meal looked eerily similar to the amount of food that had been there at the beginning of the meal. Everyone was stuffed to discomfort and Willy suspected that it would be hard to keep his eyes open for the next few hours, even considering his excitement at not only finding Arthur alive, but getting good information as well.

Arthur stood first. He hadn't taken off his coat and a sheen of sweat had formed on his forehead while sitting at the kitchen table. "I better get back. Fred will be up soon. We'll talk more on the next visit. I need to go for a walk and make sure I don't look as full as I feel when I get back. Fred and I are supposed to start getting ready for some more meetings, I guess. Gemini's got quite a schedule lately."
Willy nodded. "Good. Do that. I need some time to figure this shit out, but keep at it. And enjoy those Hi-Ho's."

"Of course," Arthur replied.

As Arthur disappeared into the cold, Willy slipped on his coat. He was too deep in thought to hear Donna calling his name until she finally shouted it and startled him.

"Is your hearing aid off?" She asked.

"Yes," Willy replied. "I can't hear you."

"I'm being serious. I have an idea."

"Say it."

"Okay, so, the party. Maybe the whole thing was just a big lie? I mean, not totally a lie, since a bunch of people showed up and donated, but a way for Gemini to hide money he got from somewhere else."

Willy considered the idea. All in all, a pretty solid deduction from the kid. Being a small town detective, Willy had never experienced the distinct pleasure of working with cases related to money laundering, but he suspected it was something like this. A person could channel a great deal of money through a party like this, all under the guise of anonymous donations.

"That's got some merit," Willy said. "Good thinking. I can tell you, though, as sure as frogs shit in the swamp, we won't ever pin Gemini down on that. There's no proof."

"Right. But say that's why he did it. If that's the case, he's got money to hide and there's only one reason to hide money. You got it doing some greasy shit. And if he's doing greasy shit, somehow, somewhere, there's gotta be proof of that."

Wouldn't it be nice if the world worked like that, Arthur thought. No sense in spoiling the kid's perception of things with the cold hard facts. Given his recent history, Gemini was a man
that new full well how to convince others to handle his greasy matters. And given the nature of the world and its propensity for producing suckers every minute on the minute, it seemed likely that Gemini would always have a steady, sustainable supply of dupes to do his bidding.

"Let's hope you're right," Willy replied. "If he is, and Arthur catches wind of it, we might be able to shut him down."
Chapter Twenty-Six

Arthur squatted in the dark of Fred's living room, hunched over a heating register, holding his breath. The lights were out as a precaution, but even in darkness he had to be careful. If Gemini saw him peeking through Fred's window to check out the community center, he might see it as a sign of distrust or paranoia. So Arthur did his best to not look, even when the temptation was great. Instead, he kept things very quiet and listened for the clap of car doors closing in cold air. He'd heard several over the last few minutes. He guessed the parking lot of the community center would be half full.

Finally, curiosity won and Arthur stood up. His knees popped and his back felt rigid. The parking lot was full. So much for his listening skills. But what did it matter? Gemini would be too busy tending to his full house to wonder whether Arthur was spying on him.

After the first few meetings, Gemini's pleasure in his own progress became insufferable. The initial five invitees succeeded in their unwitting purpose, each of them returning with a handful of friends, who in turn showed up the next week with a handful of their own friends. So on and so forth, growing exponentially, like bacteria.

Arthur stayed in the window, staring, until could see people milling around out front. That was a sure sign that the meeting had adjourned. He watched them spill from the building. Gemini stood at the doorway, shaking everyone's hand as they left, a dazzling smile splitting his face. Insufferable.

Arthur's exile from the meetings remained in place. Gemini offered no further explanation on the subject. Arthur guessed that he also told Fred to keep him at a distance about anything regarding the meetings, because Fred clammed up as well. That didn't stop Arthur from
getting small bits of information here and there, though it wasn't nearly enough to ferret out what went on in the Community Center.

Headlights flashed along the window. People were pulling out of the lot, heading on to the main road, which meant that Fred and Gemini would be home at any moment. Arthur did a sweep of the living room and made sure everything was in order. If he kept things running smoothly enough, made a big enough show of appearing loyal and desperate, Gemini would crumble and bring him back into his confidence about the doings of the church. Everything was in place.

Arthur took a seat on the couch and cracked his copy of The 100 Precepts. As he read, he scribbled notes on to a blank sheet of paper.

_Every person is the center of their own web. The wisdom of Orran Dain lies in seeing the web made of webs._

The opened, admitting Fred, Gemini and an aura of freezing cold air. Gemini looked extra pleased with himself this evening. His eyes were calm, almost sleepy, and his still had that smug smile plastered across his face. Arthur returned it, or the best approximation of it that he could gather, and tried to sound enthusiastic.

"How was the meeting tonight?" Arthur asked.

"Perfect," Fred replied. "There were so many-"

"Fred," Gemini interrupted. "Bedroom, please. For just a couple of minutes. I need a word with Arthur."

"Sure," Fred nodded. He disappeared down the hallway, looking satisfied with himself. Gemini watched him go, waiting for the sound of Fred's bedroom door shutting.

"Arthur. I'd like to talk about a cell phone."
The statement made Arthur's throat tighten, forcing an involuntary gulp. He felt like he'd just touched a live wire. Had Gemini found the phone?

"Which phone?" Arthur asked.

"Not any phone in particular. Just a phone. I'm wondering if you might be able to do something for me."

"What's that?"

Gemini settled in to the couch and adjusted the sleeves of his sweater. It was new, though Arthur wasn't sure where it had come from. He knew that he'd never seen Gemini wearing it, and he hadn't been wearing it when he left for the meeting earlier on in the evening.

"The meetings are getting to be really productive," Gemini replied. "From a spiritual perspective. We've got a lot of really great things happening and it seems like the community is ready to accept me, and I know I'm ready to accept them."

"Great," Arthur replied. "Always glad to hear that things are moving. I just wish I could help more."

Gemini nodded. "I know. And you've been helping a lot as it is, and I really appreciate it. That's why I'm going to give you another job."

Arthur felt a giddiness overtake his thoughts. He hated himself for it because the giddiness had nothing to do with the fact that this job could potentially lead to a greater understanding of Gemini's plans, but because Gemini was placing faith in him by asking him to do this.

"What do I need to do?" Arthur asked. He analyzed himself in the most clinical way he could manage as he asked the question, searching for whatever crept around deep in his psyche.
He needed this to be calm, detached. He needed this to be about Gemini, rather than about bringing all the old feelings back to life and submitting to another person's will.

"Nothing much. I'm going to get you a cell phone. You'll answer it, take messages for me, organize things, that sort of stuff. This is beyond Fred. He's not really a people person, but I think you'd be good at it. Does it sound like something you can manage?"

"Yeah, absolutely. So, what kind of stuff will I be organizing? The meetings?"

"No," Gemini replied. "You'll be in the background. People are going to want to get a hold of me pretty soon and I want someone to mediate that contact. It's an important job. Like a bodyguard in a lot of ways, but in more of a spiritual sense."

"Okay," Arthur replied. "So, like a secretary?"

"Yeah, something like that. I'm going to get a contact number up on our website tomorrow. People will call. It's your job to make sure that only the right people are put in contact with me. They're going to want to have meetings and interviews, so you'll also be in charge of making sure that I have the time to attend whatever it is that they have for me. If payment is involved, you'll also arrange that."

"I can do that," Arthur replied.

"Good," Gemini said. "We'll work out the rest tomorrow."

Arthur nodded. Gemini stood, stretched his back, and yawned.

"Oh, one more thing," Gemini said, turning back to Arthur. "A minute ago you asked 'which cell phone' when I mentioned the phone thing. Do you already have a phone here?"

A cold sweat seeped out from the pores on Arthur's face. Keep it together, Noll. This had to be played carefully. If he said that he didn't have a phone and Gemini already knew that he did, the slip-up would blow everything. On the other hand, if he admitted to having a cell-phone
and Gemini didn't already know that, then he'd be blowing it anyway. After a split second of applying his brand of back-of-the-envelope logic to the situation, Arthur decided that going with the lie was the only solid way forward, even if Gemini already knew about the phone. 

"Nope. No job, no money, no phone. Besides, who would I talk to? I've only got my uncle Karl and he can't stand me. You and Fred are the only two people on Earth that still talk to me."

A strange look passed over Gemini's face for a moment. "Sounds like your web snapped," he replied. "That's not a good position to be in. Out there alone, floating in such a huge, lonely cosmos."

#

The next morning Arthur found a new cell-phone on the coffee table. The batteries were charged, though no numbers other than the house phone were in the directory.

Arthur picked up the phone between two fingers, holding it like radioactive material. It was a newer model, the kind with the massive screen on the front. A smart phone. Sequestered away in the Orran Dain house for most of his early twenties, Arthur had never experienced such a thing. He used his finger to flip through the first few pages of menu as he'd seen Willy do with his own smart phone.

He wondered whether anyone would call. Despite the fact that people in Barlow seemed to be in a big rush to get to know Gemini, that didn't necessarily imply that anyone outside of the city limits would care. He'd already been interviewed by the one main news network in town. How much more did he expect from a town of fifteen thousand people?
The phone rang. The sudden tensing of Arthur's muscles sent him an inch in to the air and stopped his heart for a handful of seconds. Once he composed himself, he checked the phone's monitor and hit the answer button with his thumb.

"Hello?" Arthur asked.

"Gemini Lovegood?" the woman on the other end asked.

"No, sorry. I'm his-" Arthur paused. What was he? Secretary didn't seem right, or at least he didn't feel like a secretary. Assistant felt too much like a title for a helpful child and henchman was too on-the-nose.

"I'm his assistant," Arthur finished, hating himself as he did. "May I ask who's calling?"

"Yes," the woman replied. "I'm Kerry Kiernan from WIRD radio. I work as a WPR affiliate and we were wondering if we could schedule some time to talk with Gemini a bit about his group in Barlow."

"Okay," Arthur replied. "When and where?"

"You tell us," Kerry replied. "We can come to you. Scheduling is flexible."

One of the white icons on the front page of the phone's menu had the word Scheduler listed below it in white block letters, so Arthur pressed it. A grid opened on the screen, marked with dates and times. There were as of yet no events listed in the calendar.

"How about Friday?" Arthur asked. "The 5th of January."

"Perfect" Kerry replied. "Would around 1:00 work?"

"Sure," Arthur said.

"Great. We'll be there."

"Hey, hold on," Arthur said. "If you don't mind me asking, where'd you get this number?"

"It's on the blog," Kerry replied. "Is this not the right number?"
"Nope it's fine. Just checking."

"Okay. Thanks. Talk to you soon."

#

For the next several days, the phone became Arthur's best friend. The calls rolled in and he organized Gemini's life. Radio stations, television stations, newspapers, blogs, even a podcast, which was an entirely new medium for Arthur. He scheduled each and every appointment into the cell phone until the next month was almost completely devoid of blank space.

And, since the phone had an internet connection, Arthur was finally able to read the Orran Dain blog that most of the callers referenced when setting up their interviews. Despite the noise, it didn't have much to offer. Every day was dotted with updates from Gemini, ranging from a few words to a few thousand words. He talked about the meetings at the community center a bit, but focused mostly on the 100 Precepts of Orran Dain. There was even a link on the site where interested readers could pick up a copy from Divinity Texts Inc., the vanity press vendor that printed Gemini's magnum opus. Or, rather, Orran Dain's magnum opus. Arthur wondered how many copies were out there, floating around in the world.

Things were progressing quickly. It would be time for another meeting with Willy soon, and they'd have to get serious, double their efforts. They'd have to make sure that they were making every effort to assemble Gemini's threads and figure out what exactly he was working toward. And he was working toward something, Arthur was sure of it.

A door opened shaking Arthur out of his daydream. Gemini smiled at him from the doorway. "That was great, Arthur. Perfect."
"Good," Arthur replied, not quite understanding what he was agreeing to. He peered at the screen of the phone. Gemini had been having lunch with someone from the local library today.

"So it went well?" Arthur asked.

"Yes," Gemini replied. "Mary liked my book so much that she says she's going to do a specific review of it for the library's newsletter. Then she'll have me in for a signing, or something like that. Kind of a meet the local author type of thing. Did you know that Barlow has never had another published author before? I'm the first. Me and Orran Dain."

Arthur nodded, smiled, tried to convince his stomach to stop roiling at the image of Gemini, sitting at a table in the local library, mere feet from local children, handing out copies of his books to the naive residents of Barlow. "Awesome," he replied, swallowing the gush of crud that threatened to fill his mouth.

"You're doing a great job," Gemini replied. "You should know that. I'm really pleased with how you've come along. I think before too long here you're going to be able to start joining Fred and I at the weekly meetings."

A flush crept up Arthur's face. He felt it, advancing like an enemy battalion that outgunned his self-control. He smiled, despite himself. Muscle memory. Reflex. The activation of a distant program settled far into his brain's pleasure centers, designed to notify him of Gemini's praise through use of a massive wash of dopamine and endorphins. He felt giddy and nauseous in equal measures.

"Awesome," Arthur replied a second time. The words came out choked because he was biting the side of his mouth, but Gemini didn't appear to notice.
"Thanks again. Keep up the good work. We're getting there, man. We're really getting there this time." Gemini's footsteps faded down the hallway until Arthur heard the thunk of his door shutting.

He exhaled, tasting the blood in his mouth where he'd bitten through the skin.

This time? Arthur thought to himself.
Part III: January
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Arthur swept a mound of paper cups toward the trash can in the corner of the community center. Even with the door propped open, the intermingled smells of coffee, pastries, cigarettes and people followed Arthur as he swept, constantly tapping his shoulders and fingering his nostrils.

The first meeting of the new year had been a doozy. Or at least it looked like it had been. Arthur had no way of knowing beyond what he could gather hunched over in the dark of Fred's living room taking guarded peeks at the cars in the lot. By the time he made it over to the center to begin his long night of cup-duty, most of the people had headed for home. Only a handful remained crowded around Gemini at the far end of the building, too quiet for Arthur to make out any of the words.

There were four of them in total: Gemini on one side and two men and a woman on the opposite side. They were too well dressed to be trailer park folk. Yes, they wore jeans, but the jeans weren't the haggard, stiff-legged jeans of the Barlow Saves-a-Lot. These were designer jeans, tailored to perfection and designed to look fashionably worn. The men were spray tanned as well, or so Arthur assumed. Not many other ways to get a tan in Mid-January Wisconsin. They even wore sunglasses. Their image suggested that they'd just left a business casual meeting on a beach somewhere. He eased closer, humming to himself as he swept, hoping to pick up some snippets of conversation.

As Arthur passed by the open front door, he felt the pressure of the hot indoor air being sucked into the sub-zero air outside. Clouds of steam formed around him and rose into the sky as he took another look at the car the lingering group had arrived in. Black, polished, some kind of
SUV. Probably a rental, given how clean it was. There were no logos or stickers to speak of. He returned his attention to his sweeping and focused on listening.

He scooped handfuls of the trash in to the garbage can. They were shaking hands in there now, smiling at one another. Arthur glanced at Fred, who was leaned against a wall in the opposite corner, staring at something on the back of his hand.

"You know what this meeting is about?" Arthur asked.

"If you were supposed to know, Gemini would tell you," Fred replied.

"Just wondered," Arthur replied. "Since I do all the scheduling, seems like I should know about this stuff."

"Tell him that then," Fred replied. "I don't give a shit."

They were closer to the door now. Everyone was standing, Gemini nearly had his hand on the knob.

Arthur finished putting his trash in the garbage can. The tables still needed to be folded up and put away, as did the chairs. He wanted to wrap this up soon so he wouldn't miss any time at the house tonight in case Gemini revealed any details about how these strangers were.

The four of them drifted outside sending Arthur's ears into overdrive. He latched on to any and every noise, trying to pick out whatever words he could in the murmuring of the men from the meeting room.

One of the men, particularly deep of skin and greasy of hair, paused at the door to offer Gemini a blinding smile filled with too-symmetric horse teeth. Arthur thought of him as the leader, if only because he was the brightest peacock in the zoo. There was an uncanny valley effect about him, as though maybe you were looking at something too well put together to be a
real human, something that might melt if set too close to a light bulb. "We'll be in touch soon, Gemini. Great meeting you."

"I look forward to it," Gemini replied.

After their car had left the parking lot, Gemini grinned at Fred and Arthur. "We're getting there," he said. "We're getting close."

"Yeah?" Arthur asked. "Who were those guys?"

"Producers," Gemini replied.

"What's a producer?" Fred asked.

"They make television shows," Gemini replied. "They want to make a show with us."

Arthur's knees wobbled. When he realized that he was about to fall flat on his face, he squeezed the broom with every ounce of strength and used it to prop himself back up. The base of the broom creaked and crackled in protest, but held until his balance was sustained.

"Like a sitcom?" Arthur asked. He repeated the words to himself after the fact, realizing how naive they sounded.

"No," Gemini replied. "More like a documentary, but rather than a movie it's a television show. It'll really be about us."

"The three of us?" Fred asked.

"More," Gemini replied. "We'll need at least fifteen to start, maybe more down the road."

"Is this a sure thing?" Arthur asked.

"Not yet. We're still waiting on some contract stuff to clear, but it's looking good. They've already got a lawyer looking at the old house. They might work out a deal with the mortgage company to get the house back so we can use it for the show."

"The house where everything...happened?" Arthur asked.
"Yes!" Gemini replied. "Yes. I explained to them that what happened there isn't a morbid thing, or a grim thing. It was a beautiful thing. It wasn't an end for our brothers and sisters. It was a beginning."

"Jesus Christ," Fred said, his eyes wide with amazement.

"No," Gemini replied. "Orran Dain."

It didn't seem possible. Arthur waited to snap back to consciousness, to wake up, to come back to reality and find that this had all been some kind of perverse fantasy playing out in his head. Could history repeat itself with this kind of staggering clarity? He didn't see how. This was absolute proof that a supreme being did exist, and that it had a sick sense of humor.

If Gemini got the house back, if he re-formed his church with hundreds of thousands of people watching, he had won. He'd beaten everyone, killed more people than your average serial killer, and he was set to be rewarded for it.

"How'd it happen?" Arthur asked. "How did they hear about you?"

"Never know," Gemini replied. "A guy can scream into a ravine and start an avalanche. With Orran Dain's help, that's just what I've done."

Arthur wondered whether Gemini realized that he'd just recited the 34th precept: An avalanche can begin with the shouted word. He'd looked smug enough when he said it. The compulsion to punch another person was foreign to Arthur, but now, standing in a sticky community center with only a broom keeping him upright, he felt it with every molecule in his body. He wondered whether he could take Gemini. Arthur had never been in a single fight in his entire life.

"There is one thing, though," Gemini said, meeting Arthur's gaze. "They'd like to talk with you before we get things rolling."
"Me? About what?"

Gemini smiled. "They need to ask you some questions about the last day you spent in the house."

"Why?"

"They need assurances that I wasn't involved and I told them you could verify that. I know that Willy Grieves has been poking around about me, so it's only a matter of time before he tries to run my name through the muck with these television people. You're going to make sure that they already know everything there is to know. They'll be back tomorrow. You'll meet with them here around 3:00."

#

Once the cleaning was finished, Arthur, Fred, and Gemini left the community center. No one had much to say. Fred and Gemini were still absorbing the news that they may be the stars of their own television show in the near future. Arthur suspected the news was especially jarring to Fred who had a brain that would make a tyrannosaurus chuckle and probably didn't realize that, rather than turning his life into an orgy of wealth and decadence, exposure to a broad audience would most likely just swell the number of people that thought he was a moron. Gemini, on the other hand, had legitimate cause for celebration; a television show meant that his lifetime devotion to the craft of sculpting bullshit was finally paying dividends. The only thing on Arthur's mind was getting to a private place where he could call Willy and let him know what was going on. Maybe there was some cop-magic the old man could work to shut this shit down before it snowballed too far out of control.
"I'm going to take a walk, I think," Arthur said.

Fred narrowed his eyes. "Why? For fun?"

"Yeah. That community center was a thousand degrees," Arthur replied.

"Fine," Gemini replied. "Try not to be gone for too long. I want to make sure you're in the right head-space for your meeting tomorrow."

"I won't be long," Arthur replied.

He branched off for the others and headed in the direction of the front office. Once he was sure he was out of site, he pulled the cell-phone from his boot and dialed Willy's number.

Willy picked up on the first ring. "Arthur? What's up?"

"You're never going to believe this," Arthur replied. "Gemini met with some people today. They're talking about maybe doing a reality show about him. On him? Whatever."

He heard only silence on the other end of the line, then realized that he could still hear Willy's soft breaths puffing against the phone's speaker.

"You still there?" Arthur asked.

"Yeah," Willy replied. "I'm going to need you to say that last bit again, but slower. I think I misunderstood."

Arthur repeated himself. Willy swallowed.

"Yeah," Willy said. "I didn't misunderstand."

"What are we going to do?" Arthur asked.

Willy made a noise somewhere between the random humming of deep thought and the purposeful moaning of imminent projectile vomiting. "Jesus, I don't even know where to start. At no point did I ever try to make a plan for what I would do if someone gave Gemini a television show. That's not something that figures in to a person's plans."
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Willy rubbed his eyes. Tiny clusters of crust broke apart and trickled down his face. His head felt like it was full of bees and the monitor in front of him had stopped making sense several hours prior. According to the clock in the lower right hand corner of the screen in was 12:33AM, though Willy might have never known, given the constant state of dim in his office. The hinterlands beyond his office door had gone silent hours before. The night dispatcher would be in Rita's office, probably napping on the job. All the cops were off-duty or on patrol. Yet here sat Grieves, staring at a monitor, waiting for a bolt of mad-scientist inspiration to strike. His latest attempts at writing out some kind of coherent plan had devolved into a series of scribbles in which his cartoon doppelganger rigged an anvil to crush Gemini as he left Fred's trailer. Unfortunately, that plan would never work, primarily because Willy didn't even know where he could get an anvil these days.

For the last four hours, he'd been poring over the city's databases searching for a loose stone to throw at Gemini Lovegood. He read through obscure legal documents describing the necessary permits and permissions required to film a television show in a given location. He checked the zoning laws to see whether anything in the neighborhood of the Orran Dain house could be leveraged to shut down the impending production. He even looked at obscure fire, capacity, and electricity codes to see whether the crew, the equipment, or the amount of electricity required could be enough to persuade a judge that the filming wasn't safe and had to be shut down. None of it looked very promising.

A small, dark part of Willy's mind reminded him of a bust from the prior year in which a couple of local dipshits were pulled over for erratic driving. As fortune had it, the cop that flagged them had a dog with him and the minute they got close to the car the dog had gone, as
the cop put it, absolutely batshit. That alone would've been enough to warrant probable cause, but these guys really went the extra mile. As far as Willy could tell, the minute they realized they were about to be pulled over, they snorted every last bit of cocaine from the formidable bag on the console. Both of them were wild eyed and dusty faced like a pair of rabid mimes.

That bag of cocaine was still in the evidence room. The city had cut the evidence room manager, leaving it up to Willy to delegate. Problem was, the department was so short staffed, there was never anyone to whom Willy could delegate. So now evidence destruction only happened when Willy got around to burning it himself. The cocaine was still there. Just waiting to be dropped in the open window of a producer's car as Willy happened by. What's this? Cocaine? Bad news, friend. That's a felony. Clear out of town and I'll consider overlooking the whole thing.

Willy smiled at the thought. Being a bad cop must be the best. Not like this. Not like staring at a monitor for hours on end, feeling your arteries hardening from the combined assault of nicotine ingestion and ass-sitting. A bad cop would probably be banging a hooker right now. He'd go home, watch cable--because he could afford it with the extorted or outright stolen money--and have a great time. Not like Willy, who would go home, drink a skunky beer and have a microwave meal, thus accelerating his already precipitous downward decline toward death. Maybe the crooked ones had the right of it?

The phone in his desk-drawer chirped. Willy slid the drawer open and checked the screen. A text from the mayor flashed across the screen: Call me as soon as you get this.

#

"I had an interesting conversation tonight," the mayor said.

"Hi, it's Willy. Returning your call," Willy replied.
"You'll never guess who came to see me."

Willy chewed his bottom lip, thinking. "You're probably right. I don't think I can guess."

"Fred Mertz," the mayor said, his voice rising. "Fred. Fucking. Mertz. Do you know who was with him?"

"Gemini?" Willy asked.

"No. That would have been nice. Had it been Gemini we wouldn't be having this conversation. No. Fred had a lawyer with him, Grieves. And this lawyer had a visible erection in his thousand dollar pants, and he had your name tattooed on the side of that erection."

Willy shook his head. "Sorry I missed that."

"I'm not joking. The production company is a little skittish about you. They say you're harassing Lovegood and Mertz. Fred had pictures of you outside of his house poking around. Have you been spying on him?"

"Of course not," Willy replied. He wondered how convincing it sounded to the mayor, because it didn't sound very convincing to his own ears.

"Bullshit," the mayor replied.

That answers that, Willy thought.

"I'm going to say this once. Stay away from Fred and Gemini. Stay away from Cimarron trailer park. Just stay away. From everything. Aside from the fact that you're crossing a professional line, you're also biting a hand that's going to be feeding us very well in the future. Do you have any idea what kind of tax revenue a television show could bring to Barlow?"

"Knowing that isn't my line of work," Willy replied.

"Maybe not, but if I remember correctly, your line of work still requires you to work in a manner that the council finds worthy of your weekly paycheck, right? So if you know what's
good for your career, you'll listen to the words I'm saying, okay? Stay away from all of it. Do your work, bide your time, forget all about it, retire. As far as you're concerned, from here on out the name Gemini Lovegood doesn't even exist. And if you decide that you don't like the terms of this agreement, the council has given me the go-ahead to cut you loose."

Willy ran his palm along his forehead and was surprised to feel sweat. This was backwards.

"According to the city's attorney, we've got more than enough to let you go without pension. So listen to me. This is a good thing. Don't fuck it up for us."

To his recollection, Willy had never once been in a situation where he had nothing to say. It wasn't like him. Even in the worst circumstances he could typically fire off some kind of witty retort or at the very least a well enunciated fuck you when he landed in these situations. Apparently that ability didn't translate when the world was turned upside down.

He took in a breath to reply, but the mayor cut him off.

"Sounds like we understand each other. Do we?"

"Do I have a choice?" Willy replied.

"Not really."

"Then I guess we understand each other."

"That's good," the mayor replied. "You might make it through your last few years yet."

The line went dead, leaving Willy alone in his office once again.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

The next morning Arthur reported to the Community Center. The trio of people that had talked with Gemini on the night of the meeting were waiting for him. They brought one of the long lunch-tables out of storage and set it up in the large open space the ping-pong table normally occupied. They occupied the far side, with their backs to the wall. The char they'd left out for Arthur looked like something more apt for a police interrogation. Arthur eased into the seat and smiled. "Morning."

"Good morning, Arthur. My name is Alex Perno. I work as a producer for the production company that's going to create the show. I want to talk to you a little bit about the situation with Norm Nermin. This," he said, gesturing to the woman on his right, "is Angeline Dibiasio. And this," he said, gesturing to his left, "is Vin Goralski. They work for me."

"Hello," Arthur muttered. Angeline and Vin said nothing, though Arthur felt sure he noticed a perceptible uptick in the pressure and cadence of Angeline's gum-chewing. Her eyes were narrow and focused, honing in on Arthur as though he owed her money. Under her gaze Arthur felt like he'd done something wrong, though he couldn't say what. Vin did nothing. Just smiled, and kept smiling. Was he wearing makeup? Arthur couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like it. A bit of rouge on the cheeks, possibly some eyeliner. He looked like a smiling corpse, laid out on a bar at an Irish funeral.

Alex smiled too, though he had the courtesy to look a bit more genuine about it. Still, the uncomfortable perfection of his face remained. Even stubble on his face looked cultivated. A false five o'clock shadow, designed to give the impression of ruggedness, like Alex spent his weekends running cattle through a ravine. Not that Arthur was any better; he'd never really done a hard day's work in his life, aside from the few times Gemini had press-ganged him in to it by
making it some kind of service to the church. Arthur's hands were baby soft and clean, but compared to Alex's hands, he'd bet they looked like the hands of a mountain man slash lumberjack slash bare-knuckle boxer.

Arthur felt a sneeze welling up in his nostrils. One of the men across the table was wearing cologne that smelled like burnt earth and autumn wind and it seared Arthur's nostrils whenever he inhaled. He held up a hand, signaling to the man that he needed a minute, then waited as the sneeze passed.

"Okay," Arthur replied, once he was in the clear again. "What do you want to know?"

"I'm also a lawyer, by the way. To be perfectly clear with you, I'm a lawyer on retainer for Orran Dain Productions. You understand?"


"According to the police report, Gemini wasn't at the house when the mass suicide occurred. Is that accurate?"

"Yes," Arthur replied.

"And the person that orchestrated everything was-" Alex checked his papers, squinting over the thick black frames of his overpriced glasses, "Norm Nermin?"

"That's right," Arthur replied. "Norm had a vision. Orran Dain told him it was time for everyone to shed their mortal remains and come to him."

"And in your opinion, was that true?" Alex asked.

The question caught Arthur off guard. Of all the things he expected to be asked here, matters of faith had never figured in to his equation. And really, what was the answer, anyway?
At the time he might have answered that yes, he did believe it was true. Now he wasn't so sure. A little distance from the whole thing had given him some clarity about how Gemini operated. He felt like a man in the midst of a pleasant dream that wakes up against his will and attempts to fall back asleep and into the same dream but can't re-create it exactly. Even in the presence of those annoying mental ticks that worked against his will as he interacted with Gemini -- the small burst of pleasure at any small attention, or the driving need to please a leader -- Arthur couldn't ever imagine falling in to a deep enough sleep to bring his mind back into the same dream. The church of Orran Dain was done for him, even if his mind didn't entirely realize it yet.

"Yes," he replied. "I thought it was true. I still think it was true."

"If that's the case," Alex said, pen at the ready, "can you tell me why you didn't die?"

_The million-dollar question. Everyone wants to know. Even I want to know_, Arthur thought.

"I can't really presume to speak on Orran Dain's behalf," Arthur replied. "That's Gemini's job. But my guess is that it was because I still had work left to do here on Earth. I'm sure if I keep serving him well, he'll call me home sooner or later."

Alex nodded, smiled, jotted notes on his paper. "Good. Do you have any feelings of ill-will toward Gemini for what happened?" he asked.

"Of course not," Arthur replied. "Orran Dain wants what he wants. I'm only here to serve." A pleasant sense of disgust coursed through his guts as he said that, nearly making him smile. Had he ever really sounded like that? The thought that he had made him feel a more pleasant version of the same disgust. He was improving.

"What do you know about Willy Grieves?" Alex asked. His voice was fast and loud, as though he intended the question to smack Arthur dead in the face and knock him cold.
"Not much," Arthur replied. "My uncle knows him. I've had a run in or two and I know he's got some kind of vengeance boner for Gemini. Other than that, I don't know much."

"You're sure?" Alex asked. "Think back. You don't know anything else about him? Was the man trying to build some kind of a case against Willy? The thought crossed Arthur's mind that maybe he'd already said too much. If he said the wrong thing, gave the wrong information, could it be used to discredit whatever Willy had on his end?"


"Okay," Alex replied. "I think that's all I needed."

Arthur sat for a moment, not quite sure what was expected of him next. Alex turned his attention to a laptop on the table and began plugging away at the keyboard. It dawned on Arthur that he had been dismissed.

#

Gemini was stretched out on the couch when Arthur arrived back at the trailer. Never, at any point during his stay at Fred's house, had Arthur ever found Gemini laying on that couch. He picked at a fingernail, stared at the ceiling, crossed his legs then uncrossed them.

"Hello, Arthur," Gemini said.

"Hi," Arthur replied.

Gemini sighed and sat up. He looked fidgety. It occurred to Arthur that Gemini had been waiting for him. He wouldn't admit it and give Arthur the satisfaction of knowing that he'd been waiting, but he was, clear as day. Arthur took a seat on the opposite end of the couch, opened his copy of the 100 Precepts, and began to read.

"How did the meeting go?" Gemini asked.
"Oh," Arthur replied, feigning surprise. "Good. Boring. They asked me a bunch of questions about the last day in the house and how you figured in to things. That's about it."

"And you said...?"

"Nothing," Arthur replied. "You weren't there."

"My flesh wasn't," Arthur replied. "But my cosmic vibrations were. We're never really apart when we're a part of this church, of Orran Dain."

"I know," Arthur replied. "I just can't help but wonder one thing."

"What's that?" Gemini replied.

"Why do you think Orran Dain decided to give that vision to Norm?" He paused for a moment, looked out the opposite window at the winter beyond. "Norm was a moron. Why would Orran Dain do that?"

"I've thought about that myself," Gemini replied. "I think it's because I still need to spread the word for the time being. That's why he drew me out of the house on that vision quest."

"Interesting," Arthur replied. "But I was there and clearly he wanted me to live too."

"Maybe. Or he rejected you," Gemini replied.

It wasn't the first time Gemini had said as much, but this time the implication that he wasn't good enough prodded him in a soft spot. His jaw clenched, his teeth grinding in the process. He let the feeling soak in and wondered at it. Okay, and what do I do with this? The answer popped into his head. *You fuck with him. What could you possibly have to lose?*

"I don't think so," Arthur replied. "If he rejected me, he could have just killed me and not accepted me. He could have just let me sit in purgatory. He could have given me a vision and sent me off to the store for donuts, or a meat pie, or something. But he kept me there."
The taste of plaster flickered through Arthur's mind, and he remember waking up that morning in the house. If he had only walked out through that open door...

"Why would he do something like that?" Gemini asked, smiling down at Arthur like an adult might smile at a slow child.

"Who knows?" Arthur replied. "Maybe there's some unfinished business. Maybe at some point, I'll be walking along and something will pop in my head and I'll just get it, you know? Maybe I'll remember something, or figure something out, and I'll just know that there's something I'm supposed to do. Something decisive and powerful. Some game changing shit that really shakes things up."

Gemini nodded along, his smile never slipping. When he spoke his jaw seemed tighter. "You'll have plenty of time for that if this show pans out. We'll spread the word far and wide. I'm sure we'll all shake up our fair share."

For a handful of seconds, they stared at one another, both smiling, neither blinking. The silence felt like it might begin gathering weight and force. Then Arthur's Gemini-phone vibrated in his pocket, tearing his attention away from the situation.

The text came from an unknown number. Send Gemini to the Community center.

#

The text had been from one of them: Alex, Vin, or Angeline. When he passed the phone to Gemini, Gemini didn't register a lick of surprise. He expected the summons, knew that they'd want to speak with him after going over whatever questions they had for Arthur. This would also give Gemini a nice opportunity to corroborate what Arthur said in Fred's house, to see whether Arthur had bullshitted him about anything, which caused Arthur to run through the conversation in his head, evaluating each piece to determine whether he had in fact lied about anything.
To his knowledge, he hadn't. At least not about anything that the production people would be able to expose.

He watched Gemini wander towards the community center and slipped his boots on. He didn't have much time. Once Gemini reached the end of the short road on which Fred's trailer was situated, he would turn to the left and his vision of the trailer would be cut off. During that time, Arthur had to circle through the trailers and around to the office, where he could cut around to the back of the community center without being seen. He would also need to do this in winter boots, on a bed of snow, all without being heard or spotted by the wrong people.

By the time his second boot was on, Gemini was passing beyond the view of the trailer. Arthur knocked the door open and vaulted over the railing of the rickety front porch and into the snow. The footprints he left could be explained; if they clearly lead to the community center there would be trouble, but if he could do a sufficient amount of winding and turning, he could shed the trail and pick it up once he was farther away.

Snow filled his boots, freezing his feet and his bare ankles. He hadn't had time to slip on socks or a coat, and the wind cut through his t-shirt, making the skin on his chest and legs itch. He tromped through the first yard and hit the patch of crusty ice where the Cronin family beat their way to their rusting station wagon each and every morning. Davey Cronin, the youngest son, waved from the window, smiling at Arthur as he passed. Arthur returned the wave, nearly slipping in the process.

He kept to the plowed paths. This would hide his trail, he hoped, and the moving was faster. His boots slapped the concrete of the well-shoveled sidewalk and he kept his eyes on a cluster of kids tossing snowballs at one another in the vacant lots. Was it a weekend? He realized that he'd lost all sense of time since he'd come to stay at Fred's trailer. No employment meant no
clocks or calendars; no clocks or calendars meant no sense of time. Weeks, weekends, none of it made any sense to him anymore. He wondered how many meetings with Willy he'd missed. It wouldn't matter. If he got what he was hoping to get out of this trip, Willy would forgive him. This was his one opportunity to finally get some good, solid information, rather than just his own lame speculations about Gemini's intentions.

At the end of the strip he clung to the edge of the last trailer and peeked around the corner to see if anyone was watching. He'd made good time. Gemini was just stepping inside the community center. He'd take a moment to kick the snow off his shoes and shake hands with the people from the production company. Arthur ball-parked as he ran and guessed that he'd probably have a solid one and a half minutes to make it back out of sight before Gemini might turn to the window and spot him making a run for the office.

When the door closed, Arthur broke. He ran with desperate force, hurtling over a rogue kid on a tricycle that happened to wander in to his path. The main loop of the trailer park was less well maintained, forcing him to cut back his speed. Cars from the main roads dragged slush and ice back on to this stretch, so the going was more treacherous. He kept as much of his pace as he could while still feeling confident that he wouldn't brain himself on the ice.

After a few steps on the ice, he realized it wasn't as bad as he thought and kicked his acceleration back up. As he did so, the world tilted and Arthur felt his feet pedaling through the air, completely devoid of any resistance as though he'd begun to fly rather than to run. And in a manner of speaking, he had done just that. His center of gravity shifted as his feet flipped upwards. His arms dropped back, eager to catch hold of ground and save his body the terrible pain of crashing back on the frozen ground. After what felt like an eternity, his hands caught. But rather than stopping his fall, they slipped on the ragged ice shooting off in two directions as the
bulk of Arthur's body hit the ice with the hollow whoosh of air knocked from lungs. He sucked
in a long, wheezing breath and waited for the pain to subside. A group of kids to his left ceased
their game of catch to stare at him in concerned silence, wondering if maybe they'd just
witnessed a man die.

He moved a bit One arm first, then a leg, testing his parts to see whether anything had
shattered or popped. Nothing felt broken, though everything would be bruised. He'd feel this one
later, but now wasn't the time to worry about it. He pushed himself to his feet, kept low, and
moved in a broad circle around the lot in which the community center sat. Within a few seconds,
he'd maneuvered himself to a spot where he could get to the building without being seen.

The final approach to the community center was the hardest part. The afternoon sunshine
had melted the top of the freshly-fallen snow, creating crust of ice that made a tremendous
amount of noise when stepped on. If Arthur walked through the snow, they would hear him
coming a mile away and it could draw attention to the open window.

If the window was still open at all, he thought.

The ground along the edge of the Center's foundation had less snow, probably from the
heat leaking out of the building. The snow on the eaves had also melted a bit, leaving the ground
below a glassy strip of slick ice. Arthur didn't cherish the idea of risking another fall, but he had
no other way. He rushed through the outer snow to the edge of the building and clung to the wall
as tight as he could. From there, he inched forward, sliding his feel along the ice until he reached
the office window.

Everything was silent. He balled up a fist and whacked his own leg. He should have been
paying attention and planned this out earlier, he should have-
Voices drifted from the window. Gemini, Alex, and Angeline were exchanging small talk as they took their seats in the office.

"I hope he didn't come off as too simple," Gemini said. "He's kind of a tricky one to deal with sometimes. A lot of people have thanked me for taking him under my wing and helping him put his life back together."

Arthur wondered whether Gemini was talking about him or Fred, then he decided that he was better off not knowing.

"It was fine," Alex replied. "But we've got bigger fish to fry. There's a substantial cost to getting the house back. The mortgage company is okay with pulling it out of court, but they're going to need something up front in terms of payment. Assumedly you don't have that lying around?"

"No," Gemini replied.

"Right. And if Orran Dain Productions can't cover the entirety of the cost, because it would put is over the top on terms of risk," Alex said.

"We don't have much of a budget," Angeline added, "given the niche nature of the show."

"Niche?" Gemini replied. "Not for long. I'm telling you, this can really take off. Look around this town. Do you know how many of these people have read my book? A little extra up front will get a return."

"We're glad you feel that way," Alex replied. "We want to offer you a deal. You assume half responsibility for the house personally; we'll take care of the other half. We meet in the middle."

"No can do," Gemini replied. "Like I said, I don't have the capital for that. Material goods don't mean much to me, so I don't focus my life on the accumulation of wealth."
"We're offering you payment," Alex replied. "If you're not attached to that money, you could use a portion of it for this. But you'd have to know going in that if things go south and we cancel, you're still legally on the hook for your share of that money."

Gemini said something then, but a pickup rumbled by obscuring his words.

"Great," Alex replied. "We've got a deal then."

Arthur heard the sound of chairs on the floor. They were standing. He took a step back from the window and felt a twinge in his back. His right leg went numb in a flash, then erupted in to an incredible cramp. He shifted his weight, trying to work the knot out of his thigh muscle and his foot slipped on the strip of ice from the dripping eaves. He hit the side of the community center and slid to the damp ground.

The voices inside had gone silent.

"You hear that?" Angeline asked.

"Something outside," Alex replied. "On the wall."

Arthur pulled in his legs, curled his body into the smallest possible ball and tightened himself against the wall as best he could. The window slid further open. The screen was still in place, so whoever was looking out couldn't actually get their head through the frame to see him where he crouched.

Then Arthur saw the kid. A short kid, blond hair, wearing a blaze orange sweatshirt several sizes too large. He walked along the street, transfixed by the pavement, tapping a hockey stick to his left, then his right, then his left, and on and on. Arthur thought he recognized the kid as one of the group that had been playing in the street earlier on when he suffered his incredible fall.

*Just keep walking, kid,* Arthur thought.
The kid stopped. Looked at the sun, then the trees on the opposite side of the road.

Jesus Christ. Of course this kid would walk by at this very moment. Of all the times and places he could have been, here he was, admiring the happy little trees and the warm clouds, and the sweet golden glow of the sun.

*At least keep your eyes on the opposite side of the road, kid,* Arthur thought.

The kid turned and looked at Arthur.

*Fuck.*


"Hey mister," the kid said. "You okay?"

"What?" came Alex's reply through the screen above. "What'd you say, kid?"

"Not you, mister, the other mister," the kid replied.

"What?" Alex replied a second time.

Arthur waved the kid away, slashing his hand to the left and mouthing the word GO. GO, GO, GO!

The kid cocked his head, frowned. "You need help? My grandma had seizures sometimes. I got some of her medication back at my house."

"Do I need help?" Alex asked. "No, I don't need help."

"Not you, mister," the kid said, punctuating his sentiment by pointing an accusing finger at Rich. "Not you."
Arthur, at a loss, gave the kid the finger. Fuck you, he mouthed. Fuck you so hard kid. You just couldn't leave it alone. You had to be wandering around all precocious and observant, and you had to call me out. You just had to.

"Fuck you, mister," the kid called.

"Fuck you, kid," Alex replied.

"I'm getting real tired of your shit, Mister," the kid replied. For once, Arthur wasn't sure to whom the statement was directed.

"What's your name? Maybe your dad would like to hear about this," Alex replied.

"My dad is dead," the kid replied. He didn't sound sad. Nothing more than the recitation of facts. "He got killed by one of those concubines they use for cutting corn."

"Your mom then," Alex replied.

"If you can find her, go for it. She left when I was eight."

Arthur felt faint stirrings of guilt for giving this kid the finger. He'd had a rough go of things.

"Grandmother?" Alex asked.

"Dead," the kid replied.

"Uncles?" Alex asked.

"Prison," the kid replied. "My aunt said he diddled kids, whatever that means."

"Aunt then," Alex replied. "I'll tell your aunt."

"Hope you know sign language," the kid replied.

"Fuck you!" Alex shouted. Arthur heard the window slam shut followed by the faint sound of a shade falling.

By god, somehow the kid had actually saved him.
He turned to the kid and smiled, just in time for a rock to hit him in the face. It wasn't huge, but big enough to hurt. The fact that the kid had hit him with such accuracy at this distance almost impressed Arthur too much to be angry about it. When the flash of pain cleared from his vision, the kid had disappeared.

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He followed his own tracks back to the main road and took a back route to Fred's house. He had no idea whether Gemini would beat him back or not, so he spent the walk fabricating a lie that would explain his absence, and feeling sick with himself for doing so. The question, again: was he doing this because he wanted to maintain his facade for Gemini, or because he was afraid of losing favor with him? Did it matter? He swept those concerns away and focused on the issue at hand.

If Gemini asked him where he'd been, he'd say that he'd gone on a walk to clear his head. That was good: simple and close enough to the truth that he wouldn't trip himself up on the details. Keep it simple. He would use the remaining time to call Willy and fill him in on what he'd found.

Arthur knelt on the ground and fished in his boot for the Marlene cell phone. He'd just begun to work it loose from the pocked he'd cut in the liner when a shrill honk made him pop into the air and flinch. He spun and saw Fred's El Camino, with Fred's beaming face showing through the snow-scummed windshield. Fred opened the window.

"Scared?" he asked.

"Of what?" Arthur replied, still feeling his heart ramming the interior of his rib cage.

Fred scowled. "What are you messing with in your boot?" Fred asked.

"That right? Looked like you were inside it to me. Where you coming back from?"

"Just a walk," Arthur replied.

"Where?" Fred asked.

"Down the old railroad bed. Not very far, though."

"Oh?" Fred smiled. "You must be pretty fast. I was just there a few minutes back and I didn't see you. And didn't your meeting just end a few minutes ago?"

"Like I said," Arthur replied. "It was a short walk."

"If you say so. Hop in."

Protesting would be too suspicious, Arthur thought. He hopped in the passenger seat of Fred's car and headed for the trailer. He could feel the phone in his boot, could sense Willy's lingering presence on the opposite end, angry, worried, and hungry for information.

Arthur hoped he'd be able to provide some soon.
Chapter Thirty

Gemini was everywhere. People were talking about him at the bank, at every diner and bar in town, and now, as Willy sat alone on his couch, wearing a grubby white t-shirt and a pair of sweat-pants, desperately trying to forget all about Gemini, he was watching people on television talk about Gemini.

Things had started off innocently enough. He intended to watch the news, see what the weather would be like, see what he’d missed in the way of Barlow news over the past few days as he focused every bit of energy he had on finding some potential means for putting a stop to the festival of crazy that this reality show would be.

A couple of local interest stories kicked things off. A local chain store that was coming to Barlow had changed its mind upon seeing Barlow. Nothing new there. Then a story about the past deer season and the push to open up a wolf season in Wisconsin, which was about the god damn dumbest idea that Willy had ever heard. Some assholes would kill anything, provided they could get a license for it. He thought that might be the worst part of his night as he felt his blood pressure crawl towards the ceiling as the owner of a local hunting supply store explained to the clean cut on-scene reporter what a menace the wolves were to the local farmers. It turned out that wolves were only the opening act. The real show began with the final story of the evening.

Gemini came on screen, smiling and waving. A short, curly haired man in a suit stood next to him, looking slightly uncomfortable. The anchor introduced them as Gemini Lovegood, who he referred to as the administrator of a local commune. The other man, he said, was a director, all the way from Hollywood, here to run a reality show all about the hometown boy made good.
Willy couldn't hear any of the questions over the whistling of steam in his ears. One thing he was sure of, though, was that no mention had-or would-be made about the mass suicide that took place at the very same commune that Gemini Lovegood administrated.

Commune. The word made a little part of Willy's soul die. He associated it with hippies, and while he had never been a fan of hippies they at least had the right kind of attitude, for the most part. They wanted peace, togetherness, and at the very most a warm place to get stoned and have their weird hippie sex. Willy could get behind all of that; in a perfect world, they'd have it and he wouldn't care one way or another, though this certainly wasn't a perfect world. To refer to what Gemini Lovegood had created as a commune was to degrade the word itself.

The show would start filming in less than two weeks and it would air some time over the summer. The director, known for working with subjects that were considered somewhat "outré" (his word) hoped for the best. If he could, he said, he would do ten seasons about Gemini, because Gemini was just such an interesting subject and he was "really doing it."

He'd said that at least ten times. He's doing it. Really doing it. Other people are talking about it, but Lovegood is doing it.

He's doing it, all right, Willy thought. He's bamboozling every god damn simpleton in this town and putting me on the wrong side of a losing war.

Willy picked up the phone and dialed the mayor's office. A part of him hoped the mayor wouldn't answer, because he knew how this conversation would go. But of course the mayor's secretary did answer and she was more than happy to put Willy through to his excellency for a brief conversation. The minute the line connected, Willy could hear the news echoing on the opposite end as well.

"Seen any good news?" Willy asked.
"As it happens, yeah, I have," the Mayor replied. "You call to piss on the occasion?"

"No. I just wanted to give you one last warning. We've gotta put a stop to this. He's going
to make us look like fools. If he did it once, he'll do it again. He's a megalomaniac and I can't
believe no one sees it but me."

The mayor sighed, long and hard. Willy could practically feel his eyes rolling on the
other end of the line. "Remind me to explain the definition of pissing on the occasion to you next
time we talk, Grieves, because that was pretty much textbook pissing."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Willy replied.

that he did, other than squatting on a campsite, which, I might add, he has since offered to pay
for, with interest. At this point, you're just looking like a fool. So let me offer you a final
warning, my friend. Stop your crusade against Lovegood, or you're going to make yourself look
like a damned fool, okay?"
Chapter Thirty-One

Arthur made himself invisible. He didn't want any attention. What he wanted, and what he was gathering in dribs and drabs over the course of several eavesdropped conversations, was information about whether or not the group would be getting their house back.

Getting a read on the situation proved difficult. Gemini’s mode had darkened somewhat, though he'd never really let anyone see that. Arthur noticed, only by virtue of the fact that he'd been around Gemini for long enough to notice the subtle ticks that signaled his inward-facing anger. He wouldn't smile. His eyes narrowed, losing the trademark Lovegood twinkle that seemed to beguile anyone foolish enough to look into them. When he spoke, his words would be fast, clipped, not the standard, even-keeled Midwestern drawl that played as enlightenment in the Church of Orran Dain.

More than all of that, though, was the way he'd react to Arthur. Prior to the producers coming to town, Gemini had made a point of keeping Arthur at arm's length. This wasn't a new experience for Arthur; exclusion was one of many well-worn tools in Gemini's kit. But now, in the flurry of activity around the organization of the show, the attempts to get the bank to loosen its jaws on the foreclosed house, and Gemini's increasingly frequent one on one sessions with locals to determine who was worthy of a position in the vanguard of Orran Dain Acolytes that would live in the house when the show started filming, Gemini's attitude toward Arthur had gone from a malevolent if mild neglect to downright cruel.

It was a masked cruelty, to be sure. This too was a familiarity to Arthur. He'd seen it hundreds of times in his years in the cult, directed towards anyone that might have displeased Gemini in some marginal way. More often than not, in his prior state of mind, Arthur would have
thought the treatment was for the person's own good. He wasn't so sure anymore, given that he had no idea what he'd done other than existing in spite of Gemini.

Arthur considered the timeline and tried to identify a specific point where something might have gone haywire, but nothing came to mind. In the absence of a problem to correct, he focused on keeping himself out of everyone's line of sight, while also trying to gather as much information as he could for Willy. Unfortunately, there just wasn't that much to gather.

The bank had resisted letting the group have the house back, but with money on the table the resistance disappeared. They even agreed to allow the group back in before the paperwork was finished so the production crew could begin their massive remodeling projects. Apparently pictures of the house hadn't played culty-enough for the test audiences; from what Arthur could gather, the house would have a more formal temple in the basement now, and the members would be given more ordered quarters, suggesting past suicide cults that had successfully won media attention by offing themselves. The entire process gave Arthur a glimpse at the slimy innards of American entertainment. No matter how depraved your subject matter was, there was a team out there, lurking in the basement of an ad agency, ready to step in and tell you what worked and what didn't. Want to make a show about kooks that make musical instruments from human skeletons? There's a guy for that, and he's ready to explain to you that femur flutes are so last year, and this year it's all about the ribcage xylophones.

Given the number of people that popped in and out of the park on a given day, working out details with Gemini, or running things by him, asking his opinions about the structure of the show, Arthur's efforts to remain invisible were easy enough. They provided him able time to slip in and out of the house, and to sneak to Donna's trailer and give her messages to be passed on to Willy. New information was hard to come by, but he did what he could.
There was also the matter of Delilah Bransom. She'd been attending the meetings, though several of the attendees attempted to chase her off under the assumption that she was only there to steal wallets from coats while everyone else made a god's honest attempt to sit down and learn something from Gemini Lovegood. The details were sketchy and second-hand, filtered through Fred's crude consciousness, but from what Arthur could piece together, Gemini had lead Delilah to the front of the group, sat her down, and fed her several lines of top-grade bullshit straight from his own stock. By the end of the night she'd probably been eating out of Gemini's hand. Arthur wished he'd been there to judge for himself. He wanted to tell Willy more, but it was impossible to pick up the nuances when you were hearing everything through the perspective of a complete numb-skull. All Arthur knew for sure was that she was in the park every day now, following close by Gemini's side like a heeling pup.

The day was drawing closer and closer. There hadn't been any formal news on when the show would start, but Arthur could feel change in the air. They'd be moving soon, back to the old house. Back to Arthur's room, and back to the basement where Norm Nermin had poured poison down Arthur's throat.

Things had to come to a head soon. Arthur hoped he could keep up his invisibility until they did.
Chapter Thirty-Two

It smelled like a dead dog in the room. No, not a dead dog; it smelled like a whole family of dogs had died a grizzly death in the room, in the heat of summer, and the stench had decided to put down roots. This was disconcerting considering that there was no carpet or anything else for a smell to soak in to in this room. It was like the smell had soaked in to the very soul of the house. Willy wondered if that's why Marduk had been so eager to let him use it for a stakeout on the Orran Dain house.

Willy stood up and worked feeling back in to his knotted legs. He'd been sitting on a bucket for the last two hours, watching the Orran Dain house through a pair of cheap bird-watching binoculars he'd bought at the local Save Mart. Out in the frozen grass below, people moved back and forth like ants, carrying furniture and boxes into the Orran Dain house. A team of workers had also shown up to do some remodeling. Willy wasn't sure for what, but he assumed it had something to do with outfitting the house with an army of cameras to take in the comings and goings of the people that would be living there.

Technically speaking, Willy was on vacation. He hadn't taken a day off in seven years, even when he was sick, tired, or anything in between the two. And given that he was on vacation, he felt entitled to a bit of bird watching. Technically speaking, that's what he was doing. So what if he happened to watch birds at the same time and place as the crew from the Orran Dain house as they moved back in and got prepped for the start of filming? That was just a coincidence. At least as far as the Mayor went it was.

Willy had notified the mayor of his vacation, going only so far as to say that he intended on doing some bird-watching, something to calm his nerves after the excitement and frustration
of Orran Dain mass suicide. The mayor was entirely too happy as he accepted the news, probably eager to get Willy out of his hair for a few days.

A local realtor, John Marduk, let Willy use the vacant house as an outpost for keeping an eye Gemini. The deal was mutually beneficial; Willy got a place from which he could launch his surveillance campaign and John did his part to get Lovegood ousted from the nearby property, which he felt was dragging down the value of several houses he was trying to sell in the neighborhood. This particular house, a run down two story kitty-corner from the Orran Dain house, offered an excellent view. With his bird-watchers on Willy could get a pretty good idea of who was coming and going from the house at any given time. Whenever he spotted someone moving in, he'd write their name on a legal pad he kept on the card table he'd found in the upstairs closet of the house. Based on what Arthur had told him, he knew there would be fifteen people in the house, give or take. So far Willy had logged about nine of them, all random locals with the exception of one or two people of interest. Two in particular had him very puzzled.

Marcy Carlson was the first. A mousy librarian with brown hair and the exact spectacles you'd expect on a librarian; Marcy was the last person Willy expected to see with Gemini. He'd talked with her many times, asked her for book recommendations, even considered her an educated person. Now, seeing her stagger across a frozen lawn carrying a box of Gemini's shit, Willy found his respect ebbing. Was that right? Did she deserve that? He didn't know. It is what it is, he thought to himself.

The next shocker was Delilah Bransom. Now that she was on the cusp of turning eighteen, Willy wondered whether there was any hope for her to be scared into anything resembling straight. One permanent crime on an adult record often had the catalyzing effect of making further crime seem like not such a big deal. The realization dawned on Willy that he
hadn't had to confront Delilah for stealing, fighting, or drinking in several weeks. He'd wondered
where she was, and now he had his answer.

Delilah stood at the side of the yard by Gemini, always with Gemini, watching the others
carry stuff in. She was in a parka and a pair of shorts, which Willy found unbelievable given the
temperature, and her slender legs were pale from the cold air. Other than that, she didn't look a
bit cold. Her face was one bright, bracey smile, shining out from a mop of yellow ringlets. When
she wasn't watching the other people carry stuff, she stared up at Gemini with adoration
oozing from her deep brown eyes. Gemini, for the most part, didn't appear to notice her.

As for Gemini's part, he did what he always did: stood there, smiling, doing absolutely
nothing else, with that irritatingly serene look on his face. It was a look that made Willy
desperate for a high-powered BB gun to shoot those pearly white teeth out of his head one by
one.

"Let him preach through dentures," Willy whispered to himself. "Then maybe he won't
smile so damn much."

The trucks had been slowing over the course of the afternoon. The big stuff had been
moved in and it was mostly smaller stuff now. That meant that the end was probably in sight, at
least for this part. Next the crew would wrap up their improvements on the house, and after that
it would be time to start shooting. Once shooting finished, no telling how long until the material
would be broadcast. Willy's time was running out.

He looked down at Delilah again, feeling slightly nauseous at the look of dreamy teenage
love on her face. Was there something there, between them? If there was, Willy would be the
least of Gemini's worries. Jay Bransom was known around Barlow as a drunk and a scrapper,
and even though Willy liked him well enough, they'd had their share of run-ins. And there was a
sort of iceberg effect happening as well; Willy only heard about the fights that were reported. God knew how many beatings Jay and his boys had doled out that had gone completely unreported for fear of a repeat performance. Willy could arrest Gemini, sure, but he was bound by a book of rules and conduct; Jay Bransom was bound by jack shit and he didn't take to people misbehaving around his only child.

Willy made a note to talk to Jay Bransom about Delilah when he had some time. Better head that one off at the pass, before Gemini ruined another life.
Chapter Thirty-Three

The smell inside the Grand Palace Bar clung to the roof of Willy’s mouth. Something between a cigarette and the stink of unwashed men crammed into flannel hunting gear hung in the air like an angry ghost. Everything was agreeably dim since dim was cheaper than remodeling your bar to look like a place that wouldn't fall down around your ears within the next hour or so. Plus, given that every bar Willy had ever seen was in a constant state of near darkness, he’d begun to develop the theory that people weren't too keen on the idea of seeing one another all that well or being seen that well when they were drinking.

Willy, Jay Bransom, and the Palmer brothers were the only people in the building aside from the ancient bartender and a lanky mop-haired drunk hammering away at a Space Invaders game in the corner. It was accepted by the populace of Barlow that the Grand Palace was Jay's territory, which was okay since no one else wanted to drink there anyway. No big surprise there, Willy thought to himself. For the first few steps he took in the building, he was sure that he'd lose his shoes to whatever tacky mess covered the floor. He'd watched the bartender walk across the floor like a stiff-legged robot a handful of times before he realized that it had nothing to do with the man's staggering age; he was walking that way because it was the only way to make sure your shoes stayed on your feet.

The bartender walked to the table, holding a pitcher of beer like the arc of the covenant, his shoes making a crisp skrit-splat noise as they he unpeeled and reapplied them in his plodding course across the floor. He set the pitcher on the table between Willy and Jay, taking care to make sure that the weight didn't shift the crooked base of the table and spill everything. He looked for a moment at Willy, peering through a set of thick and grimy glasses, his eyes enormous and yellow, then turned his attention to Jay and shook his head. Jay was too occupied
filling his glass with the beer to notice, so the bartender shrugged and tottered off to the back of the bar where Jay's drinking coterie were waiting for a fresh round.

"So what's up?" Jay asked. "Delilah get popped for grass again?"

"No," Willy replied. "I'm glad to say she didn't."

"Good. So what is it then, because you're starting to scare me a little. When a cop buys me beer, I expect to hear that someone died."

"Everyone's good," Willy replied. "This is more of a courtesy call."

Jay's eyebrows raised over the lip of his glass. Willy continued.

"I guess you know that Dee has been hanging around with Gemini Lovegood, right?"

"Yeah," Jay replied. His reaction didn't offer a hint to how he felt about that. "She's told me about him."

"Are you okay with that?" Willy asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

"Well, the suicide for starters."

Jay shrugged, finished his beer, and filled another. The dark mustache above his upper lip was frosted with a fine layer of foam. "From what I've been told, that was mostly Norm. Lovegood wasn't even there."

"Doesn't mean he wasn't involved," Willy replied.

"Sure doesn't," Jay replied. "But doesn't mean he was either."

Willy sipped his beer, hoping a solid reply for that assertion would arrive as he did so. When that didn't happen, he decided to try a different approach.
"Listen. I know she's a good kid, Jay, but the guy is fucked up. He thinks he's some kind of space ghost, passed forward through time. Even if he's not overtly dangerous--and the jury's still out on that, believe me--he's at least got a few screws loose."

" Doesn't everybody around here? Christ. Look around. It's winter here for six months out of the year. You can't walk outside without your face hurting and it's dark before everyone gets off work. There's nothing to do but drink beer and fight over football. Can't really blame people for losing their minds, can you? At least he's not hurting anyone."

That made a strange sort of sense. Willy wondered whether Gemini could pull off the same tricks in a place that had a more moderate climate. Were people in warmer places more well-adjusted? Science said that people in Northern Wisconsin were, by nature, deficient in Vitamin D from the lack of sun. This might explain why the Vikings always looked so upset in paintings. But then, why did Sweden and Norway look like such pleasant places?

"You make a good point. But there's still a chance that he's dangerous. I'm not trying to get in your business about this, because you damn sure don't need me telling you how to parent. I'm just saying that if I had a daughter, I'd want her far away from that guy."

"I get it," Jay replied. "Really. But Dee's been getting better grades, she's been going to school, she even broke it off with that shit bag kid she was dating. And she says that Gemini helped her figure out that she needed to do all of this stuff. He's been nothing but positive with her so far, so I can't really tell her to stop hanging out with him when she's finally getting her shit together because of him. Hell, she even mentioned applying for college when she graduates. She's never talked about that before. One time she talked about going to beauty college, but this is a whole different ballgame. Book school! No one in our family has ever gone to book school!"

"Okay," Willy replied. "Okay. I just wanted to put it out there."
"I appreciate it," Jay replied. "But I'm good."

"If anything changes, don't be afraid to call me."

"Boy wouldn't that be a change of pace, huh? Me calling you, instead of someone calling you about me."

Willy nodded. "Sure would. Keep an eye on that daughter."

#

Back at home, Willy sat on the couch and watched his phone. It sat on the coffee table in the living room and it hadn't done anything in an hour. It was supposed to have rang by this point, or at the very least flickered to life with a text message. This lack of action disturbed Willy because it meant that for some reason, Arthur wasn't able to contact him.

He lifted the phone and pressed the power button. The screen lit up showing the full battery and the lack of messages. Still nothing. Willy tapped his foot and stared at the defunct television parked across the living room. All of his appliances were just sitting, doing nothing. So was he for that matter. It was maddening.

Throwing something might help. Willy wasn't the type to physically express his irritation, but the escalating situation with Gemini was creating something like a rash on his psyche. There was a constant, omnipresent itch on his being, and every second of inactivity made it spread and fester.

Why wasn't Arthur calling? The agreed upon time was nine o'clock. Willy had made sure to leave the Grand Palace with plenty of time to walk home and wait for the call, but it never came. To compound things, Willy was desperate to tell Arthur about Delilah Bransom. He
needed eyes on the girl. If her father wouldn't take measures to make sure she was safe, Willy would do it for him. He wanted Arthur to make sure that no foul play was happening between her and Gemini, and if it was, Willy wanted proof. It would be a strong branch from which he could hang Gemini. But more than that, he didn't want anything to happen to the girl. Right? Where had his priorities gone?

He checked the phone again. Still nothing. He wondered whether he ought to take emergency action. He could go to Cimarron, knock on the door, and ask them to send Arthur out. He could do it on some pretext, an unpaid ticket, or some bench warrant issued for Arthur years and years prior. Somehow he doubted that Gemini would fall for that.

Deep breaths. He tried to calm himself down. Arthur was an adult. He knew that at the first sign of trouble, he was to make a break for it. Blow Fred's premises, even if it risked the mission. He was to keep himself safe, above all else. He could handle this. Even Karl believed that, and Karl didn't appear to have a lot of faith in the kid when it came to most other things.

Fact was, Willy was getting scared. Deep down, even though he played it cool, a part of him was chewing his nails and shivering, and not just because Gemini was still out on the streets up to his old tricks. The deeper reason, the real reason at the core of everything, was that Willy was alone.

Granted, he knew other people shared his feelings on Lovegood. Arthur for one. Karl. Donna. Even Dave Marduk the realtor, though his feelings seemed based more around property values than any sense of morality. But Willy was in the lonely position of being the guy that lead the charge and in doing so he had put himself far out on a limb. The mayor's warning had hammered that home. If he kept pushing, sooner or later someone would push back, and that had
already started. Soon it would escalate and eventually, unless he could get his hands on something firm, the opposition would have him on the ropes.

It was time to ask himself a very hard question, one that his father had often asked when Willy would argue about some trivial thing.

Son, is this the hill you want to die on?

Was it? If he kept up the push, kept defending his lonely hill, it was becoming more and more clear that he might just die on it. Was he ready to accept that if it happened? The answer wasn't easy to come by. There was a lifetime of Willy Grieves before this point, so why was he so wrapped up in this particular thing?

Because this was his city to protect. Pure and simple. Other answers might be difficult, but that one came easy. Something about Lovegood put the hackles on Willy's back up. He was a threat to Willy's city, and Willy couldn't abide that.

But was he ready to die on this hill?

He leaned back and closed his eyes, the answer ricocheting off the walls of his head.

The realization was somewhat comforting. He imagined that it might be similar to what a person felt when a doctor handed them a terminal diagnosis. Once things were out of your control, you could struggle or you could kick back and let the glass shatter in whatever way it pleased.
Chapter Thirty-Four

The morning was still jet black with a hint of purple showing on the eastern horizon when Arthur called Willy. When the old detective picked up the phone, his voice still sluggish and slurred from sleep. Still in a warm bed without a care in the world. For a split second, Arthur hated him for it. He had crept out of Fred's trailer while Fred and Gemini were still asleep. They'd be moving the last of the things to the new house today and Gemini expected an early start. Arthur could see the dim windows of Fred's trailer from the railroad grade. No one was awake yet. No one should be awake yet. Not this early in the day.

"Hello?" Willy asked.

"Hey, it's me," Arthur replied. "Get to the railroad grade outside of Cimarron, quick as you can. I managed to sneak out for a bit while Gemini and Fred were sleeping."

"Okay," Willy replied. "Okay. Give me ten minutes. I'll be there."

The line went dead and Arthur shivered, alone in the dark with the January wind cutting straight through his pajamas. Why was everything colder in the morning? The black Wisconsin mornings were always freezing, no matter the temperature. Noon on a Thursday, five below zero: cold but tolerable. Same Thursday, same five below, but in the AM everything became an icy hellscape. He thought of his spot in the kitchen, his blankets, even the comfort offered by Fred's miserable, stuttering, slightly weird-smelling furnace didn't seem so bad at the moment.

Another gust of wind cut through his sweatshirt and made him wish for his jacket for the hundredth time since slipping out through Fred's front door.

*God damn, Willy, hurry it up.*

#
Willy's car protested, then groaned, then started. The vents blew a searing wind into his face. He remembered turning the heat up to max the prior night when he drove home, hoping to unthaw the chunks of ice his hands felt like. Now the vents achieved the opposite effect; the cold air ruffled his hair and irritated him, burning against his still-warm face.

Jesus, why'd it always have to be morning? Willy wasn't a morning person. Mornings in Wisconsin were colder than a one-eyed hooker.

He cruised the empty streets, waiting for the engine to finally warm enough to heat the cab. Frost lined the windshield. Nervous butterflies churning his stomach and made him feel like he might puke if he thought too much about it.

He was excited to hear from Arthur. It had been a long, excruciating wait since their last meeting. A wait fraught with questions and anxiety for Willy, since he was in the dark about everything. He didn't think Fred or Gemini were stupid enough to actually try to kill a person with their bare hands, but they might be stupid enough to convince another person to do it. This was good. At least he knew Arthur was safe now, for the time being.

He eased off the road and on to the packed snow of the railroad grade. His headlights caught Arthur, squatting on his haunches near the deeper snow on the left hand side of the grade. The poor bastard was blowing breaths into his hands and he looked like he was dressed in, yep, pajamas. Crazy shit kids.

"Get in," Willy said. Arthur did as he was asked, groaning with pleasure as he settled in to the seat. "Heat. Oh my god, heat."

Had the heat kicked on? Willy hadn't even noticed. He still felt the acute chill through his clothes.

"Good to see you kid," Willy said. "What's the word?"
Arthur spilled his guts about everything. Even the things he suspected that Willy would already know right now. He talked about the meeting with the production people (both his and Gemini's), he talked about the kid with the rock, he talked about the plans to move in to the house, and about Gemini assuming partial financial responsibility for paying everything off, and about the people he'd met that planned on being a part of things. By the time he was done, he felt like he'd deflated something in his body. He had passed over every piece of information that he'd been absorbing over the last several weeks and disgorged them in one massive slick in Willy's car.

"Wow," Willy replied. "You've really been paying attention."

"Yeah," Arthur replied.

"What about Delilah Bransom?" Willy asked. "Any thoughts on her?"

"Who?"

"Delilah Bransom. Skinny. Blonde. Teenager. Hangs out with Gemini quite a bit by the look of things. Every time I see him out and about she's there."

"Never met her," Arthur replied. "Gemini does keep me at a distance on some thing, though."

"Keep an eye out," Willy said. "I think Gemini had a long history of porking the women in the old Orran Dain house, and if he's got ideas like that about Delilah, I intend to disabuse him of them."

"Okay," Arthur replied. "I'll try."
Chapter Thirty-Five

Arthur wondered, for a moment, whether the FBI were raiding the house. He thought Willy would let him know, but the education he received while watching cop films as a teenager dictated that the feds and the locals rarely got along. Nevertheless, someone was pounding down the door, and they were determined enough to wake him from an intense afternoon nap.

He rose from the kitchen floor and walked to the door, jumping with each cop-knock. How could he explain to whoever was on the other side that he was one of the good guys, he was helping. He was a man on the inside.

He slipped the yellowed plastic shades aside to see the source of the knocking. Rather than a federal agent or a swat team, he found himself squinting through a pane of dirty glass at a young blond girl with red splotches on her cheeks and tears in her eyes. When she saw Arthur peering at her through the window, she sobbed once and wrapped her arms around herself.

Arthur opened the door. "Yes?"

"Is he here?" the girl asked.

"He who?"

"Gemini," she said, her words drawing each syllable out to a long, teary affair.

"Sure. Come on in."

Delilah Bransom. Arthur's boots were by the front door, the phone still tucked away in the lining. Judging by Delilah's face, something big was happening.

"Is everything okay?" Arthur asked. The girl looked at him, shivering, with damp streaks down either side of her face.

Gemini's door opened and he peeked out down the hall at Arthur. "Who was at the door?"
For a split second, Arthur almost said her name. Almost. Some deep part of his brain sounded an alarm, stopping him in his tracks. To know her name would mean that he'd been paying attention. Paying attention, to Gemini, would mean that Arthur might know things that he shouldn't know, or it may even raise questions as to why Arthur was suddenly so interested in the names of people that Gemini had done such a fine job of isolating him from. "Some girl. Skinny. Blond hair," Arthur replied. "She wants to talk to you."

Gemini blinked for a moment and his eyes lost their focus. When he snapped back to life, he brushed past Arthur and headed for the living room.

"Get out," Gemini said, as he passed.

"What?" Arthur asked.

Gemini stopped at the end of the hallway and turned back to Arthur "Get. Out." He repeated. "Now. Come back in two hours. Have fun. Just let me have some undisturbed time here."

"Sure," Arthur replied. He slipped on his boots and a sweater as Gemini took Delilah by the hand and lead her into the back of the trailer.

#

Arthur saw no car in the driveway. She must've walked over. That made sense, since she didn't look old enough to drive yet. What could force a balling teenage girl to walk out here from town?

He needed a good place. Somewhere to sit and watch the house, see when exactly Delilah left. He walked toward the playground. The temperature had dropped steadily over the course of the afternoon, forcing all of the kids back into their homes. Arthur wouldn't be disturbed.
He climbed to the top of the stairs on a long, silver slide and let his legs dangle over the edge. He wondered whether he should call Willy now. No, he thought. Not yet. Not until I have something concrete. Still, to be safe, he pulled the phone from his boot to make sure he had it at the ready.

Headlights flashed at the park’s driveway. Something old and rattlesome pulled in, moving at high speed. The park's speedbumps registered with a tinny crash and a shower of sparks.

Asshole, Arthur thought. Those speedbumps exist for a reason. Then he recognized the car: Fred's El Camino. It skidded to a stop in front of his trailer. Fred left the car running and ran in to the house at top speed, nearly braining himself on the un-shoveled walkway.

Arthur pulled his legs back out of the slide and dropped to the ground. Fred and Gemini were making some kind of move, and it involved a minor. This was it. It was time.

He pushed the power button on the phone, then pushed it a second time. By the time he pushed it the third time, he realized that it wasn't going to turn on. Tucked away in the liner of his boots, it hadn't been charged in weeks. Dead as disco.

Movement caught his eye. Gemini, on the walkway, leading Delilah to the car with Fred following close behind.

Arthur headed for the house, doing his best to look nonchalant. Fred spotted him and nudged Gemini with an elbow.

"What's up, guys?" Arthur asked. "Anything I can help with?"

"No," Fred and Gemini said in tandem.

"Nothing for you to worry about," Gemini replied.
Arthur directed his attention to Delilah, who stood shivering outside the El Camino, waiting. "Do you need help?" He asked.

"What the fuck did you just say?" Fred asked.

"Arthur," Gemini said. His voice was that of a parent at the end of their rope.

"I asked her if she needs help," Arthur replied. "Simple question."

Fred came around the car, his right hand clumping into a fist with each step. Here we go. Arthur braced himself. He wasn't afraid of Gemini anymore. There wasn't anything mystical or divine about him, that much had become crystal clear over the course of the last few weeks. If Gemini decided he wanted a piece of Arthur, Arthur would give him all he wanted and more. But Fred was a different ballgame. Fred had hurt people. Fred kind of enjoyed hurting people, and even when he didn't enjoy it, he'd still do it.

Fred swung his arm in a long, ponderous arc. What Arthur's uncle Karl might have called a haymaker. When Arthur was a kid, Karl had given him a long talk about haymakers.

A haymaker, he said, is something that a person does when they don't think you can defend yourself. It's an all-out attack, and in an all-out attack, a person is making themselves vulnerable. They just don't give a shit because they think that you can't do anything about it. It's about one of the best things when someone throws a haymaker at you, because it means they underestimate you. All you've gotta do is duck and they'll take care of the rest. And you could maybe toss in some frosting after the fact, just to make sure the lesson sinks in.

On came the punch, like a slow-moving freight train. Fred smiled, envisioning the sweet sensation of Arthur's skull pulping under his knuckles.

Arthur ducked.
He didn't expect it to work. Every adult male in the Midwest had some half-assed advice for a fight. Give them four or five beers and they'd share it with you again and again. But it actually worked.

Fred's fist passed over his head, a stray bullet. The momentum pulled Fred off balance which, combined with the ice, was very unfortunate for him. He slipped, twisted, and smashed his fist into the side of the El Camino.

Fred fell to his knees and Arthur, feeling what he would later think of as the closest he'd ever come to legitimate blood-lust, kicked the side of Fred's head. He pulled the kick, not really wanting to hurt the man, but still succeeded in knocking Fred's head into the door of his rattling shitbox.

Fred slumped, his eyes rolling.

"Do you need help?" Arthur asked again.

"No," Delilah replied. "Just go, please."

A few seconds on the cold ground had done wonders to rouse Fred. He pushed himself back on to his feet, shaking his head like a stunned dog. His eyes narrowed as they zeroed in on Arthur, and Arthur wondered whether uncle Karl had ever taught him any other clever tricks he could use to keep his skull intact now, when Fred wouldn't likely be as reckless as he had moments ago.

Fred took a step forward and froze. He squinted at Arthur. "What the hell do you want?" he asked.

Had Arthur given him a concussion? Had he scrambled Fred's brain with his fighting prowess.
"I want to mace you," someone said. Arthur recognized the voice, but before he could place it a jet of fluid hit Fred's face, dropping him to his knees once again. Donna came forward, edging past Arthur. She held the biggest can of mace Arthur had ever seen and judging by the vigor with which she sprayed it in Fred's face, she intended on spending the whole thing. Her face took on a maniacal cast as she loomed over Fred, drenching him with noxious fluid.

"I think he's good," Arthur replied. "You got him." He never imagined he'd be the one to call off an attack on Fred.

"He's not good 'til I say he's good," Donna replied. The stream carried on for a few more seconds before sputtering to a stop, at which point she threw the can. It made a satisfying ping as it ricocheted off Fred's forehead.

"I guess he's good now," Donna said.

"I'm going to have to call the cops," Gemini said. "I can't stand here and watch you attack Fred like this."

"Good idea," Arthur replied. "Call them."

"Fred, get in the car. Delilah, can you drive?" Gemini asked.

Delilah nodded and slipped into the driver's seat.

Arthur could hear the gritting of Fred's teeth and see the knots along his jawline as he worked both hands over his eyes. "We're not done," Fred said. "That means you too, red."

"Bring it on, cupcake. I buy those cans in bulk," Donna replied.

When Delilah put the car in reverse and gunned it out of the parking spot, she nearly ran over Arthur's feet.

"Where's are they going?" Arthur asked.

"None of your business," Gemini replied. "Consider yourself excommunicated."
Willy met Donna and Arthur at Donna's house. Donna greeted him at the door with a finger to her lips. "Shut up," she said. "Grandma's asleep. We probably couldn't wake her if we tried, but if we did, she'd be up for the day and it's not even 9:00PM yet."

Arthur edged in and began speaking in a frantic whisper. "Delilah was at the house today. Something is going on. She and Fred went somewhere."

"Kinda vague, isn't it?" Willy replied.

"Yes. Sorry. It's the best I could do. I tried to ask if she needed help, but she ignored me. Something is up, though. I know it."

"No idea where they were heading?" Willy asked.

"No."

"Well, nothing illegal about this so far."

"I also kicked Fred in the head. And I think Donna sprayed him down with Bear mace."

Willy smiled. "Really? Tell me about that."

Arthur did. Willy savored the details, living, for a few seconds at least, through Arthur and Donna. He had wanted many, many times to kick or mace Fred for one reason or another. When Arthur finished the story, Willy clapped his hands together, satisfied.

"That's good news," Willy said.

"Needless to say, I'm out of Orran Dain's church now. Excommunicated."

"That's a relief," Willy said. "I'm tired of sneaking around this asshole anyway."

"So what's next," Arthur asked.

"Now we found out where they went," Willy said. "If something is up, I want to know what it is. Once we know that, we'll go from there."
Chapter Thirty-Six

Willy asked Rita to keep an eye on the scanner for anything that might come over relating to Fred or Delilah. They also put word out with the patrol officers in Barlow and in the neighboring town, and asked them to keep it quiet. Willy was to be contacted directly if any sightings occurred. Nothing illegal had happened yet, as far as anyone knew, so everything had to be above board. Donna was keeping an eye on things at the trailer park in case Gemini made a move.

Willy considered calling Jay Bransom about the situation, but decided against it. There were too many worst case scenarios involved in that idea. Jay could fly off the handle about Willy taking an interest in his daughter, or he could fly off the handle about Fred being with his daughter, or he could fly off the handle for any number of other things. Most of the scenarios Willy considered ended with Jay flying off the handle. So everything would be kept quiet for the moment.

To remain safely in contact with everyone, Willy and Arthur set up shop in Willy's office. Which is to say, they sat on opposite sides of his desk staring at the walls, basking in the thick odor of mildew in the air. Somewhere nearby, probably in one of the walls, water trickled from a broken pipe.

"This is really your office?" Arthur asked.

"Yep," Willy replied.

"Jesus. It's like a closet."

"I know."

Willy's desk phone screamed, startling him. No one used desk phones any more. Front Desk scrolled across the display.
"Hello?" Willy said.

"Got a call. You're never going to believe who it was," Rita said.

"I'm not good at guessing games," Willy replied.

"Fred Mertz. He called in to Black Lake PD saying he's been assaulted."

"Get your shit," Willy said to Arthur. "Sounds like we're going for a drive."

#

A pair of squad cars blocked off the icy road in front of the Planned Parenthood clinic. Willy parked in front of them, got out, and showed the advancing patrol officers his badge.

"Hey, Guys. You got this under control?"

"Not much to control," the officer on the left replied. "Fight was over before we got here."

"Any idea who was involved?" Willy asked. Arthur walked to the edge of the nearest car and peered around to the front of the office where paramedics were tending to someone in the back of an ambulance.

"That guy," one of the cops said, jerking his head at the rusty El Camino parked half on the curb. Fred sat on the sidewalk looking sullen with his back to the car.

"May I?" Willy asked.

The cops shrugged, stepping aside to allow Willy and Arthur inside.

Willy got a good look at Fred. He had a nasty cut on the side of his head, but otherwise he looked okay. What a relief. The last thing Willy wanted was to arrest Jay Bransom for murder. Fred wasn't worth time in jail.

"How you doing, Fred?" Willy asked. Arthur chuckled behind him.
"Fuck off, Grieves. And you should arrest that asshole behind you for Sunday kicking me in the head earlier today."

"You want to press charges?" Willy asked. "I'll take down a report. Just come and see me in Barlow. Until then, why don't you let me know what happened?"

"Jay Bransom tried to kill me. Nailed the Camino with his truck and then hit me with a board when I tried to get out. I didn't go down right away, but he managed to put me out after a few minutes. When I woke up, he was gone."

"Why would Jay do a thing like that?" Willy asked.

"How should I know?" Fred replied. "Because he's crazy. Maybe he's on drugs."

Willy smiled his warmest old man smile at Fred. "Or maybe it's because you were bringing his daughter to an abortion clinic?"

Fred looked at the building. "Is that what this is? Alls I knew was that I was taking her to an appointment."

"Right. Sure. So where's Gemini in all of this? He knocks her up and sends you here to clean things up?"

Now Fred smiled. One of his teeth had been knocked clean out in the front, leaving a square black gap where it once stood.

"Gemini's done nothing but help people," Fred replied. "You'd know that if you weren't so horny to throw him in prison on some trumped up bullshit. He helped me, he's helped Delilah, he's helped all of us. He even helped the mayor. And don't think the Mayor doesn't know that. He knows what's at stake with this show, Grieves. And he's not going to like hearing about you getting involved in this again, is he?"
Willy leaned in, until Fred's face was an inch from his own. "I'll tell you a secret," he said. "I don't give a shit what the mayor thinks."

"That's good, 'cause he's going to-"

"Fact is," Will continued, interrupting Fred. "All I care about now is shutting this shit down. I'm going to indulge in a metaphor, Fred. Do you know what that is?"

Fred nodded. "Yeah, I know what a metaphor is."

Willy doubted that was true, but continued. "Barlow is like one of those tandem bikes. Tandem means two. Like a bike for two people, but this is even more. It's a bike for thousands of people. The whole town. And every now and again there's a struggle for who gets to steer. The mayor steers now, but Gemini's in his ear telling him which direction he should go. Me, I'm just at the back of the bike, riding along watching the scenery. I've been on the bike for a long time and I like the bike. I like making sure that everyone has a good ride on the bike. And I won't let anyone fuck that up. Now as crazy as it sounds, that might mean that I've gotta put a stick in the spokes sometimes. Because Gemini would have us ride right over the edge of a cliff if we let him. Whereas putting the stick in the spokes, it may result in some skinned knees and irritated people, but we'll still be here, rather than tangled up, dead on the ground. You follow?"

"No," Fred replied.

"I figured. That's a shame. To put it in language that even a simpleton like you can understand, I'm willing to shitter this whole television thing, even if it means my job, even if it means people don't like it, because I believe that Gemini would bring us to an even worse place if I didn't. I'm ready to burn bridges, if it keeps Barlow safe."

"And what if you stop Barlow from going to an even better place?" Fred asked.

"That's part of it too. That's on me."
"Yep. It will be," Fred replied.

Willy's phone rang, showing Donna's number. He took a few steps away from Fred, who was far too busy murdering Arthur with his puffy red eyes to pay attention anyway.

"What's up?" Willy asked.

"Well, there's a guy here. He looks angry. He's kind of prodding Gemini along with something, forcing him into a truck, and Gemini looks a little roughed up. Seems like maybe something you'd like to know."

"Okay," Willy replied. "Stay put. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"They're already moving," Donna replied. "Towards town. On their way to that new Orran Dain house, I think."

"How do you know?" Willy asked.

"I kinda took my Grandma's car and I'm kind of following them."

An unlicensed minor driving a car, assisting with a police investigation. Willy truly felt like the pinnacle of law enforcement professionalism. "Okay. I guess you're deputize," Willy replied, having no real idea of whether or not he could even really do that kind of thing. "Just keep back and don't let them see you. We'll meet you at the old house."

#

They reached the house just as sun was setting. The lights were on. All the lights. It looked as though a party might be happening, though the presence of Jay's truck out front made that an unlikely prospect. Donna was on the curb across the street, leaning against her grandmother's car and smoking a cigarette.

"Way to go on keeping it subtle," Willy said.

"They didn't notice me," Donna replied. "Now give me a piece and let's roll."
"A piece?" Willy asked. "Are you crazy? Get in the floor on the back seat of your grandmother's car and don't move until I come back out."

Donna hesitated for a minute, then slipped into the back seat and crossed her arms.

"How many people are in there?" Willy asked Arthur.

"Not sure. Could be a handful. People have been moving it over the last few days."

"Fucking great," Willy replied. The last thing he needed was an audience for Jay's righteous fury. This would go better if it was just the two of them. "When we get inside, I want you to try to get everyone out."

"How?" Arthur asked.

"We?" Donna replied. "Why does he get to go?"

"Not now," Willy replied. Then, to Arthur: "I don't know. I don't care. Just do it. I've got my own fish to fry. Jay won't shoot you, but if he tells you to stop, to turn around, to dance a jig, just do it. Whatever he says. Going in that house is the last risk I'm going to ask you to take, okay?"

"Okay," Arthur replied.

They got out of the car and crossed the yard. Someone, probably from the production company, had made sure that the walkways were impeccably clean. As they drew near, Willy felt a breath of warm, damp air from the house and experienced an intense feeling of Deja vu at passing through the front door, smelling the air, feeling the humidity. Was it really only a couple months back. He hoped he wouldn't be forced to shoot anyone this time around. He checked his belt and made sure that he had his gun, just in case.

In through the door that he'd kicked in back in November and the Deja vu pressed on. The living room was empty, as was the kitchen. Of course. It had to be the basement. Life was
funny like that. Willy waved Arthur behind him, then whispered to him. "These stairs are the point of no return, trust me. If you don't want to go, now is the time to go. And frankly, if I were you, I'd go."

"I'm good. We'll be okay," Arthur replied.

Strange sentiment from a kid headed in to the basement where he was tied down and poisoned not two months ago, Willy thought.

They went down the stairs. Willy stomped each step with his feet, making sure Jay knew they were coming. He didn't want to surprise anyone this time. He didn't want to make any assumptions about what he'd find, so until he found it, he'd treat it like any other perfectly legal probable kidnapping scenario.

"You down there, Jay?" Willy asked.

"Yep. Come on down and join us," Jay replied.

The basement had changed since the last time Arthur had been there. The water stained cinder block walls had either been redesigned to look like massive chunks of carved stone like a person might see in a castle. The bare-bulb lights with their unraveling pull-strings were gone, replaced by sconces made to look like flickering flames, though Arthur could see that they were just some kind of small electronic fixture inside. Even Gemini's card table, from behind which he'd delivered hundreds upon hundreds of speeches and sermons was gone and replaced with an ornate wooden pulpit stained a deep, glossy black. On the wall behind the pulpit, someone had painted a mandala with a squiggly symbol at each compass point. Arthur recognized none of the symbols from his time learning about Orran Dain, but he had to admit that it did lend a certain arcane air to the place.
Jay Bransom held Gemini by the back of his collar, forcing Gemini to stare down at the assembled members of his church. From the angle at which Arthur was standing, he couldn't make out much of Jay. His view of Gemini, however, was perfect. Pale face, beads of sweat trickling down his forehead, a subtle quivering of the lip. Arthur had never seen Gemini so scared before. Clearly Jay meant business and Gemini knew he did.

"What's going on, Jay?" Willy asked.

"We're going to have a sermon," Jay replied in a flat, emotionless growl. "The good father here is going to tell us all about what he's been up to. Ain't you?"

"I don't-" Gemini began, his voice shaking.

"But you do," Jay replied, jabbing Gemini in the back with something. "Now where do we start?"

"Take it easy," Willy said. "He's not worth jail time. You've got a kid to think about."

"I do. And that's why we're here. But that's a story that I'd rather let him tell you." Jay prodded Gemini again, causing him to gasp and close his eyes.

"You're putting me in an awful position here," Willy said. "I don't want to have to save this asshole's life."

"No saving him now," Jay replied. "We're at the end of the line. So you step back and let me do the work, okay? We're going to see this through. Now we'll start with Gemini. And if he doesn't want to give everyone the sermon I've got in mind, I'll help motivate him."

Jay drew back his hand and let the crowd see it, then smacked it hard against the back of Gemini's head. Gemini crumpled to his knees, but Jay pulled him back upright and thrust him forward. "Need any more motivation?" Jay asked.

Gemini shook his head.
"Good. Then help answer a few questions for me. First: what did you do to my daughter?"

"I slept with her," Gemini replied.

"And how old is she?" Jay asked through clenched teeth.

"Seventeen," Gemini replied.

"And what else did you do?" Jay asked.

"I-" Gemini sobbed.

"You knocked her up, didn't you?"

Gemini, still sobbing, nodded to the audience. "I did."

Arthur remembered a time when he was a child. He'd stolen a candy bar from the Barlow Value Mart. At home, after a tearful confession, his parents insisted that he go back to the store and tell them what he'd done. At the time, forcing him to go back to the store and admit what he'd done felt like the worst punishment ever and he had hated his parents for it. In retrospect, he remembered that moment all throughout his life and it affected his behavior. He had a feeling, watching things unfold, that Gemini would probably feel the same way, though the dice were still rolling in regards to how much life he would have left when this was all said and done.

"He did. Everyone get that? All you dumb fuckers hear that?" Jay looked the crowd over, meeting everyone's eyes in turn. "Now if I'm understanding it right, that means that you all have been duped into following a pedophile."

Jay waited, smiling, then raised his hand. "You know? I don't think following is even a strong enough word. You're here worshiping a pedophile. I'm going to let that sink in for a minute."
After a few seconds of awkward silence had passed, Jay shoved Gemini once more. "But we're not done. What else did you do? How did you and I get to be such close friends today?"

"I sent her to get an abortion," Gemini replied.

"Right-O!" Jay replied. "Class act couldn't even bring her himself. Had one of his dumbass goons do it."

"It wasn't even the first time," Arthur added. "He'd knocked up plenty of women in this house the last time around too."

"Okay," Willy said, swatting his hand at Arthur. "That's enough helping."


"Can't say I'm surprised," Jay said. "Can't be slowed down by kids, I guess. Got anything you want to say for yourself?"

Willy noted the obvious absence of the phrase last words, though he wasn't sure how much that counted for. His hand crept toward the pocket of his coat. When the moment presented itself, he had to be ready. He might only have a split second or so. He inched closer, moving slow enough to avoid attention.

"Hand him over, Jay," Willy replied. "We can put him away for a while now and you probably won't get any kind of serious jail time."

"Oh I got big plans for him, Willy. And they don't involve jail for either of us."

"Just take it easy, okay? I know you're all jacked up here, but like I said, don't make me save this asshole's life. I don't want that kind of guilt on my conscience for the rest of my life."

"Things happen when the shit hits the fan, Willy. Slip and fall, maybe a gun jams, maybe you miss the first shot. There ain't a court in the world that would convict you for fucking up. Mistakes happen."
Jay forced Gemini to his knees.

"So long, shitbag."

#

Willy watched the hammer go back in slow motion. Baseball popped in to his head and he felt like a batter staring down a fast ball. Keep your eye on it, Grieves. If he could make it just a step or two closer in the time it took Jay to get that hammer all the way back, it might make all the difference in the world.

No more time to wait, whether he was close enough or not. His hand was out, he was up and aiming, center of mass. He could hear a massive clock tolling in his head and he squeezed.

The gun roared.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Willy gunned the remote for his bed until it jerked into motion and bent him in to a sitting position. Donna hovered at the end of his bed, picking over a place of cold hospital food as Arthur looked on. The kid looked a little gray and Willy wondered whether the purple gelatin was dredging up any painful memories.

"How's it feel?" Arthur asked, prying his attention away from Donna.

"Honestly?" Willy replied. "I'm so doped up I can't even tell."

The first few hours had been touch and go. Nothing life threatening, but the doctor's questioned whether Willy would have the use of his left leg again. Now they were fairly certain that he'd have at least partial use, but that he'd probably need a cane for the rest of his life. He didn't mind. If canes were good enough for GK Chesterton, they were good enough for Willy Grieves.

"This broth doesn't taste like soap at all," Donna said. Willy and Arthur exchanged glances as she tipped the soup cup and powered down the remainder of the brown sludge. Willy had given it a taste test earlier that morning when the nurses served it to him for breakfast, but found it too reminiscent of dishwater for his own tastes.

He'd been in the hospital for about a week now, laid up in a mechanical hospital bed that Willy thought might have been designed by a former Nazi doctor. Maybe the same Nazi doctor that picked out the pastel color palette of Willy's hospital room.

In retrospect, shooting Jay Bransom with a Taser wasn't his finest idea. The force of the shock had clenched every muscle in Jay's body, which in turn caused the gun to discharge and a bullet to pierce Willy's leg. Aside from the dead leg and a few bumps and bruises, Willy felt okay. And of course Jay didn't have a scratch on him, despite Arthur's incredible tackle. If that
tackled hadn't happened, it likely wouldn't have been Willy's left leg in trouble. More like his chest. Maybe even his neck. Thank god for small miracles.

The station had been in touch and asked him whether he wanted to press charges. He was so happy that Jay didn't kill Gemini that he'd decided to let the whole thing drop. Considering the myriad other charges Jay was facing, it probably wouldn't help him a whole bunch, but all things considered he'd be okay. A little prison time might do him some good; It would let him cool off a bit and when he got out, he could be around to be a grandfather to Delilah's kid, which she had decided to keep.

"Production company dropped out," Arthur said, smiling. "Turns out they didn't want move forward when the star of their show was knocking up underage girls."

Willy shrugged. "And they said any publicity is good publicity. I guess that's bullshit."

"Not pedo-publicity," Donna added. "I just made that up. Get it?"

As of the last Willy had heard, Gemini was sleeping it off in the Barlow Jail until there was room at the county seat where he'd be tried for Statutory Rape. Willy agreed to testify to hearing Gemini admit to having sex with the girl, and even though the admission had been under duress, he didn't think it would matter. In nine months the kid would be born and DNA would prove once and for all who the father was. One way or another, it was all just a matter of time.

"You going back to work when you get out?" Arthur asked.

"Yeah," Willy replied. "But only in what the city calls a 'decreased capacity'. After a couple of years of that, I'm retiring. I've got a small pension coming to me and in a few years I can get social security. My house is paid for and I plan on driving my town car until I die, so I'm cheap. I'll get by. Plus, I don't think the mayor's going to be too pleased with me after all this."
"You might be surprised," Arthur replied. "Believe it or not, he stopped by uncle Karl's bar the other night and talked to me. Thanked me, even, for helping you put a stop to the whole Lovegood thing. I think he's happy that no one will ever find out that he inadvertently endorsed a pedophile."

"That's something," Willy replied. "What about you?"

"Can't say I have a lot of plans," Arthur replied. "I think uncle Karl's ready to let me get at my inheritance now, so money isn't really an issue. Don't tell him I said anything about it, but I've thought about buying his bar from him. Let the old bastard go retire and give me something to do with myself."

Willy grunted and settled back in to the pillows. The doctors told him he'd be released soon, maybe even today, provided everything looked good. He hoped so. The idea of spending another day in bed repulsed him, gunshot leg or not. He heard the fuzzy beep of the morphine drip and tried to focus on Arthur's face. The kid wasn't really saying anything, just kind of staring at him like some kind of curiosity, the amazing surviving fossil, carried forward through time and space, kind of like Orran Dain. Donna was putting a hurting on some kind of sandwich she'd produced from God knew where. It took Willy a moment to realize it was a custom creation she'd made from his old toast and the remains of the eggplant patty that came with his lunch. Gross.

The 100 Precepts of Willy Grieves. It didn't have such a bad ring to it. Willy thought he'd tell Arthur and Donna about it, but by the time he'd finished polishing the thought his eyes had drifted closed and he'd begun to snore.
Part IV: 12 Months Later
Chapter Thirty-Eight

Willy stood on the curb and listened to the sound of the snow melting all around him. He'd just filled his lower lip with tobacco which filled his chest with a warm content feeling that really worked with all this spring around him. He felt like he was coming back to life, right along with everything else.

He recalled making a promise to kick the habit if he survived the gunshot, but that had been in the thick of things when he thought it might still be fatal. As it were, a close brush with death only served to remind Willy of the fragile nature of human life, which reminded him that he'd better get to enjoying himself while he still good. He'd resumed his chewing habit with renewed vigor after that, though he suspected he'd quit again once the novelty wore off.

The sound of screeching brakes drew his attention. He spotted Arthur easing his beaten and bruised Chevette to a stop alongside the curb. The kid waved at Willy from inside the war torn car, smiling. Donna rode shotgun, cradling a slushy that clocked in at just under five gallons.

"Right on time," Willy said.

"Won't miss it," Arthur replied.

They walked up the steps to the former Orran Dain house together.

After the show fell through, the house dropped in to a legal limbo as the disputes between the mortgage company and the production company worked their way through the courts. In the end, the house was once again put through the foreclosure process, and once again found its way to Willy's desk.

The walk through was really more of a perfunctory thing this time around. No one had lived in the house since Lovegood, and as far as anyone knew, he'd fallen off the face of the earth. Probation officers and locals had reached out to Willy, asked him to check around, but it
was all to no avail. Lovegood was gone and Willy suspected that Barlow was the last place he'd want to be. And given his fall from grace at the end of his stay, there wasn't anyone here to harbor him anyway. Even Fred Mertz, the staunchest Gemini supporter of the bunch, had flaked and crumbled after a few months outside of Gemini's shadow.

Gemini just didn't have any friends left in Barlow.

Willy punched the key into the lockbox and they stepped inside. The house was cold, but not oppressively so. The curtains had been tossed back and the bright spring sun had heated the rooms gradually over the handful of warm days that had arrived to burn away the lingering frost. Someone, probably local kids, had broken in through the back door. Willy could see the splinters in the frame from where he stood. They'd spray painted the walls. Molestars aren't welcome, said the wall behind the couch.

"This town," Donna said. "Never know whether I should be proud or sad to live here."


They covered the first floor, going room to room, checking every room over as they went, noting how similar everything looked to the last time they'd both been in the house. Despite the break in and the vandalism, the intruders hadn't bothered to actually steal anything. Stacks of vanity press copies of The 100 Precepts filled every spare space on the first floor, crowding around most of the native furniture.

"What's going to happen to those?" Arthur asked, prodding one of the boxes.

"If Lovegood doesn't step in and claim them, the city will incinerate all of this shit for the mortgage company for a small price. As far as this shit goes, I think I'd volunteer my services and do it for free."

Arthur stared at the boxes and shook his head.
"Want a copy?" Willy asked.

"I'm good," Arthur replied. Donna grabbed three from the stack and stuck them in her coat pocket.

"Seriously?" Willy asked.

"Souvenirs," she replied. "Like I'm really going to start believing it now."

They checked the rest of the rooms on the second and third floors, finding nothing out of the ordinary. Boxes, the occasional shirt or shoe, left behind as the last few members of Orran Dain's church had fled last winter when it became apparent that Gemini hadn't just been saying what Jay wanted to hear to keep from getting killed. At the head of the stairs, Willy found a scarf wrapped around the newel post with a pair of gloves tucked in to the folds.

"Weirdos," Willy said. "I can't believe anyone ever followed Lovegood here. I'd like to deliver all of this shit to them, a piece at a time, just to remind them of what they did."

"I doubt they'd even acknowledge it," Arthur replied. "For most of them it was a stupid mistake over the course of four weeks last winter. They're just playing dumb and hoping everyone forgets."

"I don't forget shit," Willy replied.

At the base of the stairs Arthur took a last look at the kitchen and smiled. "So that's it. Closure. I'll never have to look at this shit hole again, in my entire life, no matter what happens. Maybe I can be like one of the Johnny-come-lately worshipers and just pretend like it never happened?"

Donna, from the opposite corner where she was poking through the remnants of a mice-eaten bag of Crispy Flakes, chuckled. "Good luck. You're going to be the Purple Geyser for the rest of your life if I have anything to say about it."
"How do you even know about that?" Arthur asked.

"Know all, see all," Donna replied. "You think Gemini was omniscient? He had nothing on me."

They hesitated a moment, standing in the kitchen, admiring the craftsmanship of the basement door.

"Don't make them like that anymore," Willy said.

"Right?" Arthur replied. "My dad, when he had our house built, he obsessed with the doors. It took him months to find the right ones, according to my mom. Not that I'd know, I was too busy chasing girls and joining cults to pay much attention. Still, though, I think my dad's appreciation of quality doors got passed down."

Willy shook his head. "We're stalling. It's just a basement. Let's get down there and get this over with."

"What are we going to find?" Arthur asked. "The last two times I went down there I didn't find anything good."

"Third time's a charm," Willy replied, turning the rusting knob with his left hand.

#

A feeling of deep vertigo passed over Willy as he entered the basement. Everything looked different, everything had changed, how could this-

He stopped. Took a deep breath. Reminded himself that it had been like this the last time he was here. The production company had remodeled the place to make everything look like stone and lamplight, perfect for a cult devoted to an ancient time-traveling entity and sure to drum up the appropriate amount of ratings, or viewers, or whatever in the hell those people were after. Everything had seemed somewhat intimidating back then, though circumstances were
somewhat difference. Now it all just looked chintzy, ready to break apart and be tossed in a
closet somewhere for storage until another cult was ready to roll. Will considered that and
thought maybe, viewed in this light, it was even more appropriate for Gemini and his religion.

"God damn," Arthur said. "I forgot that they did all this. I was expecting something
totally different."

"Me too," Willy replied.

"So this is where all the magic happened?" Donna asked. "Doesn't look like much. You
people are easily impressed," she said, looking at Arthur. "If I ever joined a cult, it'd have a way
better church than this."

"Congratulations on your high standards and impeccable taste in cults," Arthur replied.

Willy looked over the chairs as Arthur wandered up to the pulpit. Someone had knocked
a great deal of chairs all over the place, which made Willy recall his brief struggle as he tried to
escape Norm Nermin. He'd shot that poor dumb bastard not ten feet from where he was standing
right now and he didn't feel a lick of shame about it. He wondered if he'd do it again, given the
same situation and knew instantly that he would. Pawn or no, Nermin had been a dangerous
idiot.

It dawned on Willy that he was suddenly freezing. The lack of windows down here kept
the cold air pinned down with nothing to warm it. The whole place felt like an enormous, faux
religious ice box. He shivered, and considered, just for a second, how nice it would be to set the
place on fire and watch it burn down to nothing.

Just as Willy was about to pronounce the room clean, he heard Arthur gasp. The kid took
a few stumbling steps back and pointed at the pulpit.

"Go look. Something's there."
Donna rushed forward, eager to see what hidden treasure had so repulsed Arthur. Willy raised a hand and hissed at her, then pointed at the back of the room. "Me first, you nut. Go stand back there and make sure Arthur doesn't hurt himself."

He cursed his easy-going attitude. He'd imagined that all threat was gone, so he'd left his gun and his Taser at home, sitting on his nightstand. God help you if you die in this house after all this bullshit, Grieves, he thought. Wouldn't that be rich. Survive not one but two potentially lethal encounters here only to come back a third time and die executing what was essentially a cakewalk.

Yet something about Arthur's pale face told Willy that they weren't in mortal danger. He crept toward the pulpit, eager to figure out what the kid had spotted.

A sneaker, attacked to a leg, attached to...something. Willy rounded the pulpit to get a better look and found himself staring in to a familiar face. The skin was blue now, and the eyes were frosted from the cold, but he could recognize it anywhere. Gemini Lovegood.

Though Willy wasn't a competent judge of such things, he guessed that Lovegood had been dead for at least a few weeks. The deep blue of his skin, the patches of frost, even the dull matte finish of the icy shards of exposed eye, all looked as though they'd formed over the course of several days of deep freeze. Probably in late January or early February. He wasn't wearing a coat. Suicide by cold then? Maybe hunger? Maybe both.

"It's him," Willy said.

"I knew it," Arthur replied. "I god damn knew it. I didn't want to look because I was sure of it."

"Well," Willy said, standing up and balancing his weight on his cane, "Looks like he came in here and just settled in to die."
"Like a sick old dog," Donna added.

Willy took a step back, putting some space between him and the body, and called in paramedics and a couple of patrol officers. Arthur paced a few steps away, occasionally glancing at the hint of a shoe visible beyond the edge of the pulpit. After Willy finished the call, he grabbed Arthur by the shoulder and turned him towards the stairway.

"Come on, you two. Let's get out of here. I've had enough of this god damn house. Time to leave it behind and never look back."
Curriculum Vita

Daniel Pickles was born in McGregor, Minnesota. He graduated with honors from the University of Wisconsin-Superior in 2011 with a B.S. in Communications and entered the University of Texas El-Paso’s Creative Writing MFA program in the Fall of 2012. When he’s not writing fiction, Dan works as a Technical Writer for a segment of UnitedHealth Group. He currently lives on the terminal tip of Lake Superior with his wife and two daughters.

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