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Chapter 1

Leaves crackle underfoot like eggshells. Directionless in the dark, I forge straight ahead. The rapid staccato rhythm of the forest floor grows louder. It reminds me of the aggressive chatter of the M-16 rifles we used in Vietnam. Instinctively, my pace slows, and the noise subsides.

Familiar sounds and smells can cause a flood of unpleasant memories from those days. Other times, they engulf me when I least expect it.

Flashing lights appear over my shoulder and stop me mid-step. My stillness will make me invisible. My figure will blend into the tapestry of trees and brush.

The police cruiser drives past, so I have become a shadow now, like a ghost. If I keep these silly mind games up, the war games may play with my head, and it can ruin my night. I had only stopped to empty my bladder when I spotted a big tree in front of me. The steam from the warm fluid streaming out of my body is backlit now by a dim, distant streetlight. The urine begins to ricochet off the trunk and onto my jeans, so I back away. Farther from the tree, it's fun to play with the laser of urine.

Once I finish and look about, the solace of my surroundings makes me pause to take it all in. This place could be anywhere. The relative quiet and peaceful chapel of the woodlands reminds me of church. Not that church has been in my life lately, but Sister Mary Elizabeth would have shushed me for making noise anywhere. This moment feels like how I remember church. Surrounded by an ominous presence, there was an uneasiness and peace at the same time.

This is northwest New Jersey, though. I live in Sussex township and some places near here will make you feel like you're somewhere else. In any direction, in the middle of the woods,

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I see a tangle of trees through the gray-blue night. This is a cathedral of woods and animals and spirits. What forces are responsible for creating such beautiful surroundings? I'm not religious, but I should keep all options open.

Cold, crisp air begins to flutter around my head, and it gives me an excited shiver. Friday nights always bring with them anticipation. Friday always leads me to Casey's Tavern.

My name is Michael Walsh, and tomorrow is December 8, 1984—my thirty-fourth birthday. My old Ford pickup is parked at the edge of the woods. A thin film of frost covers the windshield as I start her sweet little engine up. Wipers on, heat on, radio on, and first gear. The radio plays New York City's classic rock station, and "Born to be Wild" by Steppenwolf comes on. The wipers keep time. I punch the truck into second gear, then third.

. . . Fire all of your guns at once and explode into space!

Explode into space. That sounds awesome.

A slow, fluffy white snow begins to blanket the windshield as the Ford weaves down the road. It reminds me of what's in the glove box, a vial of coke, cocaine. Second gear, first gear, stop. I lean across the passenger seat and unlatch the glove compartment, taking out the small glass vessel. The pearly powder shimmers inside the tiny vial I hold in my hand, like white diamond dust. When the small top is unscrewed, a little spoon emerges. I fill it and snort, up my nostril it goes. Fill again and up the other nostril. The vial goes into my coat's left pocket. On the road again, a bitter taste begins to drip down the back of my throat. A feeling of well-being and a slow, steady rush come over me. The song continues.

I never wanna die

Perhaps I am religious after all. The high builds now as a strong euphoria envelops me.

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My friend Tuchi's car is here. He has an old 1970 black Impala. Mike Passatucci, Tuchi, has been my friend since fourth grade. We went through high school together and played football together. He played running back, and I played quarterback. Man, did we ever have a few great games. We made it all the way to the state finals in Group 1 back in 1967.

Tuchi blew the playoff game when he bobbled the ball for an interception. The other team ran it back for the winning touchdown. We had a hell of a fight after the game, and if you get into it with Tuchi, you had better be able to handle yourself. He's not a huge guy, but he's ripped. I'm no slouch either. I can handle trouble when it comes my way. At six foot two and one hundred and ninety pounds, heavier than my high school days, I have been known to mix it up when needed.

I walk slowly across the gravel parking lot. The tall pine trees surrounding the place bend with the wind. Although Sussex Township is not a big, urban place, Casey's is on one of its main roads.

Tuchi's car pitches and rolls as I approach it, and the windows weep with condensation. Someone's bare ass makes an impression on the rear driver's side window. It's Tuchi's ass. I'd know it anywhere. He's going at it with his lady, Sharon. She's a dancer at Casey's on Friday and Saturday nights and she tends bar here several days during the week. Sharon is an okay person. Some of her friends, though, are a little sleazy. Not that I'm against sleaze.

Through the window, I concentrate on her face. She has a look of complete rapture as she wraps her legs around him. With eyes shut, her lips part as she desperately holds onto his vest. One high heel hangs on for dear life. She grabs his butt and digs her one hundred percent

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authentic-fake nails in. Sharon opens her eyes and notices me. We lock our gazes onto each other's, she smiles and whispers in Tuchi's ear. He stops and turns to me.

“You pervert, get a ticket from the deli counter,” he yells as Sharon gives me the finger.

Oh, well, time for a beer, so I head into Casey's. It's an unassuming, rundown, brown cedar shack with a blue neon sign up top: Casey's Tavern. They must have replaced the Y in Casey's this week. The sign has always been an inviting beacon for me. It's nice to see it whole again, lighting my way to Nirvana—or Hell.

The loud, rhythmic music blares in my face. As you enter Casey's, the bar is to the left with the dressing room and bathrooms to the right. Cheesy lighting effects flicker on the dancers in time to the music. A dancer is atop the small stage in the middle of the bar. She gyrates and flirts with the crowd. Her name is Beth. She's one of Sharon's friends, well, former friend. Let's say, they tolerate each other. They are both in their late twenties. She waves hello, and clammers from the stage as I approach the bar.

A guy at the bar tries slipping a single down her top, notices her attention isn't on him, and he protests. “Hey, Beth, what the—” He turns and shoots me a dirty look.

“Maybe she knows your dick's the size of a hamster's, Timmy,” I shout to him over the music. He begins to get up, and I come right up to him fast. He sits down.

“It's not that small, is it, Timmy?” I ask.

Timmy has become a regular since the owner redid the interior. He's a harmless, nerdy guy and one of the few black men who comes into Casey's.

“No, no, Mike, it's more like the elephant hamster's, you know? He's a rare animal from the jungles of South America. Rare, very rare, Mike,” he says.

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I scrunch his face between my two hands, and we laugh.

Timmy turns back to Beth, but she's grabbed her purse and is already around the bar headed toward me. Tonight, she wears four-inch black heels and a black G-string. She has a classic go-go dancer's body with a pair of strong thighs, a round bottom, and ample, full breasts. She rubs her hand along my thigh, then moves it up to my crotch and gropes me.

Another dancer, Chris, is on the stage, and Timmy smiles at her and waves a dollar bill in the air. She's the only black dancer who called James when he put an ad in the paper. James is a firm believer in diversity.

"Hey, Mikey, how you doin'?" Beth asks as she leans in and bites my earlobe in the most seductive fashion.

"Good, good, Beth, what's up?" I say over the music. She begins to make a meal out of my earlobe and kneads my crotch into the Washington Monument.

"I see what's up with you, Mikey boy. I'm very happy to see you too," she whispers in my ear.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I wanna show you somethin', and I know you have somethin' for me."

James, the owner, comes over. Beth removes her hand from my groin.

"The usual, Mikey boy?" he asks.

"Yeah, James, thanks."

James is an unassuming, gray haired man in his sixties with an Irish brogue. He's owned this place with my mother since I can remember. He may have known my grandmother's family from the old sod or some such place. He never told me. James has always been there for me, like a dad. In fact, he's married to my mother, so that makes him my stepfather.

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“Mike?” Beth protests. “I thought you wanted to talk with me in the dressing room?” She pulls on my sleeve.

“Oh, yeah, but the drip at the back of my throat’s making me thirsty.”

“You dick, you started without me?” She gives me an elbow in the ribs.

“Go into the dressing room, and wait for me, okay? I wanna see how Kevin’s doing.”

I glance down the bar. Kevin Coye, one of the regulars, stands with his legs spread wide for support, and his head lies flat, sideways on the bar top.

“Okay, don’t be long. I go back on in fifteen minutes.” She saunters off in the sultriest fashion, glances back over her shoulder, and throws me a kiss.

How can a woman walk in those heels? Who cares, because to watch her is, well, oh so titillating. She stumbles and drops her purse. As she bends to pick it up, she flashes the most enticing crotch shot in my direction. Beth turns, and I give her an enthusiastic thumbs-up. She smiles. Beth is no dummy. She’s the type of girl who knows how to get what she wants, or needs, at least.

Kevin has somehow straightened himself up now, and he stands erect against the bar. Kevin is an imposing figure. He reminds me of a small planet. Someone told me he once played for the New York Giants in the 1950s and did some professional wrestling as well. Nowadays, he works with the construction company Tuchi and I work for. You’ll find him at Casey’s most other times.

When Kevin is sober, you wouldn’t cross him. He’s known to take on several guys at once and flatten them all. Even in the state he’s in now, he can be volatile. Like James, Kevin has always been in my life from early on, one way or another. He gave me my first beer at thirteen. Man, did my mom get pissed. She reamed him out something awful when he brought

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me home wasted and slapped him right across the face. He took it like a man and never said a word. We get along great, but it's still wise to wait and let him focus in on me.

He raises his head. "Mikey boy," he says with a slur. He then grabs me and gives me a bear hug. Even in his drunken state, Kevin's grasp is impossible to escape. His hands are as big as catcher's mitts and he envelops me like a drunken anaconda. Struggling is futile, and I turn into the little boy from the past.

"Okay, Kevin, let go. I'm not a little kid anymore," I exclaim.

"You are to me, junior," he replies as he lets me go.

"Junior—careful, I think he's gay. I hear stories," Tuchi shouts from the door. He comes from behind me and starts to hump my leg. "Ohhhh," he moans.

"Tuchi, who's acting gay now?" I ask. "I guess Sharon doesn't meet all of your needs." I elbow him off me.

"Oh, we satisfy each other. Don't you see the smile on her face?" He gestures in her direction as she approaches us. She smiles, gives me a hug and a peck on the cheek.

"Hey, Mikey," she says. "Did you get that thingy?"

"Here you go." I hand her the vial from my left pocket. "Beth's in the changing room waiting for that, and save some for me, please." She throws me a sly smile and nods, then disappears into the dressing room.

Sharon's a special person. Not only is she attractive, she somehow puts up with Tuchi's bullshit. She's not overdone like most of the other dancers I've known. Sharon has a more natural, healthier appearance.

"Hey, bro, how you doin'?" Tuchi asks. He puts his arm around my shoulder and gives me a kiss on the cheek. This is his standard greeting, especially with me. We've been friends for

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so long it feels natural. Few people understand him or even get close to him, and if you don't know Tuchi, you would avoid him.

He's a biker-type guy through and through, although his motorcycle doesn't work most of the time. He wears a red bandana to cover his receding hairline, but his hair is long in the back, past his shoulders. One small gold loop earring hangs from his left ear, and a small crucifix hangs from his neck. Did I mention tattoos?

The first tattoo he got in Vietnam is across the left side of his chest. It's a take on Psalm 23, which became popular for many of the guys in Vietnam. We put it on lighters, on our helmets, anywhere else where we would look like a badass. It reads: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for I am the evilest son of a bitch in the valley.

He's one of a kind, and I love the guy.

"You know you're not gonna get any a' that shit back, right?" Tuchi says to me with a pat on the back.

"Yeah, what else is new? I have another one in the truck," I say.

"Nice." He lifts my beer from the bar and takes a sip.

"Hey, that's my beer, Tuchi."

"Not anymore." He turns and leaves.

"Dickhead," I shout over the music. He turns and pulls down his lower lip.

This is one of his standard moves, and if you're not quick or he distracts you, oh well, your beer's gone bye-bye. Kevin is back at the bar, and he's assumed his previous position. I'd rather not bother with anyone tonight except Beth. Here she comes out of the dressing room, rubbing her nose. As she passes Tuchi, he reaches for her crotch, but she dodges his hand.

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“Your honey’s in there, remember?” she shouts and sticks out her tongue. “Pig.”

He pulls down his lower lip again. It reveals a tattoo that reads: Fuck Off.

A couple of years ago, before Sharon, Beth dated Tuchi. Some may say Sharon stole him away. Beth would say this. Others may say she’s to blame. Neither she nor Tuchi are what you would call saintly people. They both, given the chance, would screw anyone who crossed their paths. Don’t let the Bible verses and crucifixes fool you. These religious trappings don’t guide anyone through their lives. It’s more like . . . yes, he’s Catholic, but what does this mean? What it means is, people are born Catholic and they will die calling themselves Catholic. They don’t live anything close to a pious life, though.

Like I said before, I’m not religious. Men in Vietnam would clutch the cross and pray during a firefight. Then, seconds later their head gets blown off by several AK-47 rounds. They never had a chance to even say “Amen.”

Speaking of an “amen” moment, Beth is on a beeline straight toward me. She’s sexy, charged up, and she flashes me a smile. Hallelujah.

“Come with me, Mikey. I wanna reward you for your gift.” She grabs my arm and we leave.

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Chapter 2

The snowfall is heavy for so early in December. Beth takes my hand.

“Come on. Open the truck.” She then runs to the truck in her heels and a short coat, which only covers her upper body. I search my pockets to find the keys.

“Hold on,” I say somewhat amused. “I thought you had to go on soon?”

“Sharon said she would go on for me, so we can’t take long.” She laughs. “This won’t take too long, as I recall. Now, please open the door. My feet are getting soaked.” Once I open the passenger side for her, Beth jumps in and reaches for my glove box. As she rummages through it, I start the truck and crank up the heat.

“What the fuck?” She looks at me with a puzzled, crooked face. “You always keep your little reserve right here. What the fuck?”

“I moved it, because lately, I think you and Sharon have been magically getting in my truck somehow and—”

“What?” she squeaks.

“Do you have my other thing?”

“You know that Tuchi and Sharon have a hold of that now, and you know you ain’t getting it back.” She peers at me like she’s looking over the rim of imaginary glasses.

“What?” I smile. The inside of my truck is getting warmer now, warmer in many ways.

“Mikey, don’t you want something from me too?” Beth asks. She gives me a smile, reaches down and starts molding my crotch back into a monument.

“Close your eyes,” I tell her.

“Seriously?” She stops working my groin.

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“Yeah, Beth, seriously.”

“Oh, my God, you’re a dick,” she says in a fake Valley girl accent.

We play this simple, flirtatious game a while.

“Close your eyes, Beth, or—”

“Okay, Mikeeey.” When she closes her eyes, I pretend to reach under my side of the seat.

She peeks.

“Wait a minute now.”

“I, I—” She closes her eyes again.

“Shall I continue?”

“Yes,” she sighs.

All the while, my left hand retrieves another small glass vial of cocaine from the side seat pocket. It’s been there the whole time. Game over.

“Well?” she asks.

“Open your eyes.”

“Hand it over, boy.”

Beth unscrews the top of the vial, dips the small spoon in and collects a measure of the magic dust. She puts it to one nostril and up it goes in one big sniff. This is fun for me, and I take a moment to observe her face. She’s attractive, even under all the makeup and big brown hair. Her blue eyes are accentuated with blue eye shadow and black eye liner. She wears the reddest of red lipstick. I’ve seen her dance at other places before she came to Casey’s, and the makeup is never so overdone. Does she do this for my benefit? I think she does have a thing for me. We have some kind of a thing, she and I. We are good-time humping buddies, but sometimes, I wish our relationship could have been more. This shit’s getting old.

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She opens her eyes with a gasp, rubs her nose, and catches me staring at her. “What?”

She gives me the biggest smile.

“Nothing,” I reply. “How are you feeling after that procedure yesterday?” She reaches over to my groin again and starts to rub.

“I feel great,” she says. “They put me on the pill now, so no more worries there.”

“Okay.”

“Mikey, do you dig me?” she asks in a low, meaningful voice.

“Oh, yeah,” I reply. My dick is ready to escape the zoo.

“I really dig you,” she whispers in my ear as she undoes my belt and then unzips my jeans. She sucks on my earlobe and whispers the phrase over and over, in a soft, slow chant. She takes me to a magical place. We’ve been there together before, never in my truck, though. My loins are ready to explode when she reaches into my underwear and, I explode.

“Bye, Mikey, you’re welcome and thanks,” she calls over her shoulder as she bolts away from me. She slams the door shut and rubs her hands in the snow piled on the front hood. As she runs back toward the bar, Tuchi opens the entrance door and leans out.

“Beth, get in here,” he shouts. “Sharon said she’d do a dance or two for you, not five.”

She ignores him as she passes by into the bar.

Tuchi heads in my direction, no coat, no sleeves on his well-worn denim vest, no problem. That’s my guy. The snow begins to cover him like a soft, white veil. He stops to light a cigarette, then jumps into the truck.

“What the fuck is she doing?” he asks me. Then he notices the scene of the accident.

“Man, that girl is so fucking hot,” I gasp.

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“Oh, no surprise here . . . you got a blow job from Beth,” he says. “Isn’t she supposed to swallow that shit for you, bro? I don’t wanna look at your dick juice, man.”

“Hand me that rag in the glove compartment.”

“I’m not your cum rag gofer, remember. I told you this last time.”

“Just give me the rag, please.”

He grabs the rag and throws it over my lap.

“Cover that pathetic thing up, will you?” he says with a laugh.

“Whatever. She never got it in her mouth. That girl’s as hot as the tailpipe on your bike on a steamy August day,” I tell him. Her warm breath still lingers in my ear, and I close my eyes.

“Hello, ground control to Major Tom,” Tuchi barks, and I snap out of her spell. “Don’t let that chick’s act dance through your brain.” He gestures in the air at his face.

“What?”

“Come on, man. You know she played the same head games on me. Remember—remember, bro?” he asks. “If she can give you a hand job to save five minutes, she’ll do it. Listen, I didn’t come out here to hold your cock either. I came to get more blow. Where’s your reserve stash?”

He starts to rummage through my glove box. I wipe myself off and watch him search for the coke. By the time I put myself back together and my zipper is up, he’s still in the middle of his hunt. When I throw the rag down at his feet, he stops.

He glares at me. “Get that fucking rag away from me. Your shit should be in Beth’s fucking stomach. Where’s the coke?” He steps on the rag and continues his exploration of the glove box.

“I moved it and, obviously, that was a good decision, right?”

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“Mikey, Mikey, Mikey,” he says. As his mantra continues to float through the air, my hand reaches for the vial, left pocket, then right pocket. What? I turn on the interior light and begin to search around the floor.

“Beth!” I yell.

“What? Beth what?”

“Beth must have taken it. She has it, I think. She never gave it back to me. My dick was so hard. I lost all sense of, of—”

“Oh, man,” Tuchi howls. “She had one hand on your cock and one hand on your coke. It’s only a difference of one letter, so maybe she’s confused?” he says with delight. “She couldn’t leave with your cock—or maybe she put it in her purse.” He laughs and slaps his thigh.

“The coke?” I ask him.

“No, man, Beth got your cock in her purse. You better go get it, bro.” He chuckles.

Tuchi jumps out of the truck and strolls back toward the bar. He shakes his head and slaps his thigh the whole way. I’m a bit pissed off now. Beth has pulled this before, so I should be mad at myself for losing my composure. I lost it all over my lap.

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Chapter 3

Madonna's "Like a Virgin" blasts from the sound system while Beth dances atop the stage. She notices me, smiles, and points in my direction as she mouths the words.

Gonna give you all my love, boy. . . .

Beth follows me with her gaze, mouths the words to the song, and does her best Madonna impersonation. Let me tell you, it is impressive. She and I lock eyes in a way that lets me know the night is young, and our time together tonight has just begun.

Sharon and Tuchi are at the bar now. They both smile at me.

"Hey Mikey, need a rag?" Sharon grabs one from the bar.

"No thanks, hon. That thing's worse than the other one—and, ah, maybe you'll need it later for your face," I say.

"Excuse me?" Sharon replies. "I'm no slut, and if I was one like Beth, I would know, you need to swallow the evidence, girl."

Tuchi nods his head in furious agreement.

"Absolutely," Tuchi chimes in. "I mean, you'd be embarrassed if we was talkin' about you that way, right, babe?"

"Shut the fuck up!" Sharon shouts over the music. Beth continues to mouth the words of the song. She's in full Madonna mode now as she writhes and pumps on the stage floor.

I wave as she puts an index finger in her mouth and starts to suck it. Am I a sinner for enjoying this?

Tuchi taps me on the shoulder. "You'll be up till two a.m. with her if you keep giving her coke. You know we gotta work tomorrow."

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“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“I’m not standing outside waiting for you again, bro.” He makes a hand gesture, creating a fake handgun. He points it at my face. “I’ll blow your fucking face off, Mike.”

“Listen, you and me will go and do a couple of lines, so when I get with her later, I won’t have much left,” I yell in his ear, as the song just won’t stop.

“You know, you’re not as dumb as you look. I keep telling people this about you, but no one believes me.”

“Shut the fuck up, you nasty man. Let’s go.”

The song ends. Beth pauses and watches us as we vanish. The men’s room is on the left, and the ladies’ room is on the right. James, along with Tuchi and I, made a dressing room for the dancers as part of the ladies’ room for lack of a better space. The girls have a small area where they can draw a curtain for privacy, if they want.

Tuchi pulls out a plastic package of coke we call an eight ball. This is one eighth of an ounce of cocaine. It sounds like a small amount of anything. Let me tell you with coke, which is the consistency of confectioners’ sugar, it’s a lot. He dumps a healthy pile on the counter.

“Got something earlier too,” he says with a smile.

“Nice, it may be wet here, though. Careful,” I tell him. He glares at me as though I’ve questioned his professional credentials.

“Do I look like a beginner, sir?” he replies in his best British accent.

“No, your majesticness,” I say. With a small pocketknife, I chop the glimmering crystals and lay out two long lines of it on the countertop.

“Hurry up, bro, before your girl comes knocking,” he says. Someone bangs on the door.

“Hello?” Beth says.

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We don't respond. Tuchi rolls a dollar bill and bends down to do one of the fat lines. He snorts it with a vengeance, as though his life depends on it. He raises his head back up with eyes ablaze and a finger pressed to his lips.

"Hello? Hello, Mikey, I know you're in there."

Tuchi points a finger at me to quiet my chuckles.

"I'm takin' a piss, Beth, hold on," I shout through the door.

"Well, if you open the door, we can continue our rundayview."

"Rundayview, is that a word?" I press close to the door.

"You know what I mean, come on," she pleads. "Is Tuchi with you?"

"Yeah."

"Tell him I'm gonna suck your cock just like I used to suck his small dick!" she screams.

We remain silent as I bend down and snort the second line of coke.

"What's going on in there?" Beth asks with a sorrowful voice and kicks the door.

"Nothing, hunny," Tuchi replies. Again, he lifts his finger to his lips and winks at me. He makes a smaller line on the counter with the knife of whatever is left.

He slaps me on the back. "Knock yourself out, bro." He hides the bag of coke and unlocks the door. Beth glares at him as he passes and presses his body against hers.

"Get the fuck off of me, you, you—" She squirms past and shoves him away.

"You what?" Tuchi asks. He presses against her again, holds her to the door and starts to kiss her.

At first, Beth resists, then she engages him with a full-blown French, wet, nasty kiss. She then clamps down on his tongue with her teeth and takes hold of his groin. She pushes him against the wall, and only then does she let go of him. He raises a hand to her.

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“Tuchi, don’t go there, man,” I say. “She’s just playing with you.” I give him a wink.

“Yeah, she’s definitely not worth it,” he says.

“I used to be.” She looks at him with tears in her eyes.

“Yeah, well, I had to move on. You know, we been through this already.” He holds her by her shoulders and moves her away to arm’s length.

“Oh, yeah, we been through this all right and we’re gonna keep going through this till the fucking day you die, asshole.” Beth shakes free of his grasp, and he leaves. She kicks the door closed behind him.

“You want a line?” I hold out the rolled bill. She takes it, puts it to her nostril and snorts the line of coke Tuchi prepared earlier. She rises back up, rubs her nose, and sniffs. A tear rolls down her cheek.

“Why is he such a dick to me?” She draws close, places her head on my chest, and whimpers.

“I know he’s a big dick. He’s always been a wise guy, troublemaker, from the day we met.” I stroke her hair. She raises her head up in a slow-motion move that catches me by surprise. Her somber face touches me.

“Mikey, I really dig you. You’re a good guy.”

“Well, I’ve been told this by my mother many times.”

“No, Mike.” She takes hold of my shoulders. “You’re a great guy.” She steps back to inspect my face. Beth never calls me Mike. “I’m sorry about the baby.” It’s obvious she’s had a few drinks. She wipes the tears from her face.

“Did you start on the pill already then?” She nods yes. “Let’s go have a shot or something,” I say.

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“Oh, no, little boy.” She pushes me back into one of the bathroom stalls. The door crashes inward with a thunderclap of sound.

We land on the toilet seat hard. My head slams against the wall while my back smashes into the toilet tank. “Beth, keep it down,” I say. She straddles my body as I try to comprehend what the fuck is happening. She grabs my face and propels her tongue deep inside my mouth. I take hold of her if only for self-preservation and to center myself in the universe again. She’s never acted like this before, even in her most messed-up drunk.

She pulls away. “Do you think I’ll make a good mom someday?” My face is still held between her two hands. “Do you?”

“Yes, but I know we’re both not ready for that kind of thing in our lives right now.”

She gets off me, kneels down, and proceeds to undo my pants. We’ve been here before, but never in the men’s room. I remain still and let her have her moment. My pants are down now. She reaches inside my briefs and pulls out my cock. As she goes down and puts me in her mouth, I pull back her long curls and watch her. I’m already as hard as a week-old loaf of bread. She takes most of me down her throat, then releases me, and comes up to kiss me.

“No, no, just continue, please,” I tell her. She smiles and proceeds to go at me with a ferocity and enthusiasm I’ve never seen from Beth, ever. Someone bursts into the men’s room. She stops and we hold our breath.

“Mikey, is there any more of the cok—?” It’s Sharon. “Ohhh, oh my God, never mind and don’t forget to swallow this time, Beth,” Sharon says as she leaves.

“Fuck you, bitch!” Beth yells. “She’s such a bitch, right?”

“I’m staying about ten miles behind that question. That’s between you and her.”

“Bitch,” Beth says. She bends down and takes me in her mouth again.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

When I come, my whole body vibrates like a string on a guitar. A cascade rushes through my muscles in a rhythmic fashion. She keeps me in her mouth until all the juice drains from me.

Beth stands and proclaims, “Nobody’s gonna tell me I don’t give a good blow job, right, Mikey?”

“Absolutely, girl,” I say.

“Pull yourself together, boy,” she says like a naughty teacher who’s found me masturbating. Then she leaves.

Sharon and Tuchi rise to their feet and give applause. I ignore them and proceed to take hold of his beer and gulp a big mouthful.

“Hey, man, get your own beer,” he protests.

“This is my beer, remember?” I say.

“That one’s gone a long time ago.”

“Oh, then I guess, thanks for buying me this one.” I take the bottle.

The thunderous music still blares overhead. I go past Timmy and Kevin, who still rests his head on the bar, around to the far edge to where James is standing. It’s an oval-shaped bar, old and dark, made of sturdy oak and maple. James leans my way.

“Another Heineken?” he asks.

“A shot of Jameson’s, please, James.”

Beth is nowhere to be found. He comes back with my shot and it goes down fast. I leave my money on the bar and a dollar tip, take the beer, and head back toward Tuchi and Sharon.

“Where’s Beth?” I ask.

“I think she left,” Tuchi says.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“She had a shot and went outside with a beer,” Sharon chimes in.

“Thanks. Listen, Tuchi, I’ll see you tomorrow at the job, eight a.m.”

“You don’t want me to pick you up? We’ll stop for coffee like always?” he asks. Sharon leans over and whispers in his ear. He mouths the word “Ohhh.”

They both give me a smile and a thumbs-up. Perfect together, these two, I think to myself. He and I point at each other to confirm meeting at eight o’clock tomorrow.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 4

I step into the shadows and watch while the snow and darkness help mask my presence. Beth kicks and pulls on the passenger door of my truck. She then stops, searches through her purse, and produces a nail file. She surveys the surroundings and then wedges it into the top of the window, which commences to fall halfway down.

“Holy shit, Beth,” I whisper. She won’t get too far, but this is fun. She means no harm and, deep down, I know she’s a good person. Beth is in my truck now, and she begins to search in places where she believes the coke stash hides. She hunts under the seat, in the glove box, and under again.

The thought of scaring her half to death crosses my mind. I once scared my mom by coming up behind her while she carried the stuffed turkey on Thanksgiving. The bird flew through the air and landed on my Nanna’s lap. Nanna howled with delight as my mom chased me around the table with a big fork shouting, “You son of a bitch!” My mother said I ruined Thanksgiving. Nanna said, “This is the best holiday I’ve had since 1938.”

I step out of the darkness and move undetected towards the Ford like a tiger stalking its prey. The snow has let up now after dumping a good inch on the windshield, and it helps mask my approach. She’s so absorbed in her hunt for the cocaine that she doesn’t see me creep up next to the passenger window. I hit the glass hard with my hands, and she smacks her head on the steering wheel.

“You cocksucker!” she shrieks. “I almost shit myself.” She extracts her head from under the wheel.

I’m evil, but evil is fun sometimes.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Sorry, sorry, Beth, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She rubs her head. “Come in here,” she says, and I slide in next to her. “The door was open, and I’m cold, so I, I let myself in. Hope you don’t mind?” She flutters her eyes.

“Oh, no, no problem,” I say. “Listen, Beth, I saw you jimmy down the window.”

“I thought I left my purse in here and I—I need a tampon.” She begins to cry.

“I don’t remember having any tampons hiding in my truck.” I move closer to her and reach an arm around her shoulders.

“Well, can you give me a ride home and, on the way, we can stop and get some?” she whimpers.

“Sure.” I pull the window back up. Beth shifts over to the passenger side as she wipes the tears from her face.

I get settled in the driver’s seat and start the engine. “Beth, are you all right?” I ask her.

“Yeah, I’m great.” When I reach over to pull her close, she slides next to me and perks up.

I go to tune the radio, but she slaps my hand aside and dials in the throbbing sounds of the latest disco dance music.

“Please, let’s listen to something that we haven’t heard in the bar,” I lament.

“Well, when you listen to this while I’m dancin’, you seem to like it,” she says with a smile.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Well, which is it, Mikey? Do you much purfer watching me dance or is it the music you purfer?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I much prefer watching you. Your ass is the one thing that gets me through the night, babe.” I take hold of her face, turn her toward me, and begin to kiss her. The kiss is long, forceful, and passionate. Beth grabs a handful of my hair and her tongue enters my mouth like a wild, alien animal. Then, she pulls away.

“Mikey, let’s go to your place?” she asks with the smell of whiskey on her words.

“Um, okay.” I put the truck in first gear and drive off. She remains next to me all the way, yet not a word is spoken.

Although Beth has never presented herself in such a state as tonight, we have spent a few evenings by my place. We always have fun. I live in the basement apartment of my mother’s house. It’s an ugly two-story structure, clad in olive green aluminum siding. It’s on a quiet street, not far from the bar.

One thing is for sure, I have a voluptuous, willing girl next to me, and for the third time today, she’ll get my rocks off. She’s been through a lot with this recent procedure, so we had better be more careful. Both her and I are ill-equipped for parenthood. Maybe we should just watch TV tonight? Wanting to believe I’m a good person, these are the moments when a touch of self-doubt enters my consciousness. Maybe I’ll burn in Hell? I’m still undecided if I believe in either Heaven or Hell. Hell appears to be more fun.

Once I pull up in front of my place, Beth leans over and starts to rub my groin. She sucks on my neck like a giant leech. I reach over, slide my hand inside her bra and squeeze her breast. My finger plays with her nipple until it becomes firm. She then takes hold of my head and plants her lips on mine and proceeds to suck the tongue out of my mouth.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Let’s go inside,” I say once I catch my breath. The truck’s clock shows 10:35. We exit the truck and enter into the hallway leading to my basement apartment. I silently unlock the door. She rushes to where she knows I keep my liquor. It’s in an old hi-fi cabinet my mom gave to me; one of these old-fashioned contraptions with an all-in-one TV, stereo, and such. In one of the side cabinets, you can store anything you want—booze, records, whatever.

“Should I get some ice?” I ask her. “What did you find?”

“Well, you have some JD here.”

“Jack Daniel’s on the rocks then.” As I turn back toward her with the ice and glasses, she holds the bottle of whiskey in one hand and a joint in the other hand.

She exclaims with a smile, “Now we got a party.”

“Take this ice first, babe.” Most of it slips from my hands and onto the floor at my feet.

Beth pops the joint in her mouth, hands me the bottle, and bends down to gather the ice. I place the glasses and whiskey on the coffee table and watch her. She fumbles with the melting ice and talks to herself as the G-string rides higher up her crotch. The more she struggles, the more the material shifts up.

“Beth, there’s another one to your left,” I say. *God, if you are there, please forgive me. I’m a good person, just not right now.*

“I think we’re good, Mikey,” she says as she gets to her feet. All the ice cubes in her hands are useless now.

“Let me get new ones, please,” I say.

“Were you just letting me do that to watch my ass, you perv?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Is it up to your standards and requirements?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Oh, yeah.”

She takes the bottle of Jack Daniel’s and chugs it as though it’s her mother’s breast milk and her life depends on it. She chokes on the whiskey, reaches out with a hand, and I rush to steady her.

“Calm down, girl,” I tell her. When she catches her breath, she goes for another swig, but I snatch the bottle away. She gives me a questioning glance.

“I don’t need no ice cubes.” Then, she pulls me back toward the living room, if you can call it such.

It’s a small space filled with a hand-me-down chest of drawers, a microwave, a small fridge, and a couch that folds out into a bed. Some nights, the bed doesn’t even get opened.

As she tries to light the joint, the thought crosses my mind: I can have my way with her tonight. She’s not wasted, so we’re good, right?

Beth lights the joint after two or three pulls of a match and draws a long, slow hit. She hands it to me, and I take a pretend hit. My buzz is already humming strong. Beth, I can tell, she’s going to get wasted. She floats toward the stereo as I take a seat on the couch.

“Do you still have that Billy Holly record?” she asks.

“You mean, ‘True Love Ways’ by Buddy Holly?”

“Yeaah—” she drawls with a sideways smirk.

“It’s on the left.”

“Hey, I loved this book as a kid.” She holds up an old paperback copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. “What’s that other one again?”

“*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” I say. “I lost that one, though.”

“*Huckleberry Finn*—right.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She finally finds the record and fumbles to put it on—scratch, scratch. “Whoa!” I leap up to put it on for her. She plops on the couch and flashes me the okay sign. I place the needle down onto the LP and adjust the volume lower. When I turn back toward Beth, she has her entire outfit off and at her feet. She glances up at me with sleepy eyes and gestures me over to her.

Just you know why. . . .

A violinist’s bow brushes along the strings.

We both look into each other’s eyes. The bass keeps a steady beat as a playful saxophone joins in. She’s so sexy, and she’s got me.

Tonight, Beth is on a mission. Her ferocity and shameless abandon have my full attention. We kiss, slow and long at first. Her tongue dives deep inside my mouth. She pulls away and begins to disrobe me as I get hard. Once my clothes are off, I throw her back on the couch and get on top of her. She flips me over and now she’s on top of me.

“You better be careful, little boy, or I might break your parts,” she says.

“Go right ahead, madam.”

“I ain’t no madam, I’m just a girl that’s gonna fuck your brains out, mista’.”

Beth then proceeds to rise above me as she takes hold of my erect shaft. I try to help with the business but soon learn, Beth is in charge. She pushes my hand away, then slips my cock inside her moist pussy. To say her body is ready for me would be an understatement. Her pussy is succulent and surrounds me with a warm, fleshy throb. As she starts to rise and fall above me, I watch her.

She’s everything a man would want. She has ample, compact breasts. I think they’re real. Hair that’s styled full, curly and perfect. I think it’s real. And, she also has a complete abandon

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

when it comes to sex. Sometimes, though, I wish our relationship was more than just sex and coke.

“Mikey, kiss me.” She shudders aloud and bends down to my face. We share a wet, lingering kiss as her rump continues to rise and fall hard onto me. I latch onto her neck with my mouth and suck hard.

“Don’t gimme a hickey,” she cries out. I continue to suck on her neck, and she stops.

“I have to go to work tomorrow, so please don’t leave your dog stain on me, okay?”

“Right.”

She commences to bounce on me with an assault that’s quite unlike our other encounters.

Beth pulls my head back with both her hands and starts a steady chant, “Mikey, I really dig you. I love you. I love you, Mikey,” she whispers.

Her pelvis continues to batter mine with all its weight. The motion and ferocity go on forever. Her body begins to gleam with a shimmering, feminine beauty.

Her backside continues to plunge onto my cock as she holds her upper torso tight to mine. Her hot breath and words flood my ears while her damp breasts press against my chest. She pushes her pelvis into mine with a powerful, rhythmic urgency in a way no girl has ever done. I’m not sure what I should do. A low, whimper begins to emanate from the back of her throat. She writhes up and her flesh shivers with a pure rapture I’ve never seen from her.

Beth’s entire body gleams with a luminous sweat as she grinds her pelvis down into mine so I’m deep inside her now. Her nails begin to dig into my arms.

“Are you okay?” I ask. She lets out a throaty moan.

“Ohhh yeah—I just had an orgasm, dickhead,” she says.

“Oh?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“You mean you never had a girl come to orgasm while she’s fucking you?”

“Not that I know of,” I say.

“Well, you just got my jewels ta’ jingle, and let me tell you, I’ll be back to employ you again, little boy,” she says as she pulls off me. I begin to explode all over anything in a five-mile radius. She grabs my cock and puts it in her mouth. As I ejaculate, she swallows me deep and keeps me there until I finish. When she releases me, she smiles and says, “You see, Mikey, it’s a mutual arrangement. We both got what we want, right?”

“So, you had an, an—”

“Orgasm!” she proclaims with glee. “Yeah, thanks. I really, really, really appreciate it.”

“Okay, I guess.”

The remainder of the joint rests in the ashtray. I hand it to Beth and sit on the couch next to her as she lights it again. She’s in a mellow place right now. The joint hits her lips and she draws a long, deep inhale and then hands it to me. We’re both naked, leaning back on the couch, no covers, no inhibitions, and no problems. I inhale, hold, exhale, and cough. We forgot to get tampons. I guess she didn’t need any.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 5

The alarm goes off at 7:00 a.m. I have a vague memory of Beth and I opening up the couch and getting into bed. She's sprawled out under the covers and a bit of her thigh peeks out. She is a healthy specimen of a female. Typically, I'd be waking the girl up so we can go at it again, especially since it's my birthday today, but I better shower and get out to the job. Last night wasn't a late night. I'm guessing we passed out around 1:00 a.m. My head tells me so. Beth, I figure, may need to sleep in. After she'd set up several albums to play, she took a mouthful of Jack Daniel's and fell back onto the bed. She might have been doing that all night long for all I know.

My bathroom is along a makeshift hallway we built when my mom created two rooms in the cellar. It's a shared bath between two renters. No one rents the other room yet, so I have it all to myself. Shit, shower, and, no shave, no time. As I grab my keys, Beth snores away like a drowning cow.

"Beth, Beth." I shake her.

"Haa, whaa—?" She opens one eye.

"Don't forget to lock up when you leave, please," I tell her.

She grunts and goes back to her previous activity.

The last time we stayed together, she forgot to pull the door completely shut, and a squirrel got in the place. The damn thing caused complete havoc and trashed my apartment. It made a small nest for its babies in the ceiling and found an opening to get outside for food. She even stole some of my Cheerios. The baby squirrels looked like small, helpless aliens. Some people would have flushed them down the toilet or thrown them in the trash. I fed the babies by

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

hand for a week or so with an eyedropper and baby formula. I thought about keeping one of the little critters to raise, but fatherhood wasn't in the cards at the time.

I trapped the mother squirrel and brought the lot down to the park and set them free. Tuchi told me he would have fried them up for dinner. He didn't mean it; the guy's an animal lover himself. He owns a beautiful Italian mastiff named Assassino. It means assassin in Italian. This male dog is massive at two years old. He's a gorgeous gray-blue color with the ears and tail cropped that gives the dog the desired menacing appearance. Tuchi said the breed is a descendant of the ones Roman legions took into battle: brave, loyal, and fearless.

The truck's clock shows 8:05 a.m. It's unusual for us to be working on Saturday, but for Father Bill, we do. Tuchi, Kevin, and I have been framing out an addition to the rectory at St. Joseph's Church. This is where the local kids receive their first communion and confirmation. This is where you'd get married if you're so inclined. For most people in town, if you're Catholic, this is where you would worship as well. Tuchi is already here. Father Bill stands outside in the still, cold air and talks with him.

Father Bill or Bill as we call him, is an old high school buddy and Nam buddy too. Somehow, we all ended up getting thrown into that hellhole together. Kevin's not here yet, and this is typical for him. Tuchi, though, never gets a hangover or misses work. I head in Bill's direction after I exit the truck. Tuchi is already up a ladder, and he pulls off the tarp we used to cover our work. He falters a bit and then regains his balance.

"Eight-oh-five, bro—did Beth keep you up?" he shouts as he shakes the snow from the tarp. He holds his groin and laughs a sinister, dirty laugh.

"What's he yelling about?" Father Bill asks. "Ohhh—"

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Don’t mind him, Bill. You know he’s a perv from day one,” I say.

“Maybe he needs to come to confession? Maybe you do too, Mike?” Bill says. “I haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“Me? You know I get a rash when I go to church,” I say with a smile.

“Oh, yes, rash is it, or do the walls close in on you?” He looks at me sideways. Bill was always a very to-the-point guy. He played football with us in high school as well, second string receiver because he’s so small. The coach put him in only when it became unavoidable.

I recall one play when the coach let him in the game. I threw the ball in his direction. He jumped up and snatched it with one hand before the safety smashed him to pieces. The safety was talking all kinds of trash as Bill lay unconscious. The safety had his helmet off, so I flattened him with a punch. Both benches emptied onto the field. Helmets came off, and fists were flying. Then I got blindsided in the head with a helmet. Lights out! I begin to rub my head as I approach him.

“How’s the head today, Mike?” he asks with a hint of seriousness in his voice.

“Not too good today, thanks. I was at Casey’s late and then I hooked up, ah, I took a girl home who had too much to drink.”

“Did this girl happen to be one of the dancers, Mike?” he asks me, arms folded.

“Possibly.”

“Well, did she wear a somewhat skimpy outfit of say, the G-string type and high heels?”

“I guess.”

“Well, Mike, I think she’s one of the go-go dancers,” Bill says as he closes one eye and keeps the other one locked on me.

“Yeah, yeah, Bill, listen, I better help Tuchi, so see you later.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I’ll check in with you guys at lunch then,” Bill calls out.

I wave with my back to him and climb up the ladder.

Tuchi teeters on the rafters forming the ridge of the roof. He’s got pretty good balance, I mean, the guy still practices karate and has achieved a black belt. He pulls the rest of the tarp off and lets it drop to the ground. He notices me.

“Oh, so you decided to help finally,” he says.

“Yeah, well, I see you struggling with that thing.”

“That’s called efficiency of motion,” he tells me.

He’s always talking about efficiency of motion. Maybe it’s a karate thing. Before we’ve ever gotten into a fight, he’ll point to me and say, “Remember from Nam days, Mike, efficiency of motion.” This one time, he did a roundhouse kick to some guy’s face with little effort on his part. You’d never know he injured a leg in the war.

“Tuchi, what’s next with this roof?” I ask.

“We gotta put the plywood on and sheath it,” he says as Kevin pulls up in his old red Cadillac convertible. He gave me a ride in it once, and it smelled like piss.

Kevin shuffles out of the car and yells, “I thought we were gonna meet at eight thirty?”

“Yeah, it’s eight forty, loser,” Tuchi shouts.

Tuchi is a stickler for punctuality and no bullshit. He runs this company for the owner, whom I’ve never met. Believe it or not, he excels at the grunt work of framing a building, even with a bum leg. I, on the other hand, handle most of the finish work with Kevin; drywall, moldings, and such. Still, I do know my way around a roof and siding.

Kevin bustles out of the Caddy and comes up the ladder to see what we’re doing. He has all Tuchi’s attention now. Me, I don’t care.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Sorry, guys, my car wouldn’t start,” Kevin explains.

“My car broke down,” Tuchi says.

I say, “My dog ate my homework.” Tuchi and I laugh.

“Get the fuck outta here, Kevin,” Tuchi says.

“You know I have a bad alternator. You know this,” Kevin says.

“Yeah, I also told you to replace it, two years ago. Listen, Kevin, just get the plywood, and get it up here.” Tuchi turns away and goes back to work.

“One day that little prick is gonna be under my thumb,” Kevin growls.

“You know, Kevin, if you ever showed up to the job on time, maybe he wouldn’t talk to you that way,” I tell him.

A police car rolls by. Inside is a man by the name of Chester Hornauy. We call him Chester the molester. He turns his police cruiser into the driveway of the rectory, close to where we work.

“Hey, homos, what’s up your ass? Oh, where’s Father Bill? I mean, what’s up Father Bill’s ass?” He laughs to himself. Chester went to high school with us and played football with us as well. To this day, we can’t get away from his stink.

We had all hoped he’d get incapacitated on the football field years ago. We hoped he would get incapacitated in Vietnam and never return. I hope he dies in the line of duty as a police officer. Listen, I love the police, aside from a couple of times they arrested me and Tuchi—and I’m sure we deserved it—besides those times, I’m pro-police, but when it comes to Chester, no way. Tuchi starts to give him the lower lip treatment.

“Oh, no, loser,” Chester shouts from the cruiser. “Go fuck yourself, Tuchi.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Tuchi pulls down his pants, bends over, and shows a full ass and balls view. He spreads his cheeks wide to show his butthole in all its glory. He's raunchy, and that's what I like about him. Besides, Chester always deserves the butthole, no doubt. Chester gets out of the car and comes toward us.

Chester bellows, "Do you homos have a permit for this job?" Bill comes out from the rectory. "Ohhh, here's the lead homo, Father Bill. Doesn't even kiss me once he's done fucking me," Chester says with a chuckle.

"How can I help you, Officer Hornauy?" Bill asks.

"Can you suck my dick, Father?" he snorts in a nasty voice.

"What do you want, Chester?"

"I wanna know if you have a permit for this construction, your holiness?"

"It's right in the window of the rectory if you cared to look, Chester." Bill points to it.

"I don't care about anything except for breakin' your balls, homo."

"Can you stop being such a dick when you're on church property at least?"

"Well, maybe I will when you stop sucking dick, Padre."

Bill turns and goes back inside.

As I come down the ladder, Tuchi whispers to me, "Fuck with this asshole, will you?"

"Oh, yeah, you know it's a hobby of mine," I mutter under my breath. Chester watches me as I descend the ladder.

He rests both hands on his belt and makes sure I see his right hand fondling his gun. I have some unfinished business with him from way back. Chester was fooling around in high school with an underage girl from town. No one ever found out what happened to her and

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

somehow it faded away. This always sits in the back of my mind. Soon after, we all got drafted to Vietnam. One day, I'll have the balls to act on this deep hatred I harbor for him.

“Hey, Chester, are you still a molester?” I ask him.

“Go fuck yourself, Mike.”

“You see the permit right in the window of the rectory, so why did you stop, douchebag?”

“To talk to my old friends, why else?” he says with a smile.

“We're not friends, Chester, not since high school, remember?”

“Well, let's call it slumming.”

“Listen, Chester, why don't you get outta the slum then? Keep your uniform clean.” I step into his personal space.

“You go and keep playing with your homo friends, and I'll get back to keeping this town in line.” He turns to go.

“You do that, Chester the molester,” I say.

“What?” He turns back toward me.

“What, Chester?”

“If I were you, Mikey, I would watch my step.” He glares at me. “I don't wanna have to arrest you again.”

“If I were you, Chester, I would walk away while I have the chance.”

“Tough guy, right? Always the tough guy, Mikey. Remember in Nam?” He steps in to whisper in my ear, “Who was tough, and who was weak?”

“I remember that you were a scumbag is what I remember,” I whisper back. He steps away and his eyes narrow.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“You and your friends, you think that you’re all better than me, right?”

“I don’t think that, Chester, I know that, dude.” I pat him on the shoulder and then turn to get back to work.

“You both watch your step, you hear!” Chester yells. “I’m somebody in this town now, so listen up.” Tuchi pulls down his lower lip.

“Fuck you and your lip, Tuchi!” Chester shouts. He grabs his ticket pad, writes a ticket, and sticks it under one of the wipers on my truck.

“What’s that for, Chester?” I ask.

“A broken taillight.”

“I don’t have a broken taillight.”

He takes out his flashlight, walks to the back of my truck, and busts out one of the lights with it. Then he gets in his cruiser and peels away as a storm of gravel pelts my jeans. The thought of his stench continuing to infest our world, this is what can torment you.

He’s not the biggest guy around, but he has filled out since high school. All through school, he had to wear these coke-bottle glasses to be able to see. When we had games, those things had to be strapped tight to his head so they would stay on. One time, when he talked trash over the quarterback, the running back came up and knocked him down. They got a penalty, and we won the game. He may have gotten lucky that night at the victory party we had. He went into a room with a girl I thought was way too young to be alone with a senior.

Another game, Chester got clobbered on a play. When he came off the field, he looked like a broken puppet with shattered glasses. His mom saw this from the stands and came rushing down to him on the sidelines.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I brought your other pair, Chester,” she shouted while he tried to ignore her. “Chester, honey, here’s another pair.” He rushed over to her and ripped the glasses from her hand. He then proceeded to berate her. She turned and went back to her seat in the bleachers.

“Chester, she’s just tryin’ to help you, man,” I told him.

“Mind your own fucking business,” he said. He threw both pairs of glasses in the trash.

We get serious about the new roof on this addition. The plywood goes up and we sheath it. Before long, lunchtime has arrived. Bill comes back with a few sodas and we sit outside to eat. Although it snowed last night, the day is sunny and not that cold. December can be like this sometimes.

“What a dick, right?” Bill says.

“You know exactly who this douchebag is, Bill. You spent a lot of time with him in Nam,” I say. “Sorry, Bill, but you started it.” I take a bite of my turkey sandwich. Bill takes a sip of soda and turns in my direction.

“Yes, I know you’re right, Mike. Even a guy like Chester, though, I think there’s still hope for him, if not here, then in the Kingdom of God,” he says.

I put my soda down in disgust and walk away, then turn back and point an angry sandwich at him.

“You’ll be redeemed and have lunch with Jesus for eternity, Bill, if you believe in such things. Chester’s gonna get fucked by the devil every day for eternity,” I say. “You have to believe in the devil, though, and I know you do. Karma’s a bitch as they say.”

He doesn’t reply. I finish my sandwich and get back to work.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

The day continues in a sustained silence with only the words needed to get the roof done. We all know what the next step is. We've done it so many times before. This unclean feeling, after an encounter with Chester, is familiar as well. It's also the lingering thought—*I should have killed him in Vietnam.*

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Chapter 6

When I get home, the outside door is open. “Goddamn it, Beth,” I grumble to myself. A cat rushes out and scares the crap out of me. “Goddamn it!” This is getting old with her. The bed’s still open and unmade as well. A note upon the pillows reads: Remember, I’ll see you tonight at Casey’s, Birthday Boy. Beth XOXOXO.

Today is my birthday. I’m thirty-four today, and by chance it happens to be Saturday night. Although she’s dancing at another place tonight, Beth will meet me at Casey’s after she gets off.

A shower’s in order and I rush to the bathroom, peel my clothes off, and run the water. Although this room is small and somewhat inadequate, it gets the job done. Tuchi, Kevin, and I built it in a rush when my mother and James decided to create two rooms in the cellar. They wanted some extra cash for those times when the bar gets slow. We installed one of those all-in-one tub-shower inserts. You get a tub to soak in and you get a shower with walls included with the kit. Slide it in and hook it up. A simple toilet and vanity sink complete the room. Basic is what I would call this bathroom.

Cash flow issues is why James made the decision to add go-go nights at the bar as well, even though his real dream is to have an Irish pub. His family ran one back in their village of Kilcrohane in County Cork. Tuchi and I loved the change to Casey’s, though. We couldn’t hide our enthusiasm with the remodeling of the bar, and it has paid off.

Tonight, my mother will make my favorite meal, pot roast and mashed potatoes. She always prepares this for me on my birthday. The thought of the food makes me want to touch

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

myself while I shower, but no time, Mike. My mom and James never eat too late, so I accomplish the task in record time.

As I run up the steps, I falter and trip. They hear this, and James opens the door to greet me. I'm assaulted by a barrage of happy birthday wishes from my mom, Nanna and James. This happens every birthday for me, but I still pretend it's a surprise.

"Happy birthday, honey." My mother gives me a kiss on the cheek.

"Happy birthday, Mike," James proclaims, and he shakes my hand. Then, I come to my Nanna, who sits across the table and give her a hug.

"Happy birthday, Mikey," she gushes. She gives me a kiss. As I try to pull away, she holds my face and whispers, "We may not have many more of these birthdays together."

"What are you talking about, Nanna?"

"Well, I'm no spring chicken. I'm more like a dried-up raisin." Her mature, blue eyes examine mine. My blue eyes don't have anywhere near those years of experience.

"Raisins are sweet and my favorite," I reply.

"You are a wise man." She kisses me full on the lips.

"Tell my mother that."

"Your mother is in a time warp movie. Watching her makes me wanna get some popcorn and sit back to watch the action." Nanna laughs.

"I love you, Nanna," I say.

Nanna is a ballsy lady. She has that gray-blue colored hair I see on many a granny, and she's the only woman I've ever seen smoke a pipe. She's second generation Irish. Her parents came over to New York in the early twentieth century and made their way to Jersey City. She

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followed my mother when she moved out to Sussex Township years ago. Nanna has always been an amazing grandmother. To say she and my mom have a somewhat adversarial relationship is an understatement. Sometimes they get along, sometimes not.

Nanna pulls out her pipe and starts to fill it with tobacco from a pouch she keeps in her bra.

“Mother, I told you, no smoking before we eat. What did you not understand?” my mom asks her.

“I understand perfectly, Mar. We already had some hors d’oeuvres, so I haven’t broken your—your arbitrary rules.”

“We’ve talked about this before, Mother, so put it away, please.”

“Okay, Marion.” Nanna rolls her eyes.

My mother is a short woman with the same blue eyes I have. She dyes her hair light brown and the style she likes seems to be stuck in the early ’70s. Her given name is Maryanne, but she never liked it, so she morphed it into Marion. She says it sounds more regal.

Mom then serves the meal and we all dig in. She slices the meat a half-inch thick. The mashed potatoes are made with garlic powder, rosemary, butter, and warm milk, whipped with a hand mixer and then covered in brown gravy. James comes over and serves me a glass of red wine. This dish goes well with a red, and James and I would only drink red wine. He told me once, “Don’t let people tell ye’ that ye’ have ta’ drink this wine with this kinda food or such.”

I have always followed his advice. James raises his glass.

“Let’s pause for thanks and prayers for our family, loved ones, and friends. None of us would make it ta’ Heaven without ye’. *Slainte.*”

We then start to devour the meal, to the delight of my mother.

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“Is everyone enjoying it?” she asks.

“Not really,” I say, “the gravy’s a little runny.”

“I don’t see you putting your fork down.” She comes over to me and puts my neck in a Mr. Spock hold.

“I . . . I’m still eating,” I say as I squirm under the power of Spock.

She bends down and whispers in my ear. “I remember the day you were born. It was in the afternoon, thirty-four years ago today.”

“Was my father there?” I ask. She pulls away and gives me an inquisitive stare.

“I told you many times, your father went to Alaska and never came back.”

When she sits down, everyone’s eyes are on her. They know this has been a rough spot in our relationship. Many an argument we two have had, probing the questions, who’s my dad and what happened to him? Where are the photos of me and my father like other people have? James raises his glass again.

“To the continued health of tha’ family and happy birthday to ye’, Mike boy,” he says. James always tries to keep the peace. It’s the Irish way. You sweep it under the carpet and let it die in darkness.

After dinner, a Devil’s food birthday cake with chocolate butter cream icing follows. It’s my favorite, and my mom delivered and hit all the right notes, as always.

Sometimes, though, I can’t connect on a real, personal level with her. James waves me over to him with a smile. He’s a good, kind man with meaningful brown eyes and a full head of gray hair. I tower over him. He’s great with my mother, and Nanna loves him as well.

“Mike boy, follow me.” He gestures with an inviting wave.

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The ritual is oh, so familiar from the age of sixteen on holidays and birthdays. Back in Ireland, it must be a rite of passage to get introduced to whiskey by your dad at that age. My mother wasn't happy, but James told her, he had his first sip of whiskey with his dad on his sixteenth birthday. Not that James is my dad, but he has been a great stepfather. He never had a lot of time for me growing up, with running the bar and all, but we did do some great vacations as a family.

James takes two glasses from his dry bar and pours Jameson's whiskey into both. He hands one to me. It's served neat, no ice, and two fingers from the bottom of the glass. This is how he always drinks it, but he knows I'll need some ice.

"Can I have some ice, please?" I ask him. He then hurries back out to the kitchen to get one cube. He eases it into my glass as "not to disturb the spirits," he would tell you.

"Slainte chugat," he toasts and puts his glass to his lips.

"Health to you, James," I reply. The amber liquid slides down my throat as I wonder how the rest of my night may go. Tuchi and I will meet up at Casey's. Sharon will be dancing, but Beth is somewhere else tonight. I sure hope Beth shows up like she promised.

"I never told you to put a bay leaf in with the pot roast, Marion," Nanna exclaims.

My mother excuses herself in a fluster and leaves.

I pull a bag of pot out and ask Nanna, "You want me to give you some for your pipe, Nanna?"

"That stuff grew all over Jersey City and Hoboken back in the 1920s." She waves me away. "Pipe—my pipe. Is she gone?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Good." She proceeds to light the pipe she filled before dinner.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She always smokes sweet-smelling apple tobacco. The scent would cover her total being and cover us all as children. You would know when Nanna had been in a room, even after she had left. Following the essence of apple tobacco, you'd get a whiff of old lady, cheap perfume wafting in the air as well. Those two scents together in your nose created a strange combination. I get a big kick out of watching this blue-haired lady smoke a pipe.

It's great being around Nanna, and I do appreciate my mom's cooking. The anticipation of a birthday on a Saturday night, though, is, well—electrifying. The real fun will start later tonight. What time is it, though? Why don't they have a clock on the wall?

"What time you got, James?" I ask him.

"Seven-oh-five," he replies.

"Who's closing the bar tonight?" I ask.

"Filominca."

"I have the spare key in case she has a problem."

"No funny business with that key." He shakes a finger at me.

"One time I let myself in and I'm a criminal?"

"One time too many if you ask me. Let Filominca close the place, and that's that."

"Of course," I tell him.

Nanna has the whole dining room in a deep fog of flavored smoke now.

I give her a smooch on the cheek and whisper, "I love you." She takes hold of my face.

"Take care out there, Mikey. I hear the women are fallin' all over themselves to get in the sack with you."

"Those are only the ones I pay for, Nanna," I say as I walk behind her to shake James's hand. She slaps the table in delight.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Save your dollars. You don’t need to spend them,” she says.

“Save the dollars, Mike boy,” James chimes in as we shake hands.

“I’ll save ’em tonight and buy some chewing gum.”

They send me on my way with a chorus of goodbyes and waves.

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Chapter 7

The parking lot at Casey's is full tonight. All the regulars are here. Kevin is at the bar as usual. He's not so over-the-top tonight. He waves my way. Timmy talks with Chris as he slips a bill in her bra. Tuchi and Sharon are at the bar, and they down a shot as I approach them.

"Happy birthday, bro." Tuchi hugs me and gives me the customary greeting and tonight, for good measure, a grab of my ass.

"Happy birthday, Mikey," Sharon chimes in. She gives me a warm hug. Someone taps me on the shoulder. It's Timmy.

"Happy birthday, Mike, and many more," he shouts over the music.

"Thanks, Timmy." He makes his way back to Chris who waves my way. I give her a wave.

Chris is cute, although she could use some dancing lessons if you ask me. She wears her hair in a short Afro. Her makeup is overdone, and her body isn't what you would call a typical stripper's body. She's short and petite. She also wears what appears to be a homemade G-string. She hikes a normal bikini bottom up her ass crack, folding the top under to make it smaller. Sometimes, she'll even wear a regular bra as the top part of her costume. She's definitely Timmy's favorite.

"Did you bring your package?" Tuchi asks in my ear.

"Oh, yeah."

"Hand it over," he says. As I hand it to him under the bar, Timmy comes our way again. When Tuchi sees this, he shoves the bag into a pocket.

"What's up, birthday boy?" Timmy tries to put his arm around my shoulder.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Don’t you have to go back and bother Chris? She’s going back on the stage, Timmy,” I tell him.

He rushes back to his seat in front of her. He grabs a dollar bill and starts to wave it in her direction. Sharon and Tuchi head toward the bathroom.

“The usual, Mike?” Filominca calls over my shoulder.

Filominca Brava is a great lady. She’s a small woman who wears her long, salt and pepper hair in a braided ponytail. The ponytail is half the length of her body. She’s either Filipino or a combination with some Spanish as well. I never asked. She’s awesome, and she’s a big help to James. When Filominca is on, she’s the boss.

She comes back with a Heineken and as I go to put my money on the bar, she stops me.

“The first one’s on me tonight, birthday boy,” she says. We lean over the bar and give each other a short smooch on the lips.

“Where did Tuchi and Sharon go?” she asks. “They better not be foolin’ around in the bathroom again. I warned them both before.”

With that, she grabs her wooden club, rushes around from behind the bar and runs to the ladies’ room door. She bangs on it with the club. This club of hers, she wields in situations like this or when she needs to control a rowdy patron. The weapon is one foot long with a strap at one end. Filominca keeps it behind the bar at a spot where she can reach it, and others can see her going for the thing. The mere gesture of her reaching for the club usually quiets a person down.

Tuchi opens the door and tries to run past her. She gets him in the buttocks with a perfect tennis backhand. He moans with pain and hobbles over in my direction. He rubs his nose and winks at me. Filominca turns to Sharon and uses the club like a turnstile cog to trap her at the door. You can’t make out what Filominca tells her, but she waves the club in Sharon’s face.

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Sharon stares at the floor like a guilty child while she's read the riot act. I've never seen Filominca hit a girl with the club, though. She'll wield that piece of wood whenever she has a hint of trouble from a male customer. Sharon comes our way and rubs her nose as she rolls her eyes. Before she sits down, Sharon clutches Tuchi's butt cheek and squeezes.

"Shit-t-t, that hurts, Sharon. What's wrong with you?" he asks her. She gives him a playful smile. We all sit and wait for Filominca's club to take up its customary spot.

"So, are we doing shots tonight with the birthday boy?" Filominca asks.

"Jameson's, please," I answer and hold up three fingers.

This is how the night rolls on. Shot, beer, shot, beer, shot, beer, and so on.

We pass the package back and forth under the bar so we can go in the bathroom and lay out a line every now and again. The problem is, you go all night long to keep a nice hum of a high, then the next day, you pay. Your head will be a combination of a hangover and a sinus condition. Tonight, as of now, I feel great.

The night continued with booze, music, laughter, and cocaine. Kevin came over with a birthday card, bought me a beer, and then left soon after. Sharon and Chris shared all the dancing duties, mixed with periods of taped music so the girls could take a few breaks. It's 1:45 a.m. now and Filominca yells out last call. The place closes at 2:00 a.m. She comes over to us and sets out one more round of shots and beers.

"If you wanna stay after hours, I'll let you, but no funny business, you hear." She points at Tuchi. He puts his hands up as though he's held at gunpoint. The only time she has ever done this is on my birthday. "You still have the spare keys, Mike?" she asks. I nod yes. My head feels like I'm one of those bobblehead dolls you put in your car's rear window. "You remember the

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alarm code, too?” Filominca closes one eye and points in my direction as I nod yes. “Don’t tell James, or next time I give you the club.” She points to where it hangs nearby.

“No problem and thanks, Filominca, you’re awesome,” I burp. Something came up in my throat. “It’s only gonna be us three, so no worries. We’ll stay till maybe three and lock ’er up then.”

“Don’t let me down, Mike, ’cause James will be mad at the both of us,” she says. I give her a thumbs-up while people start to filter out. At that moment, Beth pops through the door, waving a gift. Filominca gives me a kiss on the cheek and leaves. Chris goes to say goodnight to Sharon and gets a goodbye kiss from Timmy as well.

I lock the door and drag Beth back to the bar. “What did you get me?”

“You’ll see,” she says. I unwrap it carefully as she smiles a broad smile.

“*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” I say.

“You told me you lost the copy you had since you were a kid,” she says.

Sharon and Tuchi come over and he dumps out more of what’s in his bag. “What’s that?” Tuchi asks.

“My birthday gift from Beth,” I say.

“Wow, Mark Twain,” Sharon says as she grabs the book. “I didn’t know you could read, Beth.”

“Fuck you, Sharon,” Beth says with venom.

I go over to the jukebox and play one of Tuchi’s favorites—The Doors’ “When the Music’s Over.” The throbbing notes of an organ and snare drum explode and bounce off the hollow walls of the bar. Tuchi hears the song and lights up. He jumps over the bar and takes hold

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of Filominca’s club and uses it as a microphone. He climbs on the stage and wraps himself around the brass pole. Beth and Sharon shower him with applause.

Cancel my subscription to the Resurrection. . . .

While Tuchi’s doing his thing, I rush behind the bar to give everyone another shot and beer.

“Thanks for the book, Beth,” I tell her as I lean over the bar and give her a kiss. “Don’t mind Sharon.”

I proceed to draw four more long lines of coke out on the bar. Tuchi’s show continues as he belts out the song. When the part of the song where I always chime in comes, I get on the stage, and we both embrace each other and the pole.

*Jesus!
Save us!*

We sing at the top of our lungs and try to compete with the blaring music.

*When the music’s over, yeah
When. . . .*

Bang, bang, bang on the door. I jump down off the stage and turn the volume to the jukebox off. Sharon covers the cocaine with a napkin.

“Beth, go see who it is.” Someone smashes the small window in the door. Beth shields her face from the projectile glass and stumbles back.

“The music’s over, homos, open the fucking door.” It’s Chester.

“Open the door, Beth,” I tell her. Tuchi’s still on the stage. Sharon comes up to me in a panic and squeezes my arm.

“The coke,” she whispers.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

As Chester enters the bar, he pushes Beth aside. The broken glass makes an aggressive sound beneath his boots. Behind him follow two biker-type guys. These goons are big, ugly, and mean-looking. One of them is familiar. Chester's not in his uniform, so what's this all about? He swaggers toward me with pure bravado.

“Kinda late to be having so much fun, ain't it, Mike?” He inspects his surroundings with a nasty grin.

“What do you want, Chester? I don't see a uniform on you or anything and, ah—isn't it past your bedtime?” I ask him. Tuchi lets out a chuckle.

“Just passing by and heard the music, so I thought I'd see what the competition is up to, that's all. I opened a place down the road a ways, and maybe I can finally put your stepfather outta business.” Sharon sits at the bar stool in front of the napkin with the cocaine. Tuchi comes down from the stage.

“Ladies, hi, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Chester, Chester Hor—”

“Horny?” Sharon blurts out. “Is this the Chester you been telling me about, Tuchi?”

“Shut up, whore!” Chester snaps. Tuchi leaps over the bar the way an Olympic athlete would.

He lands between Sharon and Chester. Chester reaches under his shirt, pulls out a gun, and walks toward Tuchi, who raises his hands. As Chester lifts the gun close to his face, Tuchi snatches it. It is so fast, it surprises Chester and his gorillas. The two bikers pull out sleek, semi-automatic handguns in turn and point them at Tuchi. Chester stumbles back and chokes on his fear.

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“Whoa—whoa, hold on!” Chester blurts out with his hands in the air. “We’re all friends here, right? You remember your old friend from your club days, right, Tuchi?” He gestures to one of the thugs.

“Oh, yeah, perfect company for you, Chester, eh?” Tuchi scoffs.

“Shut the fuck up, Tuchi,” the one biker yells.

“Now, give me back the gun slowly, and we can all be good friends again, right?”

Chester says.

He moves toward Tuchi and waves a hand in a come-on-give-me fashion. Tuchi flips the gun up in the air. The goons flinch as he catches the muzzle with his right hand, the handle facing Chester. Chester grabs the gun and tucks it away.

“It’s all good, guys, so let’s all be buddies again, okay?” Chester gushes. He turns to the goons and motions for them to drop their guns. “Remember when we were all buddies, Mike?” he says as he sits on the stool next to Sharon. “I like to have fun too—happy birthday, by the way. We always had fun times on your birthday. Remember those young cuties we all fucked in high school and Nam?” He peers over Sharon’s shoulder, reaches over and slides the napkin away. The four big lines of coke, ready to go, are revealed. He shoos Sharon off her stool.

“Wow, we got a party going on here,” Chester says. He shifts over to the stool Sharon left, picks up the rolled bill, and snorts a line. He does another line in quick succession. Chester then spins around with a smug grin on his face and points the rolled bill at Beth. “Hey, little lady, you want some?” She gives me a hesitant look. “It’s not as good as the stuff I get, but it’s okay. It’s all right with Mike, right, Mike?” he asks as he waves her over. “Let the lady through, guys, come on.” As Beth takes a step, the thugs part ways.

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Her high heels crush the broken glass with an unpleasant sound as she tries to navigate over it. “Careful,” Chester tells her as she plods in his direction. He vacates the stool and motions for her to sit. He hands her the bill, and she snorts a line of coke. She goes to put the bill down. “No, no, do the other one,” Chester says. “It’s a party, isn’t it?” She puts the bill in the other nostril and snorts the last line of coke.

“Okay, Chester, you’ve had your fun, now you and your boyfriends can leave,” I say.

“I leave when I feel like leaving.” He gets up and comes toward me. “I can have you and your friends arrested right now for this after hours, coke party thing goin’ on. Since we’re old buddies, I’ll look the other way.”

He turns back to Beth and pulls out a card. “If you ever get tired a’ dancing in a dive like this, I opened a place down the road a bit.” He hands her the card. One of the bikers with a patch reading “Sergeant at Arms” moves in Tuchi’s direction.

“One day, I’m gonna get your colors from you, dead or alive, bro,” he says to Tuchi. He towers over him and pulls his jacket back to show his gun. Tuchi reaches to his mouth and rolls down his lower lip.

“Come on, Chaz,” Chester barks from the door. The big man turns and follows behind Chester like an obedient dog.

The patch on the back of his jacket reads “Vietnam Villains, MC.” This is the club Tuchi used to ride with years ago. When the club started getting into too many nasty things he left. This guy, in particular, has been harassing Tuchi ever since.

I run and lock the door.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

When I return with a dustpan and broom, Tuchi stands behind the bar and pours four more shots of Jameson's.

“Happy Birthday, Mikey.” Sharon raises her glass and downs it.

“Happy Birthday, bro,” Tuchi exclaims with a wink, and down the shot goes.

“Happy birthday, Mikey,” Beth says and gulps the shot, slams the glass on the bar, and points at it for another one. Tuchi obliges her. She downs that one fast as well. Glass down and, again, she wants another.

“Hold on,” I say. “I’m in trouble enough already with the broken glass and all and we’ve been drinking here for . . . crap—it’s four a.m., people!”

“I did those two massive lines of coke, and my heart’s jumpin’ outta my fuckin’ throat, so!” Beth exclaims. Tuchi shrugs and pours her another shot.

“Well, I have to clean up this mess before we go, so,” I say.

Once the glass is swept up as best it can be, I turn to find Beth still doing shots. I give Tuchi the “no more” high sign to cut her off. He puts the bottle away. Beth runs over to the jukebox and plays “Like a Virgin” for the billionth time. I go and unplug the machine.

“Let’s go, everybody, the party’s over,” I declare as I grab the Twain book.

“Ohhh,” Beth sighs as she hangs all over me. I somehow manage to work my way to the door, turn off all the lights, and set the alarm.

“Thirty seconds,” I yell. “Get your stuff and out we go.” Sharon tosses her shoes to Tuchi and runs into the dressing room.

“Grab my stuff,” Beth calls to her.

Sharon runs back with their purses and coats. We rush outside, and I lock the door.

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Chapter 8

I turn to Tuchi. “I’m screwed if James finds the door like this.”

“Listen, come back tomorrow and fix it. The place is closed tomorrow, right?”

“Tomorrow is today, man.”

“Right,” he says. “Listen, I’m gonna get some breakfast, so if you wanna come with us, you’ll fix the window later is all.”

“How the fuck can you eat after all that coke?”

“I don’t know. I’m hungry. Then, me and Sharon are gonna go by my place and fuck like little bunny rabbits.”

“I don’t think I could even get it up right now, let alone eat.”

“Well, bro, you’re gonna have your hands full with that one,” Tuchi says. Sharon steadies Beth while she helps her take her shoes off. Beth stumbles and sings “Like a Virgin.” Sharon takes hold of her shoulders.

“Are you all right, Beth? Can you stand up, please?” Sharon says in an exasperated voice.

“Oh, yeah, I’m great. Me and Mikey, we gonna go out somewhere ta’ dance and—right?” She lurches forward, then backward, as Sharon tries to stop her from falling. When at last she falls, she takes Sharon with her. Two purses and all their contents fly through the air.

“Goddammit, get this bitch home, Mike,” Sharon says when she gets up. I shove the book in my coat and rush to help Beth.

“Mikey—helpy,” she whines. She reaches in my direction, but it’s a struggle to get her to stand. “Mikey, there’s Mikey. My guy, you da’ best, bests and better, best guy ever.”

“Tuchi, let’s get some breakfast,” Sharon says.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Good luck, bro.” Tuchi pats me on the back, and he and Sharon run to his car. “What happened to your other taillight, bro?”

Beth falls square on her ass again as soon as I let her go to check out the light. “Fucking Chester, that’s what happened, I’m guessing.” There’s a ticket on the windshield; malfunctioning taillight is circled. “That’s two tickets in one day.” I rip the piece of paper into shreds.

“Mikey, you let go a’ me and—and plop, puff.” She gestures to where she thinks I may be. As she talks to herself, I proceed to pick up the contents of her purse and redeposit everything back in it again.

Tuchi drives off with a beep of the horn.

“Why do I always get in these situations?” I ask aloud. *Why do you want to be a babysitter to this person, Mike? Is it for the sex? Yes, but not tonight, please—no way.* She drained me dry yesterday, and now all I want to do is get home and try to relax. I’ll lie in bed and stare at the ceiling for hours, but at least I’ll be home. What will I do with her? I can’t leave her like this. I don’t even know where she lives. Beth sits on the ground and talks up a storm to someone who isn’t there. I get behind her and lift her to her feet.

“Mikey, where we goin’?”

“Beth, get up, please, and I’ll tell you.”

“Okay, Mikey. Mike, Mike that I ever had the pleasha’ a’ sucking your dick. Is that the Mikey we talkin’ about, boy?”

“Yeah, yeah, Beth, are you sure you mean me ’cause, ah, you get around I heard.”

“Le’ me see you face, boy.” She regains some balance and holds my face with both hands. She tries to focus in on me. “Oh, yeah, you da’ guy. Mikey man, boy—lover. Lovin’ me

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

the way ya do.” She ends the sentence singing those words to me and, somehow, she’s standing erect. Don’t think erect. Nothing is going to get erect right now.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

“Mikey—Mikey, do you love me, lover, lova?” She shuts her eyes. “Ansa’ the questions, please, you honor.”

“I’m not loving you right now with the state you’re in. We gotta get home and chill. I have to lie down, and you have to sleep it off.”

“I accep’ tha’ answer on the grounds that you sleep with me—and fu’ me ta’ night, k?”

“Whatever, let’s go. I’m taking you home. Where do you live?” I begin to shuffle her in the direction of my truck.

“My car, my carrrrr,” she whines.

“We’ll get it tomorrow, come on.”

“Noooo, I live in my car.”

When I start the truck, she reaches for the radio. I slap her hand away. She manages to turn it on, and what starts playing? Madonna’s “Like a Virgin.” No peace for me tonight, I’m sure of it.

“I love, love, love this song.” She begins to sing the words, then starts to rummage through the glove box.

“What are you doin’? It’s not there.” I turn the radio off.

“You love tha’ song when I dance to this before, ’member?” she says with a yawn. “I need something to wake me up. Where you got it?”

She reaches over and turns the radio back on as I drive off, then she reaches down my pants. I swerve into the other lane.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“What the fuck, girl, you’re gonna kill us!”

“Well then, they’ll find me with your cock in my mouth.” She hiccups. “I found somethin’. You got three balls, lova.” She pulls out the bag of coke from my groin.

“No, you did your fair share tonight, honey. Let’s leave that for another night.”

“Yeah, but the night’s still nighty, night, nighty. Don’t you wanna stay up all nighty night and fuck?” She waves the bag in front of my face.

“Beth, we’re here, wake up.” I shake her.

“Wha’?” she moans.

“We’re here. Get up.”

“Okay, Mikey, I got tha’ bag.”

I rush around to the passenger side to help her. She opens the door and stumbles again. I take a firm hold of her.

“Let’s get inside,” I say.

“I feel sick,” she says as she lurches forward. She hands me her purse and proceeds to vomit. While I hold her hair back, I also try to steady her so she doesn’t throw up on her feet. *Barf, barf*. . . followed by some dry-heave retching.

I have hold of her purse and her hair, and I hold her up as well.

What have you got yourself into tonight with this one? She taps me dry of body fluids, she never buys a shot, a beer, anything, and she does more than her fair share of my coke. Who introduced me to Beth? Oh yeah, Tuchi did. It figures. Once again, all because of my buddy, I’m in a real—a real pickle of a situation.

“Get me inside, Mikey.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Beth sits at the edge of my bed and moans a pathetic moan. I throw her things on the floor and put *Huck Finn* on the coffee table.

“Where’s the bag?” I ask. She holds it in the air.

“Maybe, if I do a little, it’ll wake me up,” she says.

“Haven’t you had enough?”

“Well, just a little?” She pouts. Then, she tries to take off her coat and G-string. It’s like watching an old newsreel of Houdini escaping from a straitjacket. I snatch the bag of coke from her hand. Undressed and redirected, she begins to shuffle through a stack of records.

“Where’s that Bubby Holly record? Buddy Holly, right?”

“Don’t play it too loud, please,” I tell her. With this, she finds the record and flips it up to show me. It slips out of the jacket, flies through the air, and hits the floor on its edge. A piece of it chips off.

“Ohhh, sorry.” She giggles.

“Beth, put everything down and sit still, please.”

“Sorry, I’ll be good.” She slinks her way over toward me while I lay out a small line of coke atop the stereo cabinet for her. She has the devil in her eyes and proceeds to kneel between me and the cabinet. She begins to undo my pants.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

She doesn’t say a word, and she puts my cock in her mouth. Still, I try to draw out a thin line for her. She may be wasting her time. All this cocaine in my system will make it harder for me to get it up. I decide to find out since it does feel good. She begins to retch again.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Get to the bathroom, go,” I tell her. She runs with her hands over her mouth. Horrible barfing sounds float down the hallway. The girl did drink a lot of whiskey tonight.

Tonight, tomorrow, what day is it? My alarm clock shows 5:35 a.m. It’s Sunday, right? Here I am with my pants down to my ankles and Beth is in my bathroom hurling up all that good Jameson’s she drank earlier. I sit on the bed, shake my head in disbelief, and take my shoes and pants off. My body just wants to rest. Still, something tells me to see if she’s all right first.

Beth kneels at the toilet with one hand on the tank and the other hand on the floor. As I get next to her, I pull her hair back, so it won’t fall in the toilet water.

“Get me a damp cloth, please,” she says, out of breath. Taking a washcloth from the shower, I then soak it in cold water.

“Watch your hair,” I say.

“Gimme me a towel,” she says in a feeble voice. “Oh, Mikey, please come here. Help me,” she pleads as she proceeds to have another episode. When the puking stops, she takes the cloth from me and wipes her face. “Ohhh—ohhh,” she moans. “Wet it again.”

As I wet the cloth, I turn back to be sure she’s steady enough and won’t fall over and smack her head on the toilet. She’s remaining still now and must have nothing left to vomit. Her entire body glistens with sweat. To my amazement, her hair remains perfect. She motions me over to her as she lets out a muted sigh.

“Rub my neck and back down, please—oh God,” she moans with barely enough energy for the words. She closes the toilet lid and rests her head on it.

Once I pull her hair to one side, I place the damp cloth over her neck. She lets out a muffled sound. The cloth works its way over her shoulders and soaks up the sweat as it goes. All the while, this low, slow murmur of a sigh emanates from her. After the cloth slides down around

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

her stomach, it glides up and around her breasts. Something begins to happen in my mojo department, and I get aroused.

I discard the cloth and I grab a handful of her breasts. They're still moist from her sweat, but firm and my fingers tweak her nipples. This elicits a faint groan from Beth. The thought crosses my mind that I'm taking advantage of her. Is it wrong to proceed? Until she says stop—I figure I'm good.

“Mikey, the rag,” she says in a weak, insistent voice.

“Let me soak it again.”

Kneeling behind her, I then spread her legs apart and pat down the moisture from the small of her back. My pace is slow and methodical. I glide the cloth over her left butt cheek, then down her thigh in one fluid motion, ending at her ankle. Her feet are filthy. *Don't get distracted.* Before me, Beth's feminine beauty is evident in all its glory. I have never been in such a situation. She's mine and this time, it's on my terms, not hers.

She remains motionless as I wet the cloth again, except for a subdued, low sound. It's a sound a wounded animal would make. I have to believe that she too is a willing participant. My cock is hard now as I resume my task. Once the cloth is done with her right butt cheek, I take a moment to take in her breathtaking attributes. Her pussy glistens with a tantalizing ripeness and is framed by her round ass and sturdy thighs. Even in her present state, she's the picture of a healthy, nubile female. I drop the cloth, spread her butt cheeks and slip inside her pussy.

“Mikey, ohhh,” she gasps. I pull her hips toward me with forceful, rhythmic motions. Her rump bounces back and forth with each thrust into her. She takes firm hold of the toilet tank now.

“Yeah, come on, Mikey. Come on, boy, fuck me!” she shrieks. I stop.

“Quiet, it's early and we don't wanna wake anyone upstairs,” I whisper.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She nods with understanding.

Once we continue, she brings her hips to mine. Beth has gotten the rhythm now and she meets my pelvis with every plunge into her. As we quicken the pace, she covers her mouth. It won't be much longer. I come inside her in a massive discharge of semen. She did say she started the pill, as I recall. Something inside my gut second-guesses my decision not to pull out.

“Mikey, you tha’ man.”

“You did say that you started the pill, right?”

“Aha.”

“Are you sure you can have sex already, so soon after that procedure?”

“Aha.” She gets up to kiss me. “The doctor said it’s okey-dokey.”

“Wait a minute, Beth. You smell like puke. Use some of that mouthwash on the sink,” I tell her.

She grabs the bottle, takes a mouthful, swishes, and spits. She grabs hold of my head and we kiss a long, frenzied, deep, wet kiss. She releases me after a minute or so and I have to catch my breath.

“I dig you, Mikey,” she whispers in my ear.

“Beth, I have to lie down now.”

Back in my room, Beth rolls up a bill, bends down, and snorts the line of coke I laid out earlier. She gestures for me to join her.

“Oh, no,” I declare. “It’s quarter past six in the morning. Let me go to sleep, please.”

“Come on. We might as well stay up now,” she says. “I’m startin’ to feel better.” She flexes her biceps in a pseudo bodybuilder pose.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“No thanks, babe.” Then she proceeds to dump out more coke, chops it up, forms another line, and up her nose it goes.

“You better drink some water. You want some?” I ask.

She nods, and I get up to pour two glasses of nice, cold water from a bottle in my refrigerator.

The water is so good. Dehydration is setting in, so I get another, then another glass. Beth puts the television on.

“This is cable, right?” she asks as she points to the box atop the TV.

“Yeah.”

“You got the MTV channel? What channel is it?”

“I have no fucking idea,” I say, and leave to go to the bathroom. Upon my return, Beth is on the bed, dancing to the song playing on this MTV channel.

“Like a Virgin” is on—unbelievable! I’m going to hurt someone soon. I rush over and shut the damn thing off.

“I thought you liked that song?”

“Not lately, I don’t.”

“Ohhh—well, what are we gonna do now?” she asks.

“Go take a shower, please, and I’ll treat you to breakfast, okay?”

“What?”

“You’re all sweaty and pukey, come on. If I’m gonna stay awake, we have to eat something. Shampoo and soap are in the shower, so hurry up,” I tell her.

“Okay.” She shuffles out the door and down the hall.

Oh my God, if she wasn’t so sexy, I’d be having a major meltdown right now.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Hurry, hide the bag of coke, Mike.

I grab a couple of Advil and down a half-gallon of water. The shower runs and I can glimpse some light at the end of the tunnel with this night that just won't end.

After changing into fresh underwear and jeans, I put my shirt on and walk to the bathroom. The shower stops as I roll on some deodorant. Beth pulls the shower curtain to one side and smiles my way.

“Brush,” she demands and reaches out a hand. I give her my brush.

She bends forward and begins to brush her hair down. She then flips her head upright and continues to brush. This is the first time I've ever seen her with straight hair. Her body still glistens from the warm shower water. The girl does like to show off her body, and why not? Beth is young and at the height of her seductive powers. She catches me studying her body and she smiles.

“Hi,” she chirps as she grabs a towel. “Ahhh, I feel so much better.”

“I'll get one of my shirts for you,” I say, and proceed into the hallway.

“Do you have a rubber band for my hair?” she calls out as I gather her G-string and bra.

“In the drawer,” I say. A flannel shirt will do fine.

Beth comes in and my gaze meets hers. She stands with the towel wrapped around her body, then she drops it to the floor.

“This is me, Mikey, el natural, no makeup, no big hair, sorry to disappoint you.”

“You look great, girl. Listen, I gotta pee, and then we'll head out.” I dash into the bathroom again to relieve myself. As the water pours through me, my head pounds, and my empty stomach growls. I rinse my mouth out with some mouthwash, swish, swish, spit. When I get back, Beth puts on her coat, G-string, and slips into her heels. Her feet are still filthy though.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

The morning air has a bite to it, and Beth shudders with the cold. We run to the truck, and I start the engine and turn on the heat. She slides in next to me, grabs my arm, and lays her head on my shoulder. The Airport Diner is up the road, and the heat in the truck begins to warm our aching, depleted bodies. Beth nuzzles me as the pictures of our encounter float through my mind. She is a dynamic force of nature.

As we pass Casey's on the way, I notice a white van parked in the lot. Stargate Alarms is what the van has printed on the side. A police car sits parked next to it. I see a Sussex police officer enter the bar. Had the alarm somehow been tripped? I never got to replace the window after all. Filominca won't be happy with me, for sure. In my rearview mirror, I see James's car pull into the parking lot.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 9

“Beth, wake up. We’re here.” I nudge her.

“Ha-a.” She opens her eyes and slides out the passenger side. An irritating chill in the air nips at my face as we rush inside and take up residence in my usual booth.

“Hi, Mike, how’s it going, hon?” Jean, the waitress, asks.

“Hangover. I need some food.”

“No surprise there on a Sunday morning, eh? What are we having?”

“Two eggs over with home fries and bacon and give me a side of pancakes.”

“Two pancakes or four?”

“Four, please, and coffee, thanks.”

“You, young lady?” she asks Beth.

“A coffee, please,” Beth says in a soft voice.

“Got it.” Then, Jean leaves us.

Jean and I see each other every week on Sunday mornings, if I can get out of bed. The clock on the wall shows 6:55 a.m., and I’m still awake. Jean comes back with our coffees, and Beth and I prepare them in silence. She must be as washed-out as me. All the life has been drained from my body. Sip, sip, it’s too hot.

“Can you pass me the milk again, please?”

“Mikey, where are we goin’?” she asks.

“I’m going back to bed after this.”

“Nooo, where are we, you and me, where are we going or are we just gonna stay good-time fuck buddies?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Beth, I’m barely awake. Can’t we talk about this another time? I—”

“I just wanna know what I mean to you, that’s all.” She stares me straight in the eyes.

Holy shit, if my eyes are as bloodshot as hers, I shouldn’t be driving.

“Yeah, what?”

“Never mind,” she says as my food arrives. “I had to move outta my place. I don’t know if you want some company by you? I been over a lot lately, you know.”

“Beth, honey, you know how small my place is. It’s not even big enough for me.” I continue to eat.

“We would be great together, Mikey. Look how much fun we have and, and I more than like your . . . ah, you know.” A single tear rolls down her cheek.

“Ha, what?” I ask.

“You’re a dick, weren’t you listening to me?”

“Yeah, but. . . .”

“I kinda thought it would be different with us. You’re a nice guy and . . . can you stop eating?” she barks suddenly.

She gets up and runs to the ladies’ room.

The food has revived me. As I pay the check, Beth comes past me and waits by the door. There’s an awkward silence as we cross the parking lot. I open my door, slide over, and open her side. No words are spoken, so I drive off. She plasters herself to the passenger door and stares out the window for the entire ride.

“Do you want some music?” I ask.

“Just get me to my fucking car, dickhead.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

As we get close to Casey's, the white van pulls out of the driveway. Doing a double take, the guy driving it looks a lot like Timmy. *Not possible, you're seeing things, Mike, because you're still drunk.* James and the police have gone. We park next to Beth's car. It's a 1980 Yugo 45 in a crappy color akin to a baby's diarrhea. It has a hole in the muffler, and you can hear her coming from five miles out. It appears as though either someone's body has been dumped in the back seat, or she lives in the thing. According to her, it's the latter.

When she lets herself out, I go to say something and then think twice. She gets in her car, tries to start it, but it hesitates; she tries again, and it starts. The wipers flap back and forth and the windshield washer fluid sprays out. The car stalls. Beth starts it up again and appears as though she's having a hard time maintaining her cool. She puts the car in gear, drives around my truck, and rolls the window down.

"I never got that abortion," she spits out with venom. "I kept the money you gave me for it. I'm pregnant with your child, asshole!" She peels out of the driveway like Mario Andretti in a cloud of dust, spraying gravel all over the side of my truck.

What? She's completely psychotic. Why would she do that? My life is getting out of control. I can only shake my head. The bar's window has been replaced. *Am I on drugs? Yes. Did I replace the window last night? No. Did the white van come and do this? If I open the place, will the alarm be the same numbers?* No answers come to quiet my racing brain. There's a phone booth next to the bar, and I drop a quarter in and dial Filominca's number. Today is Sunday, and she may be at church. My watch shows 7:55 a.m. It rings and rings, then her answering machine picks up.

"Hi, you have reached Filominca and the Brava family, please leave a message." Beep.

"Hi Filominca, I wanted to talk with you about—"

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Mike, hi. What up?” she asks.

“Oh, you’re home, I thought you’d be at church.”

“I’m going soon. So, did you lock up the bar last night and all like you said you would?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Because, ah, James called me this morning, and it sounds like someone broke into the place last night. The cops called him about the alarm going off.”

“Really? Everything was cool when we left.”

“When did you leave?”

“Like I told you, we left at about three a.m. or so, the latest three thirty.”

“Well, apparently someone broke the glass in the door and somehow got the door open.”

“No shit.”

“Mike, are you sure everything was all right last night?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay, I have to go. I’m late for church, bye.” She hangs up the phone.

Holy crap! Who? What? Who called the cops last night? Aside from the broken glass, I know for sure Chester wouldn’t be calling his coworkers after what he did. That asshole is more of a criminal than the criminals. I better get home and see what James knows. The time is 8:14 a.m. now. Wasn’t it just 8:14 Saturday night? I want to go to sleep, lie my head down on my pillow, and dream a happy dream. This birthday is turning into a nightmare.

I jump in the truck in the hopes of seeing James before he makes the 9:00 a.m. mass. The Ford fishtails out of the driveway as I push the gas pedal to the floor. A police cruiser has its lights flashing, and it’s headed my way. My asshole puckers up as they pass me. Was that Beth I saw in the back seat? No fucking way!

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

James's car is back at the house. I make it to the top of the stairs and the door opens. It's him.

"James, hi," I say.

"Are ye' all right, boy?"

"Can I talk with you for a minute?"

"Sure, sure, come on in."

"Oh, yeah, but Filominca called me and—"

"Oh, yeah, we must have had a problem at the bar last night. Someone broke in the place. I got a call from Chief Richards earlier this morning and then I called her," James says. "I just got home."

"I passed the bar coming from breakfast. An alarm company had been out to the place."

"Oh, yeah, Filominca called her friend so we could upgrade tha' alarm system."

"That was quick," I declare.

"Well, we can't let tha' bastards win, now can we, Mike? I worked too hard and too long ta' have some nefarious elements come and try ta' take it from me, right?"

"Absolutely right," I say as James tries to get past me.

"Come on, Marion, we'll be late for mass," he calls.

We start down the steps together. "Don't worry, lad. I trust Filominca to do the right thing. I hate to admit it, but those dancers seem ta' bring in tha' wrong element. She'll fix it proper like, so we won't have any more problems with hoodlums."

"I'm sure. She's awesome."

"Hi, Michael," my mom calls from behind me as she follows down the steps.

"Hi."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Are you coming to church with us?” she asks. “I’m sure Father Bill would love to see you.”

“I saw him yesterday, Ma.”

“Are you coming home now?”

“What? No. I just dropped Beth off home and needed to talk with James is all.”

“Is Beth that girl with the wild hair?”

“Yeah, Ma, it’s all the rage today.”

“She seems nice,” Mom says as we continue down the steps.

“Yeah, when she’s sleeping.” I laugh.

“Are you sleeping with her?”

“I just drove her home, didn’t I?”

“Well, I don’t like the fact that, in my house, you’re bedding down with a woman. Why don’t you get your own place, and then I won’t have to be a part of it?”

“Would you be happier if I went to bed with a guy then?”

“That’s not what I meant, smart ass. James, please.”

“He’s a grown man, Mar. I can’t tell him what ta’ do with his evenins’, luv,” James says.

James opens the car door for my mom.

“Well, you better think about getting your own place soon, mister smart ass. We’ll be having a guest coming to stay who may need more room than the one room next to you.” She gets in the car and slams the door.

“What is she talking about, James?”

“We had meant ta’ tell you, lad. My niece is comin’ over from Ireland sometime after Christmas. She recently lost her husband and ah, well—we told her if she came over, we could

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

support her till she gets on her feet again. And don't worry about your mother, I'll talk with her.

We'll have ta' spruce up tha' other room a bit, though, and give it some homey touches and such.

You'll help me, won't you, Mike?"

"Come on, James," my mother yells from the car.

"I'll help you, of course," I tell him.

"I knew I could count on ye', gotta go."

With that, he gets in his car and drives off.

My mind begins to swirl with all kinds of scenarios about someone else in the space next to me. There's only one bathroom downstairs and one washer and dryer. Will this person be using them as well? How will I ever have a girl over my place again? You can hear everything through those walls. We have conflicts now in the house as it is.

This isn't working for me already. How old is his niece? Is she cute? She recently lost her husband. What's an appropriate amount of time to grieve before people start dating again?

Stop your mind from going there, Mike. Your life is already pretty complicated and fucked up. Beth just dropped a nuclear bomb on me. Breathe deep, and quiet your mind.

My place is a disaster area as I survey the damage from last night. The bed is a complete mess. It hasn't been made or closed all weekend long. I make the bed and fold it up. Replace the cushions. Now, the place is coming back together. The glasses go to the bathroom sink to wash. The residue of cocaine left on the stereo cabinet is wiped up with an index finger and rubbed on my gums. The clock shows 8:45 a.m.

A shower, and some rest, is in order now. Boots off, pants off, and my underwear is last. Once in the bathroom, the smell of puke from last night is unbearable.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Mike, clean this mess up before your mother gets home.

She'll kick me out for sure if she gets wind of this disaster area. Frozen in thought for a moment, the realization of turning thirty-four hits me.

You live in your mother's basement. The thought of her coming home to find this mess terrifies you. And, you're playing a charade with your stepfather. And your favorite bar dancer is pregnant.

On top of all that, I'm naked and have to clean Beth's puke from the toilet and floor and who knows where else. This has to be done before my shower, so here we go. It didn't seem to be such a mess earlier. Blinded by the light as they say, like a deer in Beth's headlight. Under the sink is toilet bowl cleaner and old rags.

As I lift the lid off the toilet with some trepidation, my worst fears are realized. It looks like there had been a murder and the evidence got flushed for good measure. It smells like the person puked Jameson's whiskey before their demise. Clean, clean, and scrub, scrub I go with a bowl brush. With hot, soapy water on the rag, I wipe down the seat's lid and kneel to clean the toilet's base.

Doing this, I visualize Beth in her compromised position. Her body glistened from the sweat that poured out of it.

Stop, please, and finish the task at hand, Mike.

Once done with the mess, I run a hot shower and jump in. Where is the shampoo? The empty bottle Beth left me lies on the shower floor, so a bar of soap will have to do. After my shower, I notice the time is 10:05 a.m. The need to lie down is overpowering. I dive to the couch, pull a towel over myself, and relax my body and thoughts.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

As I plod through the dim moonlight, I see Tuchi and Sergeant Phil to my right. My finger is on the trigger of my M-16 rifle. Tuchi carries his M249 light machine gun, then he stops in his tracks. Sergeant Phil stops as well and holds his hand up.

“Tuchi, did you hear something?” whispers Jeff, who’s next to me, a foot or two away. Tuchi nods yes.

Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-tat.

Rapid fire AK-47 rounds come jetting past us on all sides. Jeff’s head explodes all over me. I hit the ground. Tuchi, with the LMG on his hip, sprays left and right into the thick brush that’s now lit with tracers from us and them.

“VC! VC!” Sergeant Phil screams as he pulls Tuchi to the ground. Rocket propelled grenades start exploding all around us.

“Fall back! Fall back!” Phil yells.

As we leap to our feet, Tuchi is hit with a barrage of AK-47 fire. I hit the ground and watch his machine gun go off, cutting Sergeant Phil in half. He was dead before his body parts hit the ground.

Down the line, calls to fall back echo back and forth. GIs scream and cry out through the thick brush. I’m paralyzed, frozen with the metal grip of fear. Somehow, I reach out a hand for Tuchi and find him. The night is ablaze with the horrific firefight around us. Some of our guys stay put and return fire. When I kneel over Tuchi, he mouths the words, “I’m dead, bro.” A bullet pierces my left shoulder like a hot, blazing iron.

Motherfucker! That hurts!

I’m propelled onto Tuchi with a pain I’ve never felt before. Vomit rises to my mouth, and I spit it out onto him.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Motha’ Fucker!” I scream.

“My leg, Mike. My leg!” Tuchi gasps in my ear.

Move! Move, Mike.

I strap my M-16 over my other shoulder, take his LMG, then grab his collar and start to drag him away. The pain is searing and all-encompassing now, and I struggle to keep my footing. A round hits the machine gun and ricochets through the cartilage of my left ear.

Goddamn it!

I’m never gonna make it home!

As I pull Tuchi through the brush, he screams like a man being slaughtered. His mangled leg drags along by a thread as I glance back to see where the VCs’ fire comes from. *Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-tat*, all around me. Rounds streak past my head and hit the ground at my feet. The sounds are deafening. Tuchi’s screams and the automatic weapon fire clatters through my ears. We fall into a deep ditch near the edge of the brush.

Tuchi is next to me, and he may bleed to death. I tear my gear and belt off in a panic. I wrap the belt around his left thigh and pull it tight, tighter. He lets out a frightful scream. I grab my M-16, stand up in the ditch, and turn around to return fire. Other GIs fall into the ditch with the same mask of fear that must have been on my face.

This guy Fred lands next to me, stands up and asks, “Where’s Sergeant Ph—” His face is shot off. I watch his body fall and squirm as the life force is bled from him. Then, he’s still. I take all his ammo. Bullets and RPGs cascade around us as Tuchi stands up on his one good leg. He hoists his LMG and begins to spray the brush with a barrage of bullets. His eyes are red and fixed hard forward.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Cocksuckers!” he screams and then the machine gun jams. “Gimme your Colt! Gimme your Colt, Mike!” he says. I pull my Colt 45 handgun from a holster at my chest and throw it to him. He catches it and begins to fire, screaming, “Mother Fuckers!” He reaches out with a hand so I can steady him on his one leg. The lower half of his left leg still dangles by a ligament. He passes out and falls in a heap next to me.

“Gimme your Colt! Gimme your Colt! Mike, we’re never gonna make it home!” My heart pounds out of my chest while the sweat drenches me and runs over my body. I lie between the couch and the stereo cabinet, as usual. The same dreams come to me most times when I go into a deep, cavernous sleep.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 10

The next weeks pass in a continuation of the debauchery and mayhem after my birthday. I have no control over it. Tuchi and Sharon are always available, while Beth has fallen off the map. I've tried to call her several times, but there's no answer. I never even knew where she lived, and now, I think she lives in her car. Christmas comes and goes as the party builds toward the new year. The cocaine flows like it's sugar in my coffee, and sometimes it is. James and I fixed up the room next to mine in anticipation of his niece's arrival. We also shored up the door between the two rooms with several locks so she would feel more secure.

We created a new, shared hallway that leads to the outside door. This way, she won't have to enter my room to get into hers. It did take some space from my area, but it had to be done. My rent is cheap, so helping with such things when they come up is fine. The bathroom is a different matter and some arrangement will have to be made.

New Year's Eve approaches and that means everyone gets off Tuesday, New Year's Day. I'll be glad when the holidays are over because the party is getting old. New Year's Eve night brings the customary scenario of Tuchi, Sharon, and me at my place after Casey's. We're still having fun at 2:00 a.m. The three of us play records all night and party like we won't be on this earth much longer. Tuchi did his karate demonstrations, which Sharon loved. I made a concoction of Jameson's whiskey and pineapple juice, which got mixed reviews. Sharon put on the MTV channel, and we danced and danced.

A commotion jars me awake. Sharon and Tuchi are on the floor and start to get it on. They make an unapologetic racket. They're both naked and I must say, Sharon is impressive. She's always

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had a nice figure, but seeing her like this has elevated her several notches in my eyes. The girl is gorgeous. As Frank Zappa said, “She was buns up kneelin’ and he was wheelin’ and dealin’.”

I spy on them and pretend to be asleep. Never mind Sharon, I’m astonished by my guy Tuchi. He’s taken off his prosthetic leg and operates okay without it. The guy is a physical wonder. Even at thirty-three, a bit younger than me, he is fit and strong. All his tattoos are on display now since he’s discarded the biker paraphernalia he wears. It’s rare to see him like this.

A passage tattooed on his back in bold, black letters reads:

“FOR I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU,” DECLARES THE LORD. “PLANS TO PROSPER YOU AND NOT TO HARM YOU, PLANS TO GIVE YOU HOPE AND A FUTURE.”

He never told me about this tattoo.

Now they begin to get all hot and heavy. He reaches for her breasts and squeezes them. Sharon sighs with a gentle sound. He grabs his cock and puts it inside her with the most delicate of moves, rub, rub, and insert.

Be quiet, Mike, or you’ll miss it all.

Beth comes to mind, and I wonder what I did to piss her off.

After some time, they switch to the missionary position. Once Tuchi is inside her again, he steadies himself over her with his hands on the floor. They meet each other in powerful thrusting motions. When he’s ready to come, he brings Sharon close to him and explodes inside her.

“Pull out, pull out, Tuchi!” He holds her tight and doesn’t let her go until he finishes. Then, he pulls away from her and falls to the floor.

“What’s the matter?” he asks.

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“I stopped taking the pill the other day. My doctor wanted me to be off of it for a while,”

Sharon says.

“Nobody tells me anything,” he says.

Sharon gets up with her hands at her crotch and runs to the bathroom. Tuchi puts his prosthetic leg back on and rushes after her. They’re having a heated discussion, but I can’t make out what they’re saying. The water runs, the toilet flushes, more loud chatter back and forth, and then Sharon comes back.

“Take me home now,” she demands as she begins to get dressed.

“Come on, babe,” Tuchi says. “Why you gettin’ so worked up for? I mean—”

“Oh, you gonna take care of a kid if I get pregnant? I had an abortion two years ago, and I promised myself, I ain’t having another one. So, you gonna make a happy home for me and babysit and all that good shit, huh?”

Tuchi remains quiet with a pensive gaze on his face.

“Nothin’ to say, right? ’Cause I’m gonna be the one holding the kid, not you!” She points a hostile finger at him. “I promised myself that I would work this shit-ass job and save money and go back to school.” She sits on the edge of the bed and begins to cry with a steady, low sob. Tuchi approaches her and tries to put a hand on her shoulder, but Sharon slaps it away and springs to her feet. “Get fucking dressed and take me home, please,” she says through her tears.

Sharon leaves and then the outside door slams behind her. As I pretend to snore, Tuchi gets dressed and follows.

Be still for a while longer, Mike.

After a few moments, I jump up and lock the door. Thank goodness tomorrow, or today as it is now, is a holiday. The clock reads 4:50 a.m.; sleeping in will be wonderful. There’s one

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more beer in the fridge and I open it, turn the TV on, and flip through the channels. The MTV channel is on again. Let's see what this channel is all about. I lean back in the bed and get comfortable.

Knock-knock-knock!

Through my sleepy eyes, the clock shows 12:35 p.m. The TV is still on. Who is this at the door? Why can't people let me sleep?

"Mikey, boy—" It's James's voice. "Come to the door, please. I need ta' talk with ye'."

"Okay, hold on." I drag myself up and crack the door open just a bit. I hear the voices of other people in the hallway.

"My niece Terry just arrived. Are ye' decent?" James asks.

"No, no, I should shower and get dressed and—"

"Okay, then, ye' do that, and I'll talk with ye' later, okay?"

"Sure, sure, James, thanks." I close the door and lock it before anyone else sees me. A female and James chatter away down the hall and into the room next door, followed by the sound of little feet.

"I'll just get tha' rest a' your bags then," James says. He walks back up the hallway and outside. A little girl's voice breaks in.

"Mum, is this my room then?" the girl asks with the same Irish brogue as James.

His niece has a daughter? James never told me. He hasn't told me much about her at all. Her name is Terry and she has a daughter. Will a male voice follow?

Wait, wait, no, she just lost her husband, remember? I rush to the door between the two rooms and listen for any more information that can be gleaned from their conversation.

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“No, luv, this is our room together.” That must be Terry.

“Ye’ mean we’re gonna sleep together, here?” the girl asks. I hear the springs of the bed James bought for them squeak as the girl uses it like a trampoline.

“Yes, Caitlin, now get down from there, please,” she tells the girl. Her daughter’s name is Caitlin.

“Why don’t ye’ have your own room, like back home, Mum?” Caitlin asks.

“Uncle James said we can live here with him for a bit till we get our own place. Let’s be thankful for what we have. He has other people livin’ with him as well, so we have ta’ be polite and grateful,” Terry says. “Please stop jumpin’ on the bed. Someone’s livin’ next door.”

“Do ye’ think the person is nice, Mum, or like an old, ugly witch? I wouldn’t wanna live next to a witch.” The girl gasps. She then bounces off the bed and runs to the door I’m at and presses against it to listen. “I hear someone breathin’,” she whispers. “It’s some kinda creature, Mum. It’s a ghost! It’s a ghost!” she chirps in a panic and runs from the door. There’s James’s voice again from the hall, and I hurry over to speak with him.

I crack open the door. “James, I need to get in the shower. How are we gonna work out the bathroom situation again?” I ask. “And why didn’t you tell me she has a kid?”

“You two will have ta’ work some arrangement out somehow. Meanwhile, I think they’ll be in their room for a while, so—”

“Okay, are they around now?”

“No,” he replies, so I take a sheet to wrap over me and follow him into the hall. No sooner as I do this, the girl pokes her head out the door of their room. She lets out an ear-piercing shriek and slams it shut.

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“It’s a ghost! It’s a ghost, Mum!” Caitlin gasps to her mother. “It was ten-foot tall and it had eyes as red as the devil’s.”

Well, that last part she’s got right.

I run into the bathroom and lock the door. The last thing I would want is to have this kid catch me in the bathroom. I’ve never had to lock the door before, and it will be another thing to get used to. It’s always been me here alone. People come over and they don’t lock the door either. Man, this situation will put a damper on my free-flow life of coming and going whenever I please. Unfortunately, I scared the little girl shitless. What will happen when her mom sees me?

The shower feels great after a night like last night. It’s a good thing Tuchi and Sharon left before the new arrivals showed up. Do I want to run into this woman Terry right now? The idea of this entire situation still rattles me. My place and my privacy are disrupted, and I’m undecided how to feel about it. The next couple of days will be busy on the job, so avoiding this Terry person will be easy.

Once dry, I wrap myself in the sheet again and crack the door to check if the hallway is clear. No one is there. The hallway has a dim light on and it helps guide me to my room. It’s only fifteen feet from the bathroom, but I have to go past their room first. I rush into my room and then, I hear their door opening.

“Hello?” Terry says. When I open my door a bit to look out, Terry scans the hallway as she leads Caitlin toward the bathroom. The low light in the hall illuminates her enough to give me some impression. She’s a woman in her late twenties or early thirties with a medium build and red hair. The hair is long, past her shoulders, and it flows free and wild.

She’s attractive in a natural way, I think to myself.

I continue to eavesdrop on them like an old fart spying on his neighbors.

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Mike, you've been reduced to lurking in the shadows. A creature of the night who stalks women and little children.

This is somewhat amusing, and it's fun being the mysterious ghost next door. They finish in the bathroom and the door opens a bit, so I close mine to a crack.

"No ghost here, luv, all clear," Terry says. She scans the hallway and bends down to search under the table next to the washing machine. "Nothin' here as well, Caitlin." I get a better view of her now. She's quite attractive in the most unassuming, ordinary way. Terry wears a pair of snug jeans and her movements have a graceful ease. This woman is nothing like you would see around here these days, with all the heavy makeup and big hair.

"Are ye' sure, Mum? A ghost like that ain't scared off easy," Caitlin says.

"Come on, luv, see for yourself." Terry holds up the drape hanging over the table. Caitlin dashes to her. She's a tiny thing of seven or eight with long brown hair. It looks as though she got some other child's hand-me-down clothes to wear.

"I can't look. I trust ye'. Let's go-o-o." As she turns, she spots me. "Ahhh!" she screams and hides her face in Terry's shoulder. "The ghost!" Caitlin yells.

Terry scoops her up and turns as I close the door and lock it. She walks toward my door.

"No, Mum, the ghost lives there. Let's go to bed and lock the door, please," Caitlin begs.

"Now, Caitlin, ye' know very well, there's no such things as ghosts or goblins."

"Who told ye'?" Caitlin asks as Terry knocks on my door.

"Hello?" She knocks again. "Hello? Is anyone there?" I stay as still as possible on the other side of the door. Her voice is soft and calm. When a woman speaks with a brogue, it's so different and fascinating. Terry is captivating, for sure.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Let’s get back,” Caitlin says in a shaky voice. They return to their room as I tiptoe over to the other door to listen. Living on my tiptoes for the duration of my life here would be bad, but being a ghost is fun.

“Help me unpack your things, please, luv,” Terry says.

“Did ye’ lock the door?”

“Yes, Caitlin, come on now, let’s put your things in the dresser here.”

What happened to her dad? At least the girl still has her mom. The two of them sound content aside from the fact that me, the ghost, terrified the kid. How long is acceptable, under international humanitarian law, to continue to scare the crap out of this kid without any repercussions?

“Mum, play my song, please,” Caitlin says.

“Okay, let me get out my guitar.”

Terry plays guitar, impressive. She begins to strum and tune it. Then, she starts to sing Simon and Garfunkel’s, “Bridge over Troubled Waters.”

Her voice is soft and soothing. The guitar playing, to me, is on a professional level and the song has been well-practiced.

This song I know well, and I’m blown away by her rendition.

“That was the best, Mum.”

“Oh, thank you, Caitlin. It’s your favorite, I know,” Terry says.

Her voice and her playing have me spellbound. They have riveted me in place at the door. Her accent and her loving chatter with her daughter are delightful.

Take a moment. Get away from the door.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

While I sit on the edge of the bed, images of her and her guitar flow through my brain in rapid succession. It's a bit off-putting, these thoughts. Never has a woman intrigued me like this. What will happen to my world with such a woman living right next to me? We're not related by blood, only by way of James, but this is still complicated. Terry is so far removed from the kind of woman I would typically go for.

Going over to the TV cabinet, I pull out the bottle of Jack Daniel's. A third of a bottle remains. Gee, thanks, Beth. I get a glass with ice and pour myself a healthy dose. The whiskey soothes me, but thoughts of what will happen next continue to wander through my head. Today is Tuesday, and I'm off for the holiday. There's a big job for us to complete tomorrow and Thursday, so I better put some of these worries aside for now.

Turn the TV on, relax with your whiskey, and jump back into bed, Mike.

This MTV channel is growing on me. Some of the videos are garbage, others are okay. If Madonna's "Like a Virgin" comes on again, though, I may need to pour another drink.

For the rest of the day, I never leave my room. My meals consist of microwave food, pizza, leftover turkey dinner, and a beer. The TV is on low so as not to arouse any curiosity from the new arrivals. Every now and again, my ear is put to the door to listen.

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Chapter 11

For the next two days, I avoid all contact with Terry and her daughter. This became no easy task. Many times I wanted to bang on the door to scare the shit out of the kid or have her open the door and watch her sing it in person. Every night before bed, Terry sings the same song to Caitlin. I never tire of going to the door to hear her sing it. Her voice is angelic and alluring. Anticipation always grips me for the concert next door.

The bathroom situation has been difficult. James said he would tape a schedule on the door. Since I get up early for work, it hasn't been a problem yet. The possibility that I may scare Caitlin every day doesn't work for the long term either. That may rub Terry the wrong way if it happens again. The need to check the hallway before and after my shower and to be as quiet as possible is tiring me. For some reason, when I've come home late, they're not around.

Friday rolls around and the time has come to make an effort to meet Terry, one way or another, but how? Tuchi and I will meet at Casey's at 6:00 or so. A few beers will help me relax about it and then I'll formulate some kind of plan on how to approach her. I mentioned to Tuchi that Terry is beginning to occupy an interesting place in my head.

The regulars' cars are here when I pull into the lot. Timmy has an old Dodge junker. Kevin has the Caddy convertible, and Filominca's brand-new Audi Quattro is here. Why is she here tonight? Her usual night is Saturday. Tuchi is here and so is Sharon's AMC Eagle. She's parked next to a beautiful black Corvette. I don't know who owns it. As I enter the place, I see Beth with Tuchi and Sharon. Sharon sees me and stops her chatter with Beth. Beth doesn't seem happy to see me; she rushes away without a word.

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“Beth,” I call after her, and she flips me the finger. She takes a seat at the end of the bar next to Timmy and Kevin.

“What’s goin’ on with her?” Tuchi asks.

“Remember my birthday? We went by my place and had a bang-up time and all. Then later, I took her to breakfast and she starts gettin’ all like, ‘I have no place to stay,’ and ‘do you care about me?’ and such. I guess I . . . I didn’t give the right answers, you know?”

“None of you guys ever do,” Sharon says. She gets up and walks in Beth’s direction.

“I see Sharon is still pissed at you too,” I say. “I thought you told me that she relaxed a bit?”

“Well, it comes and goes with her,” Tuchi replies.

Timmy comes my way as soon as Sharon sits next to Beth. “Hey, Mike, did you guys know that the North American red squirrel isn’t red at all?”

“Fascinating, Timmy, real fascinating,” I say.

“It’s more of a rusty brown.” He puts his arm around me, and I shrug him off.

“Can you please leave me alone for a while? Or I’ll have Tuchi here practice his Special Forces skills on you and kick your ass.” Timmy looks at me sideways.

“I’d be happy to, unless he buys me a beer, Mike.” Tuchi smiles at me, and he shows Timmy a tattoo on his forearm. It’s a knife crisscrossed with two arrows. An arching banner below carries the words: *DE OPPRESSO LIBER*.

“Oh, I’ll—I’ll buy you a beer, Tuchi, no—no problem,” Timmy stutters.

“Okay, Timmy, then go find Chris and bother her for a while, will you?” I tell him.

“She should be here soon. I’ll go get that beer.” He lumbers away.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Beth hasn't been here since the night we had the fight. She looks less put together tonight. The hair isn't as perfect as always and she's gaunt in the face. She and Sharon are deep in conversation. Beth lights a cigarette as they both turn in my direction. She never smoked much, and I always hated it when she did. Sharon whispers to Beth, then comes my way.

"Mikey, Beth would like to speak with you," Sharon says.

"Is she still pissed at me?" I ask. "She doesn't seem too happy."

"Yeah, I don't know what's going on with her, but she did say that you're an asshole. I didn't find that hard to believe," Sharon says.

"What?"

"Listen, she was trying to tell me a bit about what happened. I really don't wanna get involved in you guys' stuff, you know," Sharon says. "Me and Beth, we're not girlfriends, so just talk with her, please."

"Okay." I get up and go to her. Beth sees me and puts out her cigarette. She downs a shot, takes a sip of her beer, and begins to light another cigarette.

"Hi," I say. "Can I sit down?"

"Do what you want. You always do anyways." She blows smoke in my face.

"Since when you been smokin' so much?"

"Well, I have a lot of stress in my life lately. Thanks in part to you." She glares at me with malicious eyes.

"Me? I try to . . . we had a misunderstanding or something. I, ah—"

"I didn't misunderstand you, Mikey. You made it perfectly clear to me. I gave you everything I got and then some. I gave you the best blow jobs you're ever gonna get in your

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

fucking life. I gave you my heart and soul, and I get fucking nothing back from you!” She leans in toward me.

“Calm down. I gave you a lot, too. You’re as close as I’ve got to a girl before, so—”

“I feel sorry for all the other stupid chicks you had then, because—”

“Wait a minute. I—”

“You’re an asshole. I felt like shit! You didn’t wanna give me a place to stay, and my car broke down.” She sips her beer. “Plus, I’m pregnant with your child, shithead.”

“Keep it down. I never—”

“You are sorry, boy. You’re gonna be sorry when you ain’t gettin’ anymore a’ my fine ass.”

“Are you sure this is my child?”

“Oh, you’re a dick,” she says. “You know I been with you for several months now.”

Filominca comes over.

“Hi, Mike, a Heineken?” she asks.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“I’ll take a shot, please, on Mikey, thanks,” Beth chimes in.

“You’re welcome,” I tell her.

“You owe me more than a shot. You hurt me. I thought we had a more . . . a closer relationship. I realized, you’re no different from most of the other guys I’ve been with. I shouldn’t be surprised.” She takes a long inhale off her cigarette.

“I always considered myself a nice guy, right? I never would hurt you on purpose. I would—”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She grabs my arm and pulls me to her. “There’s a lotta ways a girl can get hurt, you know. I like ta’ think that I’m a tough chick, and I’ve had my share a’ tough, you know. I’m tired of havin’ to be the tough chick. There’s nobody to take care of me except me. Why can’t somebody take care of me?” Her eyes well up with tears. I grab her shoulders.

“Listen, let’s go take a walk together and start to feel better, okay? Let’s get the night turned around, come on.” I take her hand. She grabs her purse and follows me.

Filominca has her back to us, so we rush off. Timmy notices, and I put a finger up to my lips. He turns away.

We hide in the dim light of the dressing room. The bag at my groin still has a lot of coke in it. I take out a key and dip it into the white powder. Beth watches me. A bit of coke sits on the end and I bring it to her nose. She snorts it.

“Do you want another?” I ask.

She nods yes, and I repeat the same for her other nostril, then the same for myself.

“Can I have a bit of it for later? Then I won’t have to bother you.”

“Sure.” I proceed to dump a little out into a foil wrapper she produces from her purse.

“A little more,” she says. I dump out more, then close the bag up, and shove it back down my pants. I lean in and kiss her. She kisses me back, and I take hold of her ass, then she pulls away.

“Mikey, I need to take a few minutes to get myself together. I’ll see you in a bit, okay?”

“Okay, see you later,” I reply. As I get back to the bar, I ponder the thought that maybe Beth isn’t really pregnant. She’s still partying her ass off.

“What’s up with Beth?” Tuchi asks when I sit at the bar.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I think it’s all cool with her now. I’m not sure.”

“She don’t look so good,” Sharon states.

“She has a Band-Aid on her arm. Maybe she gave blood or something?” Tuchi says. I shrug it off. Filominca comes over with the beer I left on the bar.

“Where’s James?” I ask her.

“Oh, he went to help some sort of singer, his niece. He wants to try doin’ something different between the dancing, at the breaks tonight. She’s gonna sing and play guitar here, go figure. Didn’t you meet her, Mike? You know who she is?”

“I didn’t get the chance to meet her yet. She’s gonna sing here, really?”

“Yeah, they should be here soon,” she says.

With that, the door opens, and we all turn to see who it is. It’s Chris. She waves our way and runs right to Timmy. She plants a kiss on his cheek. Then, she scurries past us toward the dressing room with another wave and a smile.

Chris is much sexier tonight. The improvements in makeup and outfit have made a big difference. Timmy and she have also been much more touchy-feely with each other. She’s not in there more than five seconds when she runs out in a panic.

“Sharon!” she yells from the door. Sharon rushes over. Chris whispers in her ear before they both disappear into the dressing area.

“What’s that all about?” Tuchi asks.

“Who knows, man?” I say.

Sharon pops her head out.

“Tuchi, come here.” She waves him over. I get up to follow him. Sharon tries to block my way.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“What’s goin’ on?” I ask her as I try to get by. When I get to the entrance, Beth pushes past Chris and Tuchi.

“Leave me alone, you people!” Beth shouts.

With a horrific expression on her face, Chris runs back to Timmy. Sharon rushes to Beth’s side at the bar. Tuchi motions me over to the corner and leans in close. “She was shootin’ up in there!”

“What?”

“Listen, bro, remember those guys in Nam doin’ that shit? It ain’t good, man,” Tuchi mutters. “Chris saw all that. Someone’s gonna close this place down if that kind of shit’s going on in here. You better go see what your girl is up to.”

“Oh, man, I swear she picked that up in the last month. You know I haven’t seen her since my birthday.”

I head right over to Beth; Sharon walks away.

Beth doesn’t even glance at me. She lights another cigarette, waves to Filominca, and orders another shot.

“What are you doing? What the fuck’s going on with you? Do you want James to lose his license?”

“Can’t all you people mind your own fuckin’ business? All of a sudden, everyone’s so interested in what I do?” The shot comes, and she downs it. “Another one, please, Filominca.” She finally turns toward me.

“Are you shooting heroin or what?” I ask her. “Because, I’ve seen what—”

“I did the coke you gave me. You gave it to me, so I can do what I want with it, right?”

“I didn’t think you’d be shooting it up. Where did you pick that up from?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Careful, Mikey, when you start caring too much for people, it may soften your insides. Don’t get all soft on me now.” She takes several nervous puffs on her cigarette.

“Come on, Beth. That’s some serious shit you’re fooling with.”

“It’s a little coke is all. You can only snort so much of it and besides, it gives you a raging big rush. You wanna try it with me?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay, pussy.” She grabs the next shot and downs it fast, draws on her cigarette, and blows the smoke in my face. She laughs.

“What the fuck happened to you since I saw you last? I mean, we—”

“Well, since you’re asking, you know I had no place to stay and—”

“I didn’t know that. You said you may need a place, but—”

“Yeah, well, I had no place to go, and when I left, I went in the direction of my old place. You got me sooo pissed off, I—I couldn’t even think straight,” she says with a cold stare. “I turned the corner and ran into a fire hydrant. Not that you would give a shit.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you. I—”

“You’re sorry, Mikey?”

“Was that you I saw soon after, in a police car?” I ask.

“Yeah, I waved him down and he drove me to the station. My car crapped out and—”

“Sorry.” I reach for her arm. She turns away and waves Filominca over.

“Another shot and beer, please. Mikey, have a shot, you’re buyin’ ’em.” Filominca glances at me and I nod yes.

“Listen, listen, Beth.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She turns back toward me. Her gaze is void of emotion. “Why do you wanna go down this path of, of . . . I can help you a little, but you know I don’t have much room by me. Besides, James’s niece just moved next door and—”

“No sweat. You made me realize that I gotta take care a’ myself, you know. I’m a big girl, right, and I gotta do what I gotta do. Besides, I found someone who can help me out anyways.”

“What? Who?”

“Yeah, I found the card that guy gave me—the night we was all here late, right?”

“You called Chester, that scumbag? Are you fucking kidding me? Do you know what kind of a sick guy he is, do you?”

“He’s been nice to me, and he gave me a job as a dancer at his place. I make more money there than at this fucking dump, so—”

“Beth, let me tell you about Chester. Tuchi and I know that guy since we were kids, since grade school, and then in Vietnam. That guy is evil! Do you know what—”

“He told me that you would put him down and tell all kinds a’ bad stories and all.” She sips her beer with clear indifference.

“Forget what he told you, if you’re hanging with Chester, you’re hanging with the devil. Do you know what evil is or are you stupid, girl?”

She spits the beer in her mouth into my face.

I get up and stomp away.

Now, having found out she’s working for Chester, it explains most of her deranged behavior. Unfortunately, I still can’t figure out how to get rid of him. She has no idea what she’s in for.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She's a fly in his web now, and she may be beyond my help. I never meant to hurt her or disappoint her, but one thing is certain: compared to Chester, I'm the Pope.

Tuchi and Sharon are still at the other end of the bar. I approach them.

"Remember the night of my birthday when Chester busted in here?" I ask them.

"Yeah," Tuchi answers.

"Remember he gave Beth his card?"

Sharon hands me a towel for my face.

"Yeah," Tuchi says.

"She called him!" I exclaim.

"She called that asshole?" Sharon echoes.

Tuchi shakes his head in disbelief.

"Weren't you guys in the army with him or something?" she asks.

"Don't go there, please," Tuchi replies. "She's a fucking whack job, that one."

"You could tell he's a bad dude. I'm sure glad you two were here with me," Sharon says.

She notices the clock. "It's almost eight. We have to start dancing. I better go and see if she's okay."

Sharon goes down to where Beth is, and they begin to talk. Chris is sitting next to Timmy, and they're having an intense conversation. Kevin, as usual, rests his head on the bar. Filominca comes over to him with her club and taps it on the bar. She startles him awake, and he takes another sip of his beer.

"Get those two a beer," Kevin shouts to Filominca as he points to me and Tuchi. She opens a couple of Heinekens for us and he starts our way.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Cheers, boys!” he bellows, and we all clink our bottles together. The music starts and Sharon begins her routine. Someone taps me on the shoulder, it’s James.

“Can ye’ help me a second, Mike boy?” he says in my ear.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 12

When I get to the door, Terry comes through with a guitar case. She's headed right for me. I step aside and let her pass. She strolls by as though I'm invisible. Then she proceeds to the back of the bar and rests the case in an area between the pool table and juke box.

"Mike, take this thing." James hands me a small amplifier.

"Listen, James, don't tell Terry who I am yet. I wanna introduce myself," I say.

"Are ye' sure, Mike? It might be better if I do the introducing."

"I think I can handle her."

"I should tell ye', Mike, she's a true O'Mahoney. We're a fiery lot, so tread lightly, lad.

Didn't you meet her at the house then?"

"No."

"Good luck, lad." He passes by me with a mic stand and a smile on his face.

As I turn, Terry is there. I tower over her.

"Okay, big fella, hand it over, please," she says.

"I can help you."

"Suit yourself. This way." She heads to the back of the room where James has placed some other equipment.

She begins to pull out cables and a microphone.

"Uncle James, I need to plug the amp and the mic into tha' PA system."

He points to me. "Here's your man."

I give her a military salute. "At your service."

"Okay, mister eager beaver, here's one for the amp." She hands me an audio cable.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

I reach up and plug it into the audio jack at the back of the speaker hanging from the ceiling.

“You are tha’ tall one, aren’t ye’, mister beaver?” she says as she hands me another cable.

“Here’s one for the mic, thank you.”

She grabs the mic, fumbles with it, and it falls on the floor. We both bend to pick it up, but I grab it first.

“Here you go,” I say as I hand it to her. She looks at me coyly and bites her lip.

“What’s your first name, Mister Beaver?”

“Mike,” I say. “Listen, can I buy you a beer?”

“I’ll have a shot a’ Jameson’s with it, if ye’ don’t mind.”

“Wow! Are you sure?”

She puts her hands on her hips. “Are ye’ afraid I’m gonna get ye’ drunk and have my way with ye’?”

“Oh, no,” I reply. We get to the bar and I sit next to Kevin.

“Who is that, Mike?” Kevin whispers.

“Is that her?” Tuchi asks under his breath. “That’s the chick living next to you?”

“That’s her,” I answer.

“She’s a looker,” Kevin says.

“Check out the red hair, man. Wait till you hear her sing,” I say over the pounding music as Sharon gyrates on the stage.

“What? She’s the one singing here, when?” Tuchi asks.

“Now, I guess,” I say.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

I wave Filominca over and order two shots and two beers. When the drinks arrive, I raise my shot and turn to Terry.

“Cheers,” I say.

“All the best in your endeavors,” she replies.

Filominca grabs her club and rushes over to Beth. After waving the club in her face, she smacks the bar with it. Beth puts her hands up with a look of disgust on her face. Filominca turns away, and Beth flips her the finger.

This is shaping up to be a night we may never forget, and that’s not always a good thing. Beth gets off her seat and looks a bit unsteady as she lurches toward us.

“I’m outta here!” Kevin shouts, and he goes back to his place at the bar.

Beth comes up behind Tuchi, wraps her arms around his neck, and begins to nibble on his earlobe. She whispers something in his ear, then glances up in my direction.

“Get off me.” He shakes her off. Sharon watches from the dance floor.

“Come on, Tuchi. It’ll be like old times.” She tries to get to his other ear, stumbles, and loses a shoe. She bends to get the shoe and motions to me for support. As soon as she manages to put her shoe back on, she engulfs me with an embrace. Caught off guard, I let it happen. Beth examines my face.

“Ummm, there you are,” she says.

“Are you wasted already?” I ask her.

“Ahhh, you’re concerned for me, that’s nice. Are you afraid someone’s gonna take advantage of me? Do you wanna have your way with me, big guy, huh?” She has a tight hold of me now.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Beth, come over here for a minute.” I try to guide her back to the dressing room and away from people.

“Ohhh, here we go, Tuchi. You wanna come with us? Mikey’s gonna ravage me!” she says. “You want in on this, too?” Tuchi waves us off and turns away. “Anybody else?” Beth shouts over the music. No one can hear what she’s said. Filominca wags a finger at me, and I flash her the okay sign.

“I gotta pee. You wait here,” Beth says. “I’ll be right back.” I hear her fumble around for a while and then the toilet flushes. She opens the door.

“Are you gonna be okay?” I ask her.

“Oh, yeah, where were me? I mean, where were we? Yeah—you’re gonna ravage me, boy, right?” She pushes me into the dressing area. I fall onto a chair and she straddles my lap.

“Beth!”

“You want a lap dance, mister, mister big guy?” She grabs my hair and digs her nails into my scalp.

“No, thanks. That hurts, you know.”

“Ahhh, am I hurting you? You can handle it. I’m gonna rough you up now, boy. A lap dance is fifty bucks, that or some more coke,” she says. “I’ll give you the best fucking lap dance you ever had, Mikey.” She pushes her breasts into me and begins to kiss my face while her pelvis grinds on my crotch. I push her off my face and peer into her eyes.

“I’ll only give you a little coke to wake you up, that’s about it. You need to wake up and calm down. Don’t you have to dance tonight?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Yeah, okay, Mikey, that’ll get me through . . . thew. . . .” She giggles to herself. “My mouth ain’t workin’ too well, too bad for you. No more blow jobs for you. I get paid for them now anyways. I gotta make a living, ain’t I?”

“Come on, Beth. Why are you messing around with Chester? Is that what you wanna be reduced to? Hooking for that psycho?”

“Sorry, bub, your train has left the station, bub.” She pokes me in the chest. “I’m on the train waving bye-bye. I’m on the crazy train.” She chuckles. “Where’s the coke? Come on.”

“Okay, get off of me, and we’ll do a bit before Filominca comes in here.” She slides off and I grab the bag, dump some out on the counter, and draw out one thick line.

“Can I shoot that, please?” she asks.

“Are you fucking crazy? Snort the line, and don’t drink any more booze.” I roll a bill for her and she bends down and snorts it fast. She grabs my belt and starts to undo it.

“Promise to gimme some more later, and I’ll suck your cock right now. Come on, Mikey. I know you love it, boy.” She kneels and tries to unzip my pants. I grab her and lift her face to mine. “You wanna make more babies?”

“No, Beth, I’ll talk to you later. Please get it together and get out there.”

I wave Filominca over. “Listen, Filominca, no more booze for Beth, okay?”

“I already told her that she’s cut off,” she says.

Terry’s finished setting up her equipment and she sits atop a stool as she tunes her guitar. She then adjusts the mic stand to her height. I forget about Beth as my attention is drawn to Terry’s face. She’s stunning. Her hair is done in a more elegant upswept style tonight, yet still understated. The makeup is subtle and brings out her soft beauty. Medium gold hoop earrings

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

hang from her ears. She wears a loose white peasant-style blouse, which hangs past the top of her jeans. On her feet are a pair of black Converse sneakers.

You'll never see a woman like her around here. Most of the girls I know are into this Madonna, big hair craze with the lace and boots and such.

Will she sing her lullaby song? It's grown on me. James is behind the bar now, and Terry gets up and comes over to talk with him. I can't hear what they say, but I try to read her lips.

She catches me staring at her, and her demeanor changes. She turns away with a contemptuous expression. James gets her a bottle of beer, and she asks him something and gestures my way. He turns in my direction and tells her something before he comes over to me.

"Terry's asking me who you are, Mike. I told her you're one a' the regulars. You better get ta' introducin' yourself then," he says.

"I kinda did already." I head in her direction, but she turns away. Her body language is like that of a rattlesnake as it rattles its tail. She gets up to leave, and when she turns, I step in front of her.

"I'm Mike, remember?"

She looks at me with disdain and tries to get by.

"Move, please," she says as she tries to shoo me away. "Out of my way!"

"You're James's niece?" I try to keep her in front of me.

"What's it to ye'?" With that, she pushes me aside and stomps away.

Tuchi, Sharon, and James have a laugh at my expense. James puts a Heineken on the bar for me.

"So, how'd the introductions go, Mike?" James asks.

"Very funny, James," I say.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I tried to warn you. Now, she thinks you’re just some guy in a bar, tryin’ ta’ pick her up.”

“Well, I am, but. . . .”

“Listen, she lost her husband last year, so I’m thinking, maybe you should let her have a wide berth,” James asserts. “Let her be. She’s been through a lot, the poor woman.”

“Ahh, leave her alone then,” Sharon says. “Look what you did to Beth.” She snickers.

“What did you do ta’ Beth?” James asks. “Is she okay? She don’t seem too fair lately.”

“I didn’t do anything to her!” I exclaim.

“I better get her goin’ then ’cause she’s dancing next, and then my niece is gonna do a few songs.” James turns and asks Sharon, “Are you sure Beth is okay to dance?”

“I’ll go and check out the situation.” Sharon walks over, taps her on the shoulder, and Beth raises her head. Sharon helps her up, and they head toward the dressing room together.

Terry heads toward the bathroom, but a moment later, she rushes out and doesn’t appear at all happy. The woman who sings to her daughter isn’t this woman. James is right. Maybe I should give her a wide berth. I’m going to have trouble with that, though. Terry has intrigued me. The music stops and Chris gets off the stage in a huff. She has a spirited conversation with Timmy and then Timmy approaches me.

“Is Beth okay, Mike?” he asks, concerned.

“Oh, she’s having an off night I guess, Timmy, that’s all,” I say.

“Oh, here she is.” Timmy points.

Beth is on a beeline toward Terry who’s seated at the bar now. Sharon takes Beth’s arm and pulls her in the other direction.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“That bitch,” Beth yells. Some people across the bar turn to see what the problem is.

Sharon tries to quiet her down as she shuffles her away.

“Go dance and forget about it,” Sharon tells her.

She stops and turns to Sharon. “How do I look?” Beth grabs her breasts.

“They look great,” Sharon replies with a roguish smile. Beth turns to go, and Sharon slaps her on the ass. “Now, go get ’em, girl.”

Beth prances toward the stage and Sharon does the crazy sign with a swirl of an index finger behind Beth’s back.

“That chick’s fucking crazy,” Sharon says as she approaches us. “I laid out two big lines to wake her up. She wanted to shoot it up! Then, that girl of yours over there, Mikey, was tryin’ to get in the bathroom. Beth opened the door and shouts, ‘Wait your turn, bitch!’ The mule there said, ‘Fuck off, slut!’ and walked away. I had to grab hold of Beth and remind her to do the lines I put out.”

“Well, I’m not hanging around to get her home tonight, that’s for sure,” I declare. “I don’t even think she wants to be around me, and besides, she’s getting a little scary.”

We all turn to watch her.

“Why does she always have to start her routine with ‘Like a Virgin’?” I protest. The high heels and the moves are there, but she’s thinner and her expression is flat and far away. Her actions are tight and precise, moving along with the song. She grabs the pole and spins around it in one broad, fluid arch. I’ve never seen Beth dance with such abandon. She’s more polished in many ways, yet less connected to the crowd in front of her.

She dances toward the end of the stage near Kevin, Timmy, and Chris. She bends over to flash her ass. She then spins around, grabs the G-string, and pulls it aside to show her bush area.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Timmy and Kevin are slack-jawed and stare wide-eyed in amazement. Chris covers her eyes.

Tuchi and Sharon gape at each other in disbelief. They both know that in New Jersey you can't show any private parts in a bar that serves liquor.

Beth proceeds to lie down on her back, pulls the G-string aside again, and flashes Timmy a full bush shot. She slips a finger inside herself. I can't believe what I'm witnessing. She's never acted this way on stage before. She then jumps up, grabs her breasts, and pulls off her top. Some of the customers go crazy. They don't get this kind of show here at Casey's. Many of them clap and whistle as a cascade of rolled up dollar bills fall at her feet. Beth snatches the bills up in her hands as fast as she can. Chris runs to the dressing room, horrified.

"You better get her off that stage fast, Sharon, before James comes back!" I shout in her ear.

Sharon jumps up and rushes around the bar. As she gets Beth off the stage, James comes from the cellar and catches the end of this. He is pissed. He runs behind the bar and tries to cover Beth's bare breasts with a towel. Tuchi stands there and rolls up a dollar bill.

"What are you doing?" I ask him.

"I was gonna throw her a dollar."

"Don't encourage her. You know they can shut this place down if someone sees this shit," I say.

"I'm an innocent bystander." He throws his hands up in the air. The song ends and Sharon and Beth come around our way. James is behind the bar and he apologizes to all the customers. Most of them shout their approval. James is embarrassed and pissed, while Kevin and Timmy still haven't picked their jaws off the bar.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Beth, what the fuck are you doing?” I ask her. Sharon tries to help her get her top back on.

“I—I . . .” she stutters.

“James can get in a lot of trouble with that kind of stuff going on in here,” I tell her. She turns to Tuchi and takes the dollar bill from his hand.

“I earned that, didn’t I?” she says.

“You sure did, girl,” Tuchi replies.

Sharon slaps him on the back of the head.

“Asshole, let’s get serious here,” Sharon says. “I like this place, and I sure as hell don’t wanna see anyone shutting it down. James is a nice guy, Beth. You better get your act together ’cause you ain’t maintaining a level of . . . of normal.”

“This *ain’t* normal. We don’t lead normal lives, Sharon. None of us do,” Beth shrieks. “Don’t kid yourself into thinking we’re normal. Look who’s fucking talking to me about normal!” She turns and heads into the changing room.

Chris runs out of the dressing area and sits back down with Timmy and Kevin. She still seems panicked. Chris has always been a more, how would I say, a boring dancer. She smiles a lot and has bumped up her technique, but she never does many of the crotch shots. She spins around the pole and gyrates her hips. Once or twice, she bends over to give Timmy a nice ass view.

Sharon gets up and starts for the dressing room. Tuchi grabs her arm.

“Listen, babe, leave her alone. She’s on that slippery slope to nowhere. You can’t help her.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Well, maybe if I help her, I help myself too. Maybe she’s right. I have no business telling her to be virtuous or whatever or how to act,” Sharon says. “Look how we all act. We live our lives here at this place, but this is a nowhere place. She’s on the slippery slope, and we’re on a dead end, Tuchi.”

She pulls her arm free from him and goes into the dressing area.

A guitar chord breaks the stale air. We all turn around as James taps on the mic. Terry sits on a stool behind him.

“Hello, everyone. We’re gonna try something new tonight. I’d like ta’ introduce my niece Terry from my hometown of Kilcrohane, County Cork, Ireland,” James says. “She’s gonna sing a few lovely tunes for ye’ and. . . .”

“Boo-oo!” someone shouts. “Take off your shirt.”

“Shut up!” I stand up to see who said it.

“Thank you, Mike, and as I was tellin’ ye’, she’s here ta’ sing a bit for ye’ now.” He gives some soft applause. I stand, start to clap, and nudge Tuchi to join in. He gives a few half-hearted claps.

“Wait till you hear her sing,” I tell him. He gives me a sideways stare.

Terry pulls the mic close to her face and begins to play and sing “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” plucking the strings with her delicate fingers. This is the first time I’ve actually seen her play the guitar or sing for that matter. This beats eavesdropping through the door for the last few days.

“Bro? Mike? Do you want another beer?”

“What?” I ask. “Did you want something?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Are you okay, man? Get him a beer, James,” Tuchi says.

James shakes his head and laughs.

“What’s wrong with you? That chick’s getting to you? She is cute, though.”

“Can you let me listen, please?”

Before realizing it, she finishes the song with a bit of fine fingerpicking on the strings. I get to my feet to clap and nudge Tuchi again to join in.

“She’s awesome, man,” I say.

“Calm down,” Tuchi says.

“Come on, isn’t she awesome? She’s not like all these other girls we see around here. She’s a woman.”

“I’d like ta’ do another Simon and Garfunkel song, it’s called ‘The Boxer,’” Terry announces. Her voice is soft and resonant with a deep tonality to it. She begins to play.

I grab my beer and move closer to her, standing at the edge of the bar, closest to where she is. Terry’s agile fingers float over the guitar strings.

“Mikey, I’m gonna go,” someone whispers in my ear.

“What?”

It’s Beth.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry for being a bitch. I just wanna leave and put tonight behind me.”

“Are you okay to drive, Beth?” I ask her. She stands motionless and glares at Terry as she gets to the part of the song that goes:

*But I get no offers
Just a come-on from the whores. . . .*

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“What did that bitch say?” Beth turns to me with a face that says there’s gonna be a fight soon.

“She’s not singing about you. Those are the words to the song,” I explain.

“Well, she looked right at me and sang it, that bitch,” Beth spurts. Then, she grabs me and kisses me long and hard as she takes hold of my crotch. I push her off. She stares Terry down for a moment. “I gotta go, bye,” she blurts out and leaves.

As the set ends, I call James over and get Terry and myself a beer. She places the guitar against the wall and takes her seat at the bar.

“I got you another beer.”

“I can pay for my own beer, thanks,” she says.

“Can’t I buy you a beer at least? I’m not sure what I did to get you mad at me.”

“Okay, then.” She picks up the beer. “Good luck in all your endeavors.”

“I want to properly introduce myself and—”

“Ye’ already did.” She gulps a mouthful of beer and looks at me with disdain.

“Yeah, but I—”

She gets up to leave, and I get in front of her.

“Move, please. I didn’t come here ta’ keep company with tha’ likes a’ you. Go back ta’ that tart ye’ came in with.” She tries to brush past me.

“Oh, you mean that dancer I was talking to? I’m not with her.”

“Well, she seemed quite affectionate,” she says with a questioning glance. “Is she your sister then?”

“Wow, that’s funny. I can explain. I think you—” She starts to walk away.

I grab her arm. She kicks me in the shin, and it hurts. Blood has surely been drawn.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Let go a’ me, mister big shot, or your plums’ll meet my knee.”

“What?”

She marches away. I follow her to the bathroom door. “Listen, I’m sorry. I—”

“Are ye’ a stalker then? I’ll ask my uncle James ta’ grab his pistol and sort ye’ out.” She clenches one hand, then marches into the ladies’ room.

Tuchi and Sharon have been watching from the bar.

“So, how’s it goin’, lover boy?” Sharon snickers. “I like this chick. She has balls.”

“Now I know why you like her,” Tuchi says. “You wanna fondle those hairy things.”

“You know, if you two were any funnier, you could work a standup act and take it on the road. I’m trying to introduce myself is all, but I can’t quite pin down how to approach this woman.”

“She doesn’t seem too receptive,” Sharon says. “You know, losing a husband and coming to a different country, that can’t be easy, Mike. Did you tell Tuchi she has a kid as well?”

“Yeah. A little girl.”

“And she still doesn’t know that she’s living in your mom’s house, next to you, in the cellar?” Sharon questions.

“No, not yet.”

“Ohhh, this is getting juicy now.” Sharon smiles. “I’m gonna sit back and watch the show. This is new territory for you, Mikey.” She puts an arm around my shoulders. “Usually, you don’t have to struggle for a girl. What’s your next move, General?”

“You’re having a lot a’ fun with this, ain’t you?” I ask her.

“Ohhh, yeah, this is priceless.” She cackles.

Terry comes back to her seat at the bar.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Maybe I should buy her another beer. From far away, though. Like from here away. I’ve run out of legs and she said my plums were next. That’s my nuts, right?” I ask them both.

“Yeah, good idea, Mikey, go for the lateral attack ’cause the frontal assault ain’t working for you, General.” Sharon pats my shoulder.

I wave James over and ask him to send Terry another beer. He does this, but when he puts it down and points in my direction, she waves him away, beer in hand. He comes back, shakes his head, and puts the beer in front of me.

“No good?” I ask.

“Mike boy, do ye’ want me ta’ repeat what she told me?” James asks.

“Okay.”

“Tell him ta’ piss off.” James shakes his head.

“So, the lateral tactic failed, General. What’s your next move?” Sharon asks. “You need an ally.” She picks up the beer and starts to leave.

“What are you doing?” I ask her.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell her you’re her neighbor. This is some sista ta’ sista stuff.”

Sharon approaches Terry and reaches out a hand. Terry shakes her hand, and Sharon takes a seat next to her. Wow, the sister to sister strategy is working. Sharon is the best. She puts the beer in front of Terry and gestures my way. They both look over and Sharon whispers something in Terry’s ear. Terry whispers back to Sharon. They both laugh and look at me. The two of them remain at the bar and talk for some time. Chris has taken the stage and the music begins to blast again. Sharon and Terry seem like they’ve hit it off.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

What are they saying to each other? Sharon orders two shots of Jameson's.. They down the shots and chase it with a healthy mouthful of beer. Some time passes as Chris finishes her few numbers. Sharon finishes her beer, shakes Terry's hand and heads my way.

“Well, what did she say?” I ask with anticipation.

“She told me to tell you that she's not interested. She also told me to tell you she has five kids, two of whom are in wheelchairs. She figures that should scare you off. Then she asked if Beth is your girlfriend. I told her no—and that you're just some harmless guy who comes here often. She did comment that you're handsome, though.”

“Great, that's something.”

“I like her, so I think you should leave her alone,” Sharon says.

Terry begins to break down her equipment. James goes over to help her, and she gives him a kiss on the cheek and a warm hug. She passes me at the bar and taps me on the shoulder.

“Sorry I kicked ye', but you're a big chancer, and you deserved it.” She turns to go.

“I can make it up to you if you give me your number, we can—”

“Fat chance,” she says, and she and James proceed to leave.

What time is it? The clock shows 9:30 p.m. It's early. She does have the little girl, though.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 13

It's 10:30 p.m. and I'm still here with Tuchi and Sharon. After the Beth episode, the fun had been drained out of the rest of the night. I went to do another line of coke, but dark thoughts of her crept into my head and turned me off. She's become so messed up. I feel sadness for her. We all know what Beth is about. If she's inside Chester's sphere of influence, none of us can help her.

Filominca is behind the bar, and we order one more round of drinks. Chris is on the stage now. Kevin has left, but Timmy is still here and is quite attentive to Chris's gyrations and dance moves. When Filominca comes back with our drinks, I tell her to buy Timmy a drink from me. She opens him a beer and points at me. Timmy raises the bottle in appreciation and smiles my way. Typically, a guy at the bar would love to get a view of a girl's vagina. Earlier, though, Timmy didn't seem to care for Beth's crotch shot one bit.

"Thanks for trying to help me tonight with Terry," I whisper into Sharon's ear.

"You're welcome," she replies. "If you give her a little room to breathe, she may eventually come around. She told me her husband died in an accident last year, so that's gonna remain kind of an open wound for a while, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Listen, I'm gonna head out soon. Tell Tuchi to hold onto this bag for me. I'm gonna lay off of it for a while." I hand her the bag of coke under the bar.

"Well, okay, but I was hoping that he'd lay off of it, too. Mikey, we all been a little out of control lately with the holidays and all. This Beth thing tonight shows you just how bad it can all turn."

"Yeah, I know. See you soon, hon." I go over to Tuchi. "Take care, brotha. I gotta go."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“It’s early,” he says.

“Well, I’m gonna go and find out if this Terry woman will talk with me. She seemed to soften up a bit before she left.”

“You better put on your old football uniform, bro, cup and all, just in case.”

“You and Sharon should form that comedy act and take it on the road, far away from me.” I give him a kiss on the cheek and leave. I wave my goodbyes to Filominca, Chris, and Timmy.

When I get to the truck, it has writing scribbled on the windshield. In lipstick, it reads: Former Lover.

That has got to be Beth. As I wipe the words off the glass, I can’t help but say out loud, “You know, this truck might be old and all, but it runs great, and it gets me where I need to go, so fuck you, Beth.” I start the truck and warm my hands at the heater vent.

James’s car is at my house and that means so is Terry. I enter the hallway and peer around through the dim light to see if anyone is here. It’s dark and quiet and empty. I try to close the outside door slowly so as not to make a sound.

Just then, Terry comes from her room with Caitlin in tow. “Okay, luv, tha’ coast is clear.” She hears the door creak shut.

“Oops,” I say.

“Holy Jeysus! Who’s there? Uncle James?” she asks in a frightened voice.

Caitlin screams, “It’s tha’ ghost! It’s tha’ ghost!”

“No, it’s me, Mike from the bar, relax.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I knew ye’ was a stalker all right. Get back, ye’ feckin’ stalker!” She turns on the overhead light. “Oh, yeah, it’s you from the pub.” She lets Caitlin down and says, “Go upstairs and get Uncle James, luv, fast.”

“Hold on, Terry,” I say.

“Oh, so ye’ remember my name, stalker, now do ye’?” She grabs a broom from the corner and points the handle at me. “Stay back or my foot’ll meet your plums for sure!” She rushes me with the broom handle, and I try to grab it from her. Then it happens. Her knee meets my groin hard. As I collapse to the floor, she begins to hit me over the back with the broom’s wooden handle.

“Stop, stop, Terry!” James shouts from behind her. “Please stop, girl! This is Mike. He lives in the room next ta’ ye’. Don’t kill ’em!”

“Jeysus, what?” She turns toward James. “This is the guy from the pub. He followed me home.”

“Yes, he’s the guy from the bar, but he lives here. He’s my stepson, Mike.”

“Jeysus no, this fella here, he lives here?” She points the broom at my door and then whacks me again with the handle. “You’re tha’ ghost then, are ye’?”

“Yes. I’m the ghost.” She hits me with the broom again, hard.

“Jeysus, Terry!” James says.

“That’s for scarin’ me little girl for tha’ last three days, thank you very much. Caitlin, come and say hello to your ghost then. He’s just a pile a’ useless flesh and bones. Come on now, luv, be polite and say hello.” Caitlin comes to me and puts out a hand. I grab it and we shake. She helps me to my feet.

“Your name’s Michael then, ghost?” Caitlin asks.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Yes, my name’s Michael, Michael Walsh, and you’re Caitlin?”

“Yes, Michael, how long have you been a ghost then?”

“Ohhh, not too long. I’m still learning.”

“Ya don’t seem so scary now, Michael.” She pokes my leg. “You feel like you’re formed and whole like the rest of us.”

“Well, Caitlin, I’m a good ghost.” When I gaze at Terry, she meets my eyes.

“Do you want some soup, Michael?” Caitlin asks. “Mum, can Michael have some Cup-a-Soup?”

“Didn’t ye’ eat earlier, luv?” Terry looks at James.

“She did, but I think this one has a hollow leg.” He chuckles.

“And we should be polite to our new neighbor, Mum,” Caitlin says.

“Sure, luv, do we have soup, I wonder?” Terry asks. She bites her lower lip and turns to James.

“Well, if ye’ don’t, I have some upstairs,” James says.

“Okay, then,” Terry says, and she goes into her room. Caitlin follows her mother.

“Mike, remember boy, you’re walkin’ on eggshells,” James mutters in my ear with a look I haven’t seen since I was seventeen.

“James, I understand.”

“Okay, then.” He pats me on the back and goes upstairs.

Terry’s room is much smaller than I remember. There’s a double bed against the far wall under a back window. The room is sparse with no cabinets or closets, only a dresser across from the bed

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

and no TV or refrigerator either. A small microwave sits atop the dresser. Caitlin begins to prepare the soup for us.

She pours water from a jug into three cups of instant soup and places them in the microwave. She then pushes a few buttons and claps her hands in approval. To see this little person doing this, for me, is quite fascinating. She's a precocious little girl.

"Michael, sit here, please." Caitlin points to the bed. Terry bites her lower lip as she watches Caitlin. Terry is a natural beauty and her love for her girl is most evident. She catches me watching her, and I turn away.

She comes and sits next to me on the bed. "I'm so sorry I was a dick ta' ye'. Why didn't ye' tell me you're James's stepson, for Jeysus sake?"

"I tried to tell you and then you kicked me in the leg. I may never dance again."

"For real?" she asks.

"No, I'm messing with you."

"Ohh—ye' coddin' me then?" she says, and then glances at me sideways.

"What?"

"You're breaking my balls, as you say here in the States."

"Oh, yeah, I'm teasing you. Not about my leg bleeding, though."

"What?" With that, I pull up my pant leg to show her the damage.

"Jeysus, Mary, and Joseph! I'm so sorry," Terry says as she jumps to her feet. "Let me get ye' some swabs or somethin'." She bites her lower lip.

"Hello, all. I've brought ye' yer soup." Caitlin presents the cups to us. Terry sits back down and takes hold of hers. Caitlin holds out one for me.

"Thank you, Caitlin," I say.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Caitlin grabs her soup and settles on the bed next to me. Terry gives me a wink. I notice Terry and Caitlin share the same smile and green eyes. Is she tolerating me for her girl's sake? We sit and finish our soup in silence. Soon thereafter, Caitlin gets an upset stomach. Terry picks her up and hugs her.

"I'm sorry but I gotta take care." She takes her daughter outside and into the bathroom and I hear some sort of goings on. The words are muddled and soft. When they return, a pale Caitlin nestles in Terry's arms.

"Is she all right?" I ask. Terry lays Caitlin on the bed.

"She'll be fine. This happens often with tha' Cup-a-Soup. I think it's too late for her to be eating."

"Maybe you should get some food with better nutritional value," I say.

She turns toward me.

"Oh, do you think I'm a poor mother then? Do you wanna become our protector and shield us from our own deficiencies?" Terry asks with her hands on her hips.

"No, no."

"You think we can't survive without your divine intervention?"

"I know you're an amazing mom. I've listened to you both through the door all week and I know you're amazing with Caitlin."

"Oh, so the ghost, who is you, is spying on me then? All the while, I'm sittin' here chattin' ta' myself, you been spying on me?" She closes in on me. "You might be needin' some medical attention, you do."

"Well, my leg needs some medical attention."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Oh, Jaysus, I’m so sorry. I forgot. Well, I apologize again. Can you show me the damage one more time?”

“I’m not sure if I can even look at the damage.”

“Well, close your eyes, and I’ll take another look-see.”

“Okay.” She pulls up the leg of my jeans.

“Oh, crap, Jaysus! I’m so sorry. I thought ye’ was a stalker. Why didn’t ye’ tell me you’re James’s stepson?”

“I tried to tell you.”

“Well, serves you right, stalker. Take your pants off, and I’ll tend ta’ ye’ then,” she says.

“What? Wait!”

“Oh, you’re all taken aback now, ain’t ye’? Ye’ stalk me all night in the pub and ye’ scared my child half to death for days. Then, ye’ follow me home and now ye’ want me to believe that you’re scared of me?” She stands up and folds her arms. “Go next door, and I’ll be over in a while to patch you up.”

“Okay.”

“Go on then.”

Caitlin has fallen asleep on their bed.

I get up and pour a couple of shots of Jack Daniel’s. One of them goes down my throat. A can of air freshener is under the couch and it’s sprayed in liberal amounts. There’s a knock on the door. Terry comes in without a word. She carries a towel and a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

“Take your pants off and sit down, please.” She motions to the couch.

“But, I—”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Ye’ ain’t got nothin’ under those jeans I ain’t seen before. I’ve got five younger brothers who I bathed every night when they were small. Peel ’em off so I can save your life.” She points the bottle of alcohol at me and shakes it.

“Can you help me with my boots, please?” I ask. She steps forward and pulls them off. The jeans come off, and when she sees my shin, she grimaces. Some skin has peeled away, and the blood has dripped down and dried in my sock.

“I’m so sorry.” She covers her mouth with her hand. “I better repair the damage and make it right. Saint Joseph, forgive me.” She makes the sign of the cross. “Don’t it hurt?” she asks with the most mournful, guilty face.

“Well, it would hurt less if I had that whiskey over there.” I point to the bottle on the stereo.

“Right ye’ are. Whiskey will help you for sure.” She points an index finger at me and winks. “You’re a reader then, Michael?” She holds *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in her hand.

“Not a voracious reader, but yes.”

“I like a good book. Is this a good one then?”

“You never read *Huck Finn*? It’s a classic,” I tell her.

“I’ll have ta’ borrow it.”

I’m enjoying this. My leg stopped hurting hours ago. To watch her move and talk is fascinating. She puts the book down and turns around with a shot in each hand. Her face is open, happy, and her eyes glow like jewels. She hands me a shot.

“*Slainte!*” she says and downs her shot.

“*Slainte.*”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Health and wealth to ye’. Now, quiet down and let me tend to your leg before you bleed to death and they’ll arrest me.”

She kneels down in front of me and surveys the destruction she caused. She bites her lip in the most frantic, alluring fashion. It’s quite unconceivable to me, the sight of a woman like her tending to me. She gets up and pours two more shots and hands one to me.

“*Slainte!*” she pronounces, and we down them. “I fear you’re gonna need it ’cause this looks quite dodgy ta’ me.”

“Will I live through it all?”

“Well, we won’t be calling the medical examiner for ye’ any time soon. The scar, I fear, is gonna be a permanent reminder of our introduction tonight, though.”

With that, she pours the alcohol over my leg, and now my leg is on fire. This hurts more than when she kicked me earlier. I’ve been shot in Vietnam, and this is painful.

“JeJesus, I’m an eejit! Get to the shower!” Terry points in the direction of the bathroom.

“I’m sorry. I’m not a nurse. I’m not even an EMT. I, I wanted ta’ make it right and, feck’s sake, I did ye’ in again,” Terry laments from the open bathroom door.

The water pours over me and down my legs. The pain subsides quickly.

“I’ll be all right. Hand me that bar of soap on the sink, please,” I say.

She grabs the soap and goes to hand it to me. I pull the shower curtain partially aside, reach out for it, and take her hand.

She gazes up at me. “I best leave ye’ to it, Michael. I’ll wait for ye’ next door,” she says demurely.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 14

I hear the door between our rooms unlock. She has a roll of first-aid tape in her mouth. She is also carrying a pair of scissors, a tube of something, and a bottle of Jameson's whiskey. She spits the tape onto the bed.

"Do ye' have a pair a' white socks?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"Hand 'em over."

I jump up and search my dresser as she pours two shots of the whiskey. "Do you have some clean knickers?"

"Underwear? Yeah."

"Put 'em on. I don't want ye' ta' get all horned up."

"Got 'em." I slip into the briefs under my robe.

"Not the socks, though, I need 'em. Now, sit down if ye' please." She hands me a shot.

"*Slainte.*" We down them simultaneously. She turns and notices the record player. "Do you have a nice collection of LPs then, Michael?"

"I think so. Most are from my mom. The stereo used to be hers."

Terry arranges her first-aid items on the stereo cabinet.

"Sock, please," she says, holding out a hand. After thrusting a sock into her hand in a precise, clipped fashion, we play a game of operation.

She cuts the sock straight across, above the ankle with the scissors. Terry then takes the tube of, it says antibiotic ointment and begins to squeeze some out onto my leg. All the while, she glances up at me, concerned.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

I imagine that an angel appears before me and flutters her wings.

She smooths out the ointment over the raw real estate, takes the trimmed sock and slides it over my foot and up to cover my shin. Her lip continues to be mangled by her teeth and her face contorts in the most adorable fashion.

“Tape,” she orders with an outstretched hand. I grab the roll from the bed and slap it into her hand. “Thank you,” she says in a crisp voice. She then pulls off a length of tape and hands me an end. “Hold, please,” she says in the same voice, and cuts the tape. She glances up and gives me a smirk. She’s definitely a celestial being. My loins begin to get aroused. She notices and pauses.

“Don’t get all excited on me now, sailor. I have to finish the procedure.” She wraps the sock to my leg with the tape. Standing, she says, “You’re gonna live!”

“Thank you, Terry.” I stand and take her hand. She looks right through me with disarming candor. I pull her toward me. She comes to me willingly and I kiss her. Her lips are soft, and she smells of roses. She kisses me back, but soon breaks it off.

“I don’t want ye’ thinking I’m a total Sally or somethin’,” she says. “We been drinking and I’m a bit tipsy, and I ain’t no tart like that one from the pub I seen ye’ with.”

“I know that. I knew you were different from the first time I saw you,” I tell her.

“Caitlin’s a good sleeper, but let me close the door.” As she does this, I pour two more shots. She comes toward me, and I hand her one.

“*Slainte*,” I say.

“Oh, this is the last one, Michael, it’s late, and I don’t want ye’ obsessin’ over me.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“It’s too late; I never met a woman like you, Terry. You’re nothing like the girls I usually go out with. You rough me up, and then you patch me up afterward. Does anyone ever come out alive after they mix it up with you?”

“Not typically. My husband’s gone to meet the Lord above, so maybe you better run for your life then, Michael.”

“No—no, you’re not gonna scare me away that easily. I been through Vietnam, and I’ve seen a lot of bad and ugly, and that ain’t you. Bad and ugly are all around us. That’s the human condition, I guess.” I close in on her. “I ain’t gonna leave you alone.”

“I don’t want ye’ to be fallin’ for me, Michael. I’m not some little doll you take out of the cupboard to play with when you get bored. Tonight’s been grand, really.” She reaches up and holds my face. “To enjoy the company of a man again, and I kinda have a thing for ye’, ye’ know.”

“You do?” I grab her tight.

“You’re great with Caitlin, too, and that goes a long way with me. I just think—if we take it a bit slower. I was married for quite some time, ye’ know. I never did jump back into the game till tonight.” Her tone changes. “Say, let’s play some LPs and have a dance?” She breaks away with a smile and starts to shuffle through the record collection.

In the bathroom, I rake my hand through my hair, then wipe myself down with a damp washcloth. Once dried off, I apply liberal amounts of deodorant. The smell of roses engulfs Terry, and I have to find out from where on her body it emanates. The thought of how I look or smell hasn’t concerned me since high school. When I get back, Eddie Floyd’s “Knock on Wood”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

starts to play on the stereo. She waves me over to her. As I approach her, I think, *God, you are real.*

Terry has the 1960s groove down better than anyone I've seen. If you've ever watched Janis Joplin moving on stage, think better than Janis. I'm not the best dancer and she's blowing my mind. Typically, I would have to be drunk on my ass to even come close to anything resembling a groove, but I try. She's all smiles and having a great time. She takes hold of my hips and tries to help me. It's hopeless.

She lets go of me and is in a dancing trance now. I stand there and watch in awe as her organic beauty takes over my world. Her hair flies through the air as she shakes it around her head to the beat of the song. I pour two more shots.

"Come on. Join in," she says with shimmering eyes.

"Are you sure Caitlin will sleep through this?"

"She'll be fine. Show me some moves, Elvis." She dances my way with a mischievous look on her face.

It's like thunder and lightning. . . .

She grabs the shots I poured and hands me one. "Last one." She downs hers fast. "It's getting hot in here, ain't it?"

I rush to set the mood and turn the light one click lower. The room goes a shade darker. We clutch each other and kiss as Terry takes a firm hold of my ass.

I gather a handful of her hair in one hand to hold her head still while I plunge my tongue deep into her mouth, and her tongue meets mine. Then, she stops.

"Ye' have a nice arse, Michael."

"Likewise, Terry."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“You’re all chubbed up. Maybe I should just go ta’ bed?”

“Yes, you should.” I pick her up, bring her back to the couch, and lay her down.

“You’re gettin’ me plastered ’cause you want a go at my giblets, don’t ye’?” she asks.

I nod my head.

“Let’s not fall for each other then. I’ll complicate your life, and you’ll complicate mine.”

“It’s too late for me, Terry.”

I begin to undo her blouse and she closes her eyes. I grab a handful of a breast through her lacy white bra.

“Oh, God,” she moans.

I kiss her, but she breaks it off.

“Michael, I been outta that game a long time, ye’ know.” She holds my face. “You’re wonderful and we’ve had a good craic and all, but I just met ye’.”

She sits up and slowly buttons her blouse.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

Terry gets up, quietly walks to the door, and opens it.

“You’re amazing, Michael, really, but I best go.”

“Alright.”

“Tomorrow, we can get some tea and. . .” She yawns a long, sleepy yawn. “Then we’ll . . . I’m sorry, I’m absolutely shattered.”

“What? Why?”

“Tired, I mean ta’ say.”

“Ohhh, okay.”

She puts a finger to her lips and disappears into her room.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Speaking of being shattered, I lie down on the couch and close my eyes.

I break through the door only to see a naked Chester kneeling on top of a girl. He has his hands around her neck. I leap through the air and tackle him. We fall off the bed and onto the ground. I pull my Colt handgun from its holster and put it against Chester's head. He raises his trembling hands up and out to the side.

"I'll fuckin' kill you, Chester!" I say.

"That bitch bit me! It's not my fault! That fuckin' gook bitch bit me, Mike."

"You motha' fucker! I'll kill you right here!" I spit my words with fury.

"Why would you give a crap about some gook whore? They mean nothin' to us, man!"

Chester says.

"Stand up so I can watch you hit the ground. Get up!" I drag him to his feet.

"Michael—Michael, wake up. You're dreamin'." I hear Terry's voice urgent in my ear as she shakes me awake. I'm on the floor again, and my heart pounds like a beating drum. Terry takes hold of my face.

"Oh, hi, I'll be okay. I have some bad dreams sometimes," I say.

"You're drenched in sweat. I'll get you a wet towel." She rushes out of the room, and I hear the sound of water running in the bathroom. She comes back and begins to dab my face as I try to get to my feet. She stops me.

"Stay here a minute," she says. "You jumped outta the bed screamin'. You scared tha' crap outta me. I thought you were gonna kill someone, so you said. Who's Chester?"

"Oh, he's a guy I grew up with in town."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Why you wanna kill ’em then?”

“It’s a long story. I have these dreams sometimes from the war is all. It’ll pass.”

“Look at ye’. You’re a ravin’ maniac. You’re soaked in sweat. Michael, this can’t be good for ye’. Have ye’ ever seen someone about it?”

I wave away the notion. “I just need to let it pass is all. It always passes. Don’t concern yourself too much with it.”

“You can’t run from your demons forever, Michael. Look what it’s doin’ to ye’.” She has true concern on her face.

“Help me up, please.” I grab her and touch her face. “You’re amazing. I’m gonna take a—”

Caitlin calls from the other room.

“Mum, are you okay?” she asks. “I got up ta’ go ta’ tha’ jacks and didn’t see ye’. I figured you got kidnapped.”

Terry goes over and opens the door a crack.

“You can see I ain’t kidnapped, luv, so let’s go and get cleaned up and Michael’s gonna take us to get some tea, okay?”

“Okay, Mum.” With that, Caitlin closes the door to their room.

“She is adorable and quite the precocious little girl,” I tell Terry.

“She’s a cheeky one she is, that’s a definite. Listen, I’ll go get dressed and then we can all go and get some breakfast tea? Whadda ye’ think?”

“My mom probably has some upstairs. It’s dawn, so Mom will probably be asleep, but I think she has tea.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“The tea she has isn’t that good, sorry, Michael. Besides, I’d like to get out and do some shoppin’. Uncle James gave me a bit of cash to get a small fridge and a hot plate and some other such items.”

“Okay, I’ll get dressed and wait for you guys,” I say.

“Brilliant, we’ll be back in a jiff.” She saunters away.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 15

Terry returns with her hair done in a ponytail, wearing jeans and a sweater. The Converse sneakers still rock her feet as well. I see no evidence of any makeup. Her simple, natural beauty shines through. If she'd been any other woman from around here, I'd have grown a beard by the time she'd be ready to step out. Caitlin has on a simple outfit of jeans and a T-shirt and what appears to be a hand-me-down coat that's still a bit too big.

“Ready,” Terry says as she puts on a classic navy peacoat.

When we get to my truck, I stop her. “You look great in that coat,” I tell her.

“It's one a' my favorites.”

“I would like to sit next to Michael,” Caitlin declares. “I can help you drive. What? It's all mixed up in here, Mum. Why is the wheel over there?” Caitlin exclaims.

“Well, ye' was sleepin' when Uncle James brought us here, and his car is the same way. That's how they do it in the States, luv.”

“I think I'll be okay, Caitlin, but I do appreciate your offer,” I say.

“My dad let me help him drive, but his lever was on the other side. I'll do my best with my left hand then.” Caitlin slides closer to me. Terry gives me an apprehensive smile.

“All right then, Caitlin, let's see how you do. My truck has first, second, third, and fourth gear with reverse far to the middle and down. Does that sound right?”

“No, no, he had a haitch shape. One, two, three, and R was at the bottom.” She motions through the gears with her right hand.

“Well, I'll help you learn how we do it, okay?” I say.

“Brilliant!” Caitlin rejoices.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Terry gives me a wink.

I start the engine and release the emergency brake. She has her left hand over my hand on the stick shift, and we're off.

"First gear, but I have to stop and check traffic," I say. "Okay, the coast is clear. Okay, second gear and then I give it some gas. Third gear and some more gas." Caitlin alternately watches the road and watches her hands move.

"Someone's comin', get over!" she says.

"No, Caitlin, they drive on the wrong side a' the road in the States as well," Terry explains. "It's okay to open your eyes now, luv."

"I thought we were a goner for sure, Mum," Caitlin exclaims.

I can only laugh to myself at this little girl. We pull into the supermarket parking lot, and she helps me go down the gears as well.

"Great job, Caitlin. How long you been drivin' then?" I ask her.

"Since I'm five."

"And how old are you now?" I ask.

"Eight," she proclaims.

As we begin to wander through the aisles, Terry and Caitlin's mouths are agape with wonderment. Caitlin would find candy or cookies stacked on a shelf and take an armful, then Terry would put it all back. Terry parades down the aisles with her eyes ablaze and then pivots around toward me.

"JeJesus," she says, "I never saw so many choices of, of everything! How many people live in this village? You got an army nearby? I can't even see the other side a' this building."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Mum, can we get these cookies?” Caitlin asks. She holds a bag of chocolate chip cookies aloft. “These are my favorites.”

“Okay, just the one, luv. Michael, they must have my teas here for sure in a warehouse like this.”

“Follow me. I come here a lot.”

“Do ye’ leave little crumbs on tha’ floor so ye’ can find your way out?” Terry asks me.

“This is a typical American supermarket, Terry.”

“Jeysus, you can fit ten or more a’ the one back home in this place. I never seen such a thing.”

“Okay, here’s the teas,” I say.

Terry turns to talk to Caitlin, but she’s nowhere in sight.

“Mother Mary, I lost her already. Caitlin?” she calls out, and then runs in the direction we came from.

They both come from around the corner. “Caitlin, stay with us close now, please. This store is too big ta’ be wanderin’ off.”

Caitlin has opened the cookies by now and is going to town on them as we inspect the tea aisle. Terry paces back and forth while she points to one box of tea and then another and then again to another choice. She stands back to get a better, broader view of all the boxes of teas. She grabs two, then another and another. Three of them fall to the floor. She holds up the one still in her hand.

“That’s the winner, I reckon,” she says with a smile. I see a teapot and hot plate for sale nearby and grab them both. Terry gives me a thumbs-up for approval, and we go to the checkout.

“It’s on me, Terry,” I say.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I’m no charity case, Michael Walsh.” She smiles at me, pays, and we leave in short order. “I’ll let you buy me breakfast, though. I’m famished. Is there a place nearby ta’ grab a sausage or an egg?” she asks.

“I know just the place.”

Caitlin became so busy with her cookies, she let Terry sit next to me.

I pull into the parking lot of the town diner and we get out. Off to one side, I notice a ragged-looking guy that comes around town now and again. He has long salt-and-pepper hair and a long beard. He heads my way.

“Hey, man, you got a quarter? I need to make a phone call. My truck broke down,” he says.

“Sure, here you go.”

I watch him amble off toward the diner’s outdoor pay phone.

Then Terry, Caitlin, and I go inside and grab an empty booth. Terry and I sit opposite each other, and Caitlin sits next to me. Jean waves to me as we sit.

“So, this is where you come after you get plastered then?” Terry asks.

“Yup.”

Jean comes over with two cups and three place settings.

“Hi, Mike, coffee, everyone?” Jean asks as she pours me a cup.

“I’ll have a tea, please,” Terry says.

“And for the little one?” Jean asks.

“Do ye’ have any chocolate milk?” Terry asks her.

“Sure do, I’ll be right back.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Terry takes a menu and begins to examine it. I always get the same thing—two eggs over easy, crispy white toast, home fries, and bacon. Some Advil to wash down with the coffee would have been nice as well. Terry goes over the menu choices with Caitlin until they’ve made their decision. She puts the menu away and leans over the table.

“Michael, you have me completely wrecked this mornin’,” she whispers to me. “What time was it then when. . .?” She turns toward Caitlin. “Caitlin, you got chocolate all over your mug. Please put the cookies away. That’s all you’ll be gettin’ today.”

“She looks just like a younger version of you,” I tell her. “Her freckles are adorable.”

“Like twins if ye’d ever seen my younger self,” Terry says.

We order our food—Terry decided on two sausages and two eggs each for herself and Caitlin—and when it comes out, Terry and I dig in. We devour our food, and it revives me somewhat. Caitlin plays with hers. She has eaten only one sausage. Jean wraps up Caitlin’s leftovers and as we get ready to leave, I notice a commotion outside.

No fucking way! Chester’s outside harassing the guy I gave the quarter to. He’s raging in the guy’s face and knocks him off balance with a push. The guy puts up his hands and backs away. Chester rushes inside, grabs the phone from behind the counter, and begins to dial. He’s not in uniform.

“Hey, yeah, it’s Sergeant Hornauy. Send a tow truck to the Airport Diner right now. Listen, just do it!” He hangs up. He addresses Jean, who is behind the counter. “Police business.” Then, he turns to leave. “Well, look who it is,” he says. “Got the whole family with you today, Mike, eh?” He comes toward us.

“Crawl back in your coffin, Chester,” I tell him.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“You’re funny, Mike. You’re always funny,” he says with a sinister smile. “You out havin’ fun last night again with your, ah, bimbo girl I see. This one’s new, eh?” He chuckles as he points to Terry.

“Piss off, ye’ dirtbag! Keep it up, chancer, and my foot’ll meet your clackers for sure,” Terry says.

“Whoa, she’s a feisty one, Mike. Good in the sack probably, right?”

And with that, Terry tries to get around me and kick Chester. I have to pull her back and hold her. Chester’s unimpressed and bends down to Caitlin’s level. “Hi, little girl, is this your new daddy?” Chester asks her with a smile.

Caitlin shakes her head no as an uneasy look comes over her face.

“My dad’s in Heaven,” she says.

Chester rises back up.

“At least someone knows where their father is, right, Mike?” He calls Jean over. “Get the kid a milkshake on me.” He throws a five-dollar bill on the counter, turns, and leaves.

I release Terry from my grasp.

“Why’d you hold me back? I’d a’ flattened him, that feekin’ arsehole.” Terry kneels down to console Caitlin. “Are you okay, luv?” She glances up at me. “What’s wrong with ye”? He scared her half to death. Ain’t ye’ got no balls?”

“It’s complicated with that dickhead,” I reply.

Terry gets to her feet. “Complicated nothin’. I’d a—”

“That’s Chester,” I tell her. She searches my face.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“That’s the Chester in your dream you wanna kill—that Chester?” I nod my head. “I’ll help you then. He’s a royal feck hole, ain’t he? Sorry, Caitlin, I know I shouldn’t be cursin’ in front a ye’.”

Jean calls to us as we exit. “Here’s your milkshake.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Terry replies.

We watch as the poor guy’s truck gets towed away. Chester stands at the door of a black Corvette and forms his hand into the shape of a gun. He aims it in my direction, winks, and gives me a nauseating grin before he gets in the car. Beth happens to be in the passenger’s seat. She turns her head, notices us, and flips me the finger as the Corvette peels away.

“Wasn’t that the loose bit who was molestin’ ye’ at the pub? What’s she doin’ with a feck-face like that?” Terry asks.

“That’s her,” I say.

“Mum,” Caitlin protests.

“Sorry, luv,” Terry says.

“Hey, you need a ride, man?” I ask the old guy.

“I guess I do,” he says.

Sliding across the seat of my truck, I open the passenger door. Caitlin climbs in, followed by Terry who puts Caitlin onto her lap. The stranger gets in next to Terry and shuts the door.

“Where you goin’, fella?” I ask him as I pull out of the parking lot.

“Make a right, then a left on 23.”

Caitlin studies his face. Terry gives me a look.

“Tryin’ to help a guy who’s had a run in with Chester is all,” I pronounce.

Terry turns to him.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I’m Terry and this is my daughter, Caitlin. Pleased ta’ meet ye’.”

“I’m Sergey,” he says.

So, here we are, all squeezed into my truck. Sergey the stranger with Terry and Caitlin huddled in the middle. He looks like a very interesting fellow. We’ve been on Route 23 for a while now, and we’re getting close to High Point State Park.

“Are you near High Point, Sergey?” I ask.

“Yeah, sort of,” he answers.

As I drive a bit more, we’re inside the park now. Distant memories of Tuchi, Bill, and me coming up here as kids float back into my consciousness. This is where Chester had his brush with death.

“Turn left here,” Sergey says.

“Left where? I don’t see a road.”

Terry gives me a worried glance.

Then, I see a narrow dirt road and make the turn. I’d be hard pressed to want to drive up here in the dark. It all comes back to me in a split second, a flash of shotgun blasts in the night. This is near the spot where we were the night Chester shit himself from fear, and then we left him there. We were all terrified. Tuchi, Bill, and I got on our bikes and tore out of there so fast. The trees are close in on the truck now, and their branches scrape at my door as the uneven dirt road makes for a rough ride.

“Here is good,” he says. “You can follow the road up and around, and it’ll bring you back ta’ Route 23 eventual. I appreciate tha’ ride.”

An old wooden sign beside him reads: Limestone Waters Spring at Munsee Reservation—Open. Faded letters following that are worn away by time.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

He begins to head down a hidden pathway.

“Terry, can you roll down the window, please?” As she does, I call out, “Sergey, can I ask you something?” He turns and comes to the window. “Was there a guy called Spookadoodle who lived up here years ago?”

“Well, he never liked the name, but that was my father. He was the original caretaker of this place for the Munsee tribe after the war. Why do you ask?”

“Well, we used to come here as kids. One time, we came up here at night and someone scared us half to death. He chased us down the hill with shotgun blasts.”

“You left one of your friends behind?”

“Yes.”

“I remember the boy. Well, people didn’t take care a’ this sacred place. They would throw their garbage and bottles around. Then it became a tribal ritual site, and even the tribe’s people eventually died off. He asked me to take care of the place before he disappeared, and that’s what I been doin’ ever since.”

“Can I check out this place before we leave?” I ask.

“Well—you have been a righteous fellow by me, and I do appreciate your help today. You all have to promise me that this site will remain a secret. I don’t want it desecrated by townies. You saw earlier how a townie can be,” he laments.

“Oh, yeah, that guy will never come back here. Your father scared the crap out of him years ago, literally.”

“Okay, then, park here,” Sergey says.

I shut the truck off and we get out to follow him. Terry rushes around from her side and clutches my arm.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Are you sure they ain’t gonna be lookin’ for our bodies up here tomorrow?” she whispers in my ear.

“Listen, I think we can handle anything he throws our way.”

“Well, by the looks a’ your performance with Chester, I have my doubts,” Terry says.

“Gee, thanks,” I say with a smile.

She grabs hold of my arm and bites my shoulder in a playful manner.

We follow Sergey up a path for a while, and then he waves us onto a trail that winds down the hill. As we try to follow close behind, tree limbs and bushes slap at us left and right. Terry pulls on my arm.

“Michael, let’s go back, please,” she says with a shudder.

“No, I need to see this place. Come on, it’ll be all right. He’s harmless. Caitlin, are you okay?” I ask her.

She nods her head yes.

We come to the bottom of the path, and laid out before us is a clear blue spring surrounded by cliff face on three sides. A soft sand beach slopes down to the water as brilliant sunlight dapples the surface of the still spring like magical pixies.

“It’s beautiful,” Terry whispers reverently.

“Yes,” Sergey says. “These waters are limestone waters. They run deep underground and are as pure as Mother Nature can get them. It filters through the limestone until it comes to the surface, untainted and clean. This precious water isn’t for everyone, but I had a feeling about you people. Not everyone would put out a hand to help a guy like me. Not everyone is ready for a place like this either.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Did anyone ever swim in it?” Terry asks him.

“Some people used to go in. Usually, it was the old tribal folk who plunged in after an elaborate ceremonial rite of sorts.”

“You’ve seen them do these things, Sergey?” I ask him.

“Oh, yeah, years ago, it was a regular thing,” he says. “I was initiated into the tribe as a youngster as the traditions demanded. Immersion in the waters, the elders say, cleanses your soul and prepares you for manhood.”

“That’s absolutely fascinating,” Terry says.

I turn to look again at the glimmering water. Caitlin stands at the edge of it and recites a short prayer.

Caitlin turns to us. “Mum, can we come back one day and go for a swim?”

Sergey walks over to Caitlin and kneels next to her in the sand. “You, young lady—you may be the only person here the waters would accept.” He puts a hand on Caitlin’s shoulder.

Caitlin studies his face intently. She gives him a hug, and he hugs her back. Terry squeezes my arm, then goes to Caitlin. I feel left out, so I join them at the water’s edge. It’s January, but the water isn’t frozen as I kneel to dip my hands in. It’s cold, and I take a sip.

“Don’t drink the water!” Sergey calls out.

“Why? You said it’s the purest and—”

“If you’re not prepared to receive what the water has to offer—you may be sorry.”

“What do you mean, Sergey?” I ask.

“You’ll find out,” he says.

Terry rushes over to me. “What are you doing? This is a sacred place of worship for him,” she says under her breath. “Don’t be dippin’ yourself in holy water unless ye’ mean it.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She approaches Sergey. “Can we come back sometime when it gets warmer?”

“I think you people are the type a’ people the water may accept,” Sergey says. “I have a P.O. box at the post office I check weekly. I’ll give you the address, so when you wanna come back, write me a letter and I’ll answer it. Sorry, I don’t have a phone up here. We never did.”

He turns to leave, and we all follow him up the path and through the dense brush back to where we came from. He stops on the path at the top of the cliff face and pulls out a pen. “I don’t have any paper but. . . .” Sergey says.

I hold out my hand, and he begins to write on it. Terry’s face glows with excitement, and it catches me off guard. We walk to the truck and wave goodbye to Sergey. He disappears into the woods.

“Terry, can you get me a piece of paper and pencil in the glove box please so I can write this address down?”

“Do you think he’s lonely livin’ up here, Mum?” Caitlin asks.

“I don’t know, luv. Maybe, we could be some friendly faces for him to see again. He seems nice enough. Whadda ye’ think, Michael? Can you bring us back to see Sergey someday soon?”

“For sure, this place is cool.”

While we drive back, Terry and I sit in silence while Caitlin chatters away.

“I think he’s a good man,” she states. “I do like him. He must be lonely living in tha’ woods all alone, though. I’m sure it’s scary in the forest at night. Yes, he is a very mysterious fellow.”

Along the way, my gut starts to rumble.

Chapter 16

The instant we arrive back at the house, I rush to the bathroom. The pain and gas are unbearable. Once I get onto the toilet, what ensues is a massive attack of explosive diarrhea. I drank a lot last night, it's true, but I felt fine at breakfast.

Wait, Sergey warned me not to drink the water. Please, let this episode be over soon. A cloud of noxious fumes begins to surround me. I reach for the air freshener near the sink and spray the air, to no avail. The oxygen is being sucked from the room, so I flush the toilet. Oh, God, that is disgusting.

It comes in waves now. At first, I think the suffering may be done. Then, a debilitating agony takes hold of me again as the shit pours out of my body. I flush the toilet to get rid of some of the stink, but the stench lingers overhead like an ominous storm cloud. Wave after wave continues to pass through me. Sweat spews from me, and I begin to feel weak. How long have I been in here? There's a knock on the door.

“Michael, are ye' okay?” Terry asks.

“I'll be fine,” I answer with a feeble voice.

When the diarrhea subsides, I turn on the shower and let the water run down my back and butt. My body needs to be scrubbed. The warm water feels good as I lather up some soap and hit every nook and cranny. Even in my weakened state, thoughts of my encounter with Terry from the night before come to me. Once I towel off, I crack the door open.

“Terry—Terry, can you get me some underwear and a shirt and pants, please, from my dresser?”

After a minute, she emerges from my room with some clothes.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Here ye’ go. Are ye’ . . .? Oh, God, it’s brutal in here. I’ll leave ye’ be,” she says.

“Thanks.”

Dressing is an effort. My pants don’t make it past my butt, and a shirt is impossible to pull over my head. As I collapse to the floor, all I want is rest and sleep. I’m so tired, and the cold bathroom floor feels nice. I close my eyes.

The room is dark and lit by a lamp in the corner with a scarf drawn over it. The smell of pho, from the roadside vendors in downtown Da Nang, floats through the air. On the bed is one of the go-go dancers from earlier tonight. She has on a gold miniskirt and a gold bra. A pair of gold go-go boots cover her calves. She can’t be more than seventeen years old. Her long black hair lies flat along her head and shoulders.

“Hi, Joe, what you want?” the girl asks me.

I’m so wasted, I don’t know what I want, so I plop down on the bed next to her. “You want me, Joe, five dolla’,” she repeats as she unbuckles my belt and proceeds to grope around my groin. She pulls my cock out and starts to jerk me off. “Ten dollar, Joe,” she says.

“Wasn’t it five dollars a second ago?” I ask her.

“Okay, five dolla’, you got five dolla’, Joe?”

“Hold on. One of my buddies pushed me into this room. I don’t know if I have five dollars.”

“What you got, Joe?” she demands, and she stops her activity. As I search my pockets, I find a dollar bill and give it to her.

“Okay, you get dance.” She goes to a small record player on a table in the corner.

“What’s your name?” I ask her.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Linh,” she says as she drops the needle on a 45 record.

*The look of love
Is in your eyes. . . .*

She does her best version of a seductive dance. In the dim light, I can see she’s quite cute. Most of the Vietnamese girls I’ve seen tonight are what you would call petite. They’re short with small breasts and long hair. All the girls in this place want your attention and money. It’s the only way that some of them can get by. She heads toward me as she sways her hips from side to side.

Linh turns around and pulls her long hair aside as though to tell me to undo her top, so I do. When she turns back, her young, small breasts quiver to the music. Then, she presses them into my face. I grab her ass, pull her onto my lap, and take a firm hold of her butt in both hands. She kisses me.

A man yells in the room next door. “You fuckin’ bitch!” That’s Chester’s voice. A girl screams. Linh stops to listen. The girl next door screams again, and we hear something like slaps or punching sounds. It’s the sounds of someone being beaten.

“That my sister, Joe, that my sister, please help her!” Linh shouts.

I rush next door, but the door is locked. The door gives way as I smash through it.

“I’ll fuckin’ kill you, Chester!” I scream while Terry’s face comes into focus over me. She tries to tell me something, but I can only hear Linh’s screams in the background.

“Michael, can ye’ hear me?” That’s Terry’s voice.

No sounds come from my mouth when I try to respond. Her hands cradle my face, and it transports me back to my mother’s touch whenever I was sick as a child. It’s a comforting, warm

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

feeling. I'm so fucking tired. My body feels like someone poured molten lead into it, and it's hardened in place. Terry stops me as I try to get up.

“Michael, ye' must a' had another bad dream. Stay down, please.” She closes the door, kneels next to me, and begins to pull up my pants. I can't help her. Terry manages to sit me up and pull my shirt over my head. She holds my face between her hands.

“Are ye' okay now?” she asks.

I focus in on her face. “You're amazing,” I tell her.

“Yes, yes, you're delirious. I only came in 'cause I have ta' use tha' jacks, mind ye'. Don't move,” she tells me. She pulls her jeans down and sits on the toilet.

Hearing her pee is so funny, I laugh. “Shush,” Terry chides. “I don't want Caitlin ta' hear us. If ye' haven't noticed, she's inta' everyone's business, that one.”

She finishes, wipes herself, flushes, and pulls up her jeans. Terry is so natural and comfortable in her own skin. Why has it taken so long for her to come into my life? I watch her soak a washcloth with water and ring it out.

“Here ye' go. Put that on your neck. It smells like a shit factory in here. I best open tha' window.” She does this and sprays more air spray around the room.

“The water did this to me. It must be,” I say.

“Sergey did warn ye'. Yet, ye' just had a little dribble. It's a magical place, Michael, a sacred place,” Terry says. “We have sites like it back home in Ireland. They're called thin places.”

“What?”

“The boundary between our world and the magical world, or eternal world, the boundary is thin. Sometimes tha' two worlds mix a bit. I knew straight away when we got to the end of the

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

path, and the body of water lay before us.” Her eyes light up with wonder. “I felt God’s presence, ye’ know, a kinda feelin’ like that. Ya know how ye’ feel when ye’ step inside a church?”

“I don’t go to church anymore.”

“What’s that now? Well, no wonder tha’ holy water’s tryin’ ta’ get tha’ devil outta ye’ then,” she exclaims. “You’ll be goin’ ta’ church with me on Sunday, for sure. I fancy ye’, Michael, but ye’ won’t be gettin’ inta’ my knickers any time soon if ye’ can’t step inside a church every now and again. Haven’t ye’ been baptized?”

“Yes.”

“And didn’t ye’ make your first communion?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, you’re a child of God, and ye’ should visit your Father now and again,” she says.

“I never knew my father. He died in Alaska after the war. Even that scumbag Chester knows I grew up without a father. Terry, I gotta lay down, sorry. Thanks for your help.” I drag myself to my feet, pull up my pants, and leave.

My body is cold and listless. The realization that Terry has developed a soft spot for me, though, is a comforting thought. It’s funny the way she talks about shagging, and I laugh to myself. Her warmth and unaffected nature are endearing. The church thing, though, I may have to suck it up.

“Michael, can I come in?” Terry asks from behind her door.

“Sure.” She comes and sits on the edge of the bed. She stares at the floor.

“I didn’t mean ta’ remind ye’ of a sore spot on your heart. I’m sorry for it. I fear for Caitlin’s heart each day over her father’s death,” she says.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“How’d he die?”

“He was buildin’ a bomb for tha’ IRA in tha’ attic—and, ah—he blew himself ta’ bits. Not only inta’ little bits ye’ can barely bury, but, ah—he blew up tha’ whole feekin’ house.”

“Wow, did you know that he was a bomb maker?”

“Excuse me, no!” she exclaims. “I was questioned extensively by the authorities, though, and my life was turned into a feekin’ mess for some time thereafter. Thank tha’ saints, Caitlin and I weren’t home that day or ye’ wouldn’t be talkin’ ta’ me now.”

“That’s big-time serious stuff. I’m sure she misses him, but I’m glad you and she came into my life.” I reach out for her hand and she takes mine in hers. She smiles. A tear runs down her cheek and she brushes it away. I squeeze her hand.

“Michael, we all of us, go through this life a little scarred, a little bruised, I figure. We all have that sore spot on our hearts if we’re livin’ our lives. I stopped goin’ ta’ church after we buried Caitlin’s dad. I didn’t wanna talk to a God that would take my child’s father from her. I was so angry with God for a long time.” She wipes a tear from her eye. “Then, one day I realized, it was her dad I should be fumin’ with. How could he be so selfish a man? How could he be so wrapped up in his own rubbish—ta’ where he didn’t think about her, about us? So then, I started ta’ get back ta’ church, and it helped me. It helped me be happy again. It may help ye’ too, Michael.”

“Well, what time are you figuring to go?”

“Uncle James told me he and your mum usually go ta’ the nine o’clock service. Your mum said ye’ went ta’ school with tha’ priest.”

“Oh, he’ll be floored when he sees me in church,” I say.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Hopefully ye’ won’t get struck down by a bolt a’ lightnin’,” she says with a smile. Then, she leans in and kisses my cheek. “Thanks for comin’ with me. You’re a wonderful fellow, Michael Walsh. Rest up, and I’ll make ye’ some tea. I’ll be back in a jiff.”

With that, she rushes off to the bathroom for water and brings the kettle back. She fires up my hotplate, then rummages around the cabinet for cups and spoons. She finds the sugar and milk in all the usual places. I’m too washed out to move, but it feels great to have someone pamper me.

No other woman in my life ever treated me so gently except for my mother. Terry also has this aura of extraordinary strength. It’s still quite unbelievable she shows any interest in me. Even I know I have issues. She’s not afraid of me and my issues.

“Do ye’ want a cup a’ tea, luv?” she calls out the door to Caitlin.

“Yes, please,” Caitlin answers.

The water boils, and Terry pours it into three cups. “Michael, do ye’ like milk and sugar?”

“Heavy on the milk and two sugars, please.”

“Comin’ up, your majesty,” she says with a clipped voice as she brings a cup over to me. I prop myself up with a pillow and grab the cup of tea with both hands. “Let the tea steep for a few minutes, and I’ll be right back,” she says. She then goes to bring Caitlin her tea.

“Thanks, Mum,” Caitlin squeaks.

“Let it cool a bit before ye’ have some, luv.”

Terry comes back through the door and closes it halfway.

“I could get used to you treating me so nice,” I tell her. She crawls onto the bed and tries not to spill her tea.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I could get used ta’ bein’ around ye’, Michael. I don’t want ye’ thinkin’ I’m a total Sally, though. I’m not runnin’ around lettin’ any fella grab my boobs, I want ye’ ta’ know. So, don’t be tellin’ your friends that I’m a piece a spare arse now.”

“Too late. My friend Tuchi you saw me with at the bar, he’s already told the whole town about you.” I wait a beat or two, then flash her a smile.

“Ohhh, you’re spoofin’ me now. That friend a’ yours, Tuchi, he looks like tha’ real dangerous type. I like his dragon tattoos on his arms, and I noticed he wears a crucifix. Does he go ta’ church?”

“No, he probably hasn’t been ta’ church longer than I haven’t.”

“How’d ye’ get ta’ know him then?” she asks.

“We’ve been friends since grammar school. We played football together, and we served in the army together in Nam.”

“He’s your best mate then?”

“Yup, I guess you could say that.”

“And the girl Sharon I was talkin’ with, is she his girl? They’re a couple then, right?”

“Yes.”

“I like Sharon. She has a nice way about her. Not like the bimbo that was playin’ with your clackers. That one, she looked like a tart, and she sure acted tha’ part,” Terry says. “Have ye’ ever rattled her?”

“Do you really wanna know that?”

“Well, I’m just tryin’ ta’ get ta’ know ye’. Was she your girl?” she asks.

“She was, but that’s over now,” I say.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Brilliant! You’re white as a ghost, Michael. I’ll leave ye’ ta’ rest now, and we can talk later.”

“Thanks.”

Terry leaves and closes the door behind her. I sip the tea she prepared and wonder how long this magic will last. Terry is so easy to talk to. She said she wants us to take it slow, though. Never mind that she lost her husband and how devastating that must have been for Caitlin. These two beautiful creatures come with some of their own baggage. Still, I want her calmness and I want her strength in my life. The sock-bandage is still around my calf, and it’s soaking wet. I put the tea down and get up to remove my pants. My body tingles, and I fall back onto the bed.

The warm sand squishes between my toes as the sun’s rays fall hot against my back. It reflects off the clear water and shimmers onto the cliffs and trees above me. Terry and Caitlin wade into the spring hand in hand. They both wear long, white, flowing summer dresses. Terry turns to me. “Michael, come with us,” she says. She extends a hand, and I grab hold. She lets go of Caitlin.

“Can she swim?” I ask.

“She’ll be fine,” Terry replies. Caitlin takes broad breaststrokes, which get her to the middle of the spring. Terry pulls me waist-deep into the water. It’s not cold, but neutral in temperature. As we go in deeper, my body becomes buoyant and I float without effort. Terry lets go of my hand.

“Come on, Michael. Follow me,” Caitlin calls out.

Waking up on the bed, it feels as though my body is floating with an unencumbered lightness. I feel better than before.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Stay still for a moment to gather your thoughts, Mike.

The images were so vivid and real. I'm glad I passed out on the bed. It would have made a horrendous noise if I'd hit the floor. Terry might start to freak out over these episodes. They seem to be coming more often now.

I work my way to the edge of the bed, undo my pants for real this time, and pull them off. The tape around my leg begins to unfurl. There will be some hair removal, so I go for it. Rip, shred, fuck, it hurts! Terry did a great job of nursing my wounds, and it looks like it's on the mend.

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Chapter 17

No one else bothered me, talked to me, or called for the rest of Saturday. I languished in bed, watched TV, and ate. I needed the rest. Terry and Caitlin talked and fooled around some, but they didn't disturb me at all. Terry played guitar, and they sang and danced all day. For some time, they must have gone upstairs to my mother's because all was quiet.

It has been an amazing few days since Terry and Caitlin exploded upon my world. Many things have changed. Beth is out of my life. She'll never suck the life out of me again. Her unpredictable moods and behavior are in the past. I just need to find a way to tell Terry about her pregnancy. It's eight o'clock on Sunday morning, and as I get to the bathroom, I can hear that Terry's in the shower. I knock on the door.

"Good morning, can I shower after you?" I ask.

"Yeah, no problem, Michael, be right out." The water turns off, the shower curtain pulls aside, and Terry hums a song. She opens the door.

"Good mornin', it's all yours." She comes out with her hair in a towel and one wrapped around her body. I grab for her towel, but she dodges me. "Stop horsin' around and let me get ready, please." She gives me a peck on the cheek. "What have you done to me?" she says.

She scoots off to her room, and I run the shower. I am rested and vibrant. The shower enlivens me, and my body is crisp and clean afterwards. Terry is at the sink now, brushing her teeth. She's dressed fancier today than she's ever appeared before. She wears a long pale blue dress. Her hair's in braids and twisted into a bun.

"Hope ye' don't mind. I figure we'll save time by sharing the jacks. Hurry up now. I don't wanna keep Uncle James waitin'," she exclaims.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“We’re gonna be going with James and my mother?”

“Yes, she choked on her coffee when I told her you’re comin’ with us. I’m guessin’ it’s been a long time since ye’ been ta’ church, eh? I hope tha’ walls don’t come crashin’ in on ye’.”

“Great,” I say.

James and my mother are already in his car when I get outside. Caitlin and Terry ease into the back and make room for me. I slide in and close the door. My mother peers at me over her glasses. Why do I have to sit in the back like I’m nine years old? This is painful.

“Terry, I’m not sure how you did it. I been trying for years to get Michael back to church. You’re a magician,” my mom gushes.

“I did cast a spell on him. It can’t be broken till I receive a thousand dollars,” Terry says. “Until then, he’ll do my bidding.” She shoots me a devilish smile as she pats my thigh.

“Good morning, Michael,” Caitlin says.

“Good morning, Caitlin.”

“Mum, when will I make my first communion?” Caitlin asks.

“Very soon, luv,” Terry says.

“I just can’t wait much longer, Mum. I can’t wait! Michael, will you be takin’ communion today?”

Caitlin grabs my arm. My mother pivots around and gazes at me over her glasses. We lock eyes as she waits for my reply.

“What? What’s the matter?” I ask her.

“Oh nothing, I just wanna hear your answer is all,” Mom says.

“You can’t hear the answer while you’re turned around?” I ask her.

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“I wanna see your expression when you tell Caitlin.”

“Can you mind your own business, please?”

She turns back around. “Caitlin, I haven’t gone to confession in a while, so—”

“Years,” my mother adds.

“So, I can’t take communion till I do that first,” I tell her.

“Don’t ye’ wanna get communion, Michael? My mum said that when I get my communion, I’ll be closer ta’ God and my dad.” She looks up at me and waits for my answer.

“Caitlin, honey, maybe I will one day again soon and then I’ll be closer to my dad, too. He’s also in heaven.” My mom glances over at James.

Once we’re headed in, my mother comes up alongside me.

“I’m glad you’re here with us today, Michael.” She pats me on the back. She and James take their seats as Terry and Caitlin catch up with me.

“I know she must be happy that you’re here. I am,” Terry says.

“Me too,” Caitlin chimes in.

“Well, I’m not sure this can be an every week thing, but I like to see you happy,” I tell Terry, and I put my arm around her shoulders. She flashes me the most beautiful smile.

Going to church makes me a bit nervous. Although I’ve done plenty of work in and around the church for Father Bill, I can’t remember the last time I was at mass. All you do is sit and stand and sit several times.

Follow everyone’s lead, Mike.

I search for a seat in the back. Kevin sits at the far left all by himself, so I sneak down toward him.

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“Kevin, what the hell are you doing here? I didn’t know you went to church,” I say.

“Hey, Mikey, what brings you here today?” he asks, surprised.

“I hooked up with that singer at the bar the other night. She’s James’s niece from Ireland and I guess, I guess I . . . I don’t know.”

“Okay then,” Kevin replies.

“Michael, excuse me, sir,” Terry says from behind me. “Michael, we’re gonna sit with your mum and James, so please come along. Sorry ta’ interrupt,” she tells Kevin, and we head toward the front pews.

“Why do we have to sit with them?” I ask her.

Terry takes my hand. “Because we came with ’em and we’ll sit with ’em. Besides, your mum’s gonna do a reading.”

“What?” I exclaim.

She drags me up to the front and we sit next to my mother and James. My mother gives me a stare over her glasses again, and it drives me nuts. The mass begins.

Father Bill comes out with three other people. I try to remember how all this will go. They bow at the altar as the organist plays. Father Bill walks to the pulpit.

“Let us ask for God’s forgiveness when we have not been good disciples. Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins, because of Your just punishments, but most of all because they offend You, my God, who are all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen.”

This man before me, Father Bill, I know him so well, but what makes him different from me? We, both of us, saw and did terrible things in the war. Bill always had a Bible with him

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whenever I saw him, though. He and Chester ran the supply depot at Da Nang. We would run into them when Tuchi and I would go there for leave, and the last time we visited, it didn't end well. Chester brought us all to a whorehouse. At the back of a small bar, there was a dark, dingy space with rooms for the girls. As I close my eyes, his voice transports me through many years.

"Mike, is she dead?" Bill asks me. I feel her neck and try to find a pulse, nothing. Chester rushes to put his clothes back on.

"Don't let that motha' fucker leave, Bill!" I shout.

Linh runs into the room and screams.

"Anh, wake up!" She shakes her sister's lifeless body. "Anh, please wake up," Linh cries. She falls onto her sister's body and strokes her face. "Ohhh, poor Anh, poor Anh, who do this?" Linh gets to her feet. "Joe, who do this? Why they do this, Joe?"

She snatches my Colt from its holster on my chest. She stands back and points the gun at me. Her hands quiver.

I will die today, I think.

"Who do this? Who do this, Joe? She only fourteen, she's no hurt anyone! Why they do this?" She collapses in a heap of tears and grief next to her sister's corpse. I take the gun back.

"Bill, let's get tha' fuck outta here now!" Chester yells.

"Mike, are you gonna be okay?" Bill asks me.

Chester runs for the door, and I begin to shoot. I miss my mark, and he escapes. Bill puts his hands up in fear, as though I would shoot him.

"Mike, Mike, put the gun down!" Bill screams.

Tuchi bursts into the room with wide eyes.

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“What the fuck is goin’ on here?” He sees the body on the bed and pauses. “What happened?”

“She’s dead, Tuchi! I . . . I—” Bill sputters.

“I nothin’, let’s get the fuck outta here now,” he says.

Tuchi takes the Colt from my hand, looks both ways at the threshold, and leads us out the door. We run down the dark hallway as fast as we can and rush out the back door, down an alley, and into the street. He hails the first cab he sees, and we jump in.

When I open my eyes, my mother is at the pulpit. “A reading from Lamentations: My soul is deprived of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is; I tell myself my future is lost, all that I hoped for from the Lord. The thought of my homeless poverty is wormwood and gall; remembering it over and over leaves my soul downcast within me. But I will call this to mind, as my reason to have hope: the favors of the Lord are not exhausted, his mercies are not spent; they are renewed each morning, so great is his faithfulness.

“My portion is the Lord, says my soul; therefore will I hope in Him. Good is the Lord to one who waits for Him, to the soul that seeks Him; it is good to hope in silence for the saving help of the Lord. The Word of the Lord.”

The service ends and my mom comes over to me. “Michael, I’m glad that you came with us today. Someone’s having a positive influence on you.” She throws a look at Terry, who stares at the ground.

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” I say.

“In any case, let’s go home, and I’ll prepare a nice lunch for us all, okay?”

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“Brilliant idea, Mar,” Terry gushes.

James and my mom head out the front. Terry, Caitlin, and I follow along.

“Mike, Mike, wait,” Father Bill calls.

“Hey, Bill,” I say.

“I couldn’t believe when I turned and saw you in the front row. It’s been a long time, Mike, since I’ve seen you in church.”

“Yeah, well—Terry here, has a thing for church and . . . ah . . . well, she needed a ride, so I gave her a ride. Then, I had to use the bathroom and—”

“Right, you came to use the bathroom and then you came and sat in the front. I understand. You know, your mom reads a passage every Sunday. I even see Kevin in the back, but I never see you, Mike,” Bill says.

“Well, you know me, Bill, if someone needs a ride, I’m a nice guy, and I give them a ride, that’s all.”

“Okay, Mike, I’ll let you off the hook. It’s still great to see you here, though, whatever brought you. And thank you, Terry, for playing a part in it,” Bill says, and he reaches out his hand. “I’m Father Bill, and I’ve heard all about you from James.”

“Pleased ta’ meet ye’, Father Bill. Maybe, I can get Michael ta’ come ta’ church more often,” Terry says.

Caitlin holds out her hand. “I’m Caitlin,” she blurts out. Father Bill bends down to her level.

“I’m pleased to meet you too, Caitlin. I’m so happy that you introduced yourself. Will you be coming to see me on Sundays then?”

“I think yes. My dad’s in heaven, and my mum said church can help me talk ta’ him.”

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“Well, your mom is right. But, you can talk with him anytime you feel like it. Before bed, say your prayers and then say good night to your dad. He’s listening all the time, okay?”

“I will,” she replies, and they hug.

“We better get goin’, Bill,” I say. “We came with my mom and James so—”

“Okay then. Terry and Caitlin, it was so nice to meet you today, and I’ll be seeing more of you, I hope?”

“We’ll see ye’ next week, Father, and hopefully, you’ll see this one too.” Terry points my way.

“Take care, Bill.” We shake hands.

“Great to see you today, Mike. Be well.”

As we head toward the car, Terry puts her arm around my shoulder.

“Well now, tha’ building remained intact, Michael, all is well. Wasn’t it good ta’ spend an hour or so communing with God?”

“I’m not sure I believe in God anymore,” I say.

Terry stops in her tracks, turns and stares right into my eyes.

“Don’t say that,” she protests. She bends down to Caitlin. “Luv, go see Uncle James, please. Tell him Michael and I’ll be there in a jiff, okay? Go now, quick.”

Caitlin runs to the car.

Terry folds her arms and glares at me. “Why would ye’ say such a thing in front a’ my daughter? You can think how ye’ like, Michael Walsh. I may not be able ta’ sway you, but Caitlin—Caitlin will be a God-fearin’, good Catholic girl. She’ll believe in the God that gives us life and the God that takes life away at his discretion.” She stomps away.

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My mind tries to process her words and her displeasure with me as I stand alone for a moment. My mother studies me as I approach the car. Terry sits in the middle of the back seat. Her gaze is forward and fixed as I slide in next to her.

Believe me, no one wants the business end of Terry's fury when she's angry. My wounds aren't quite healed from the first couple of encounters with her. We drive home, and no one utters a word. When we get to the house, Caitlin and Terry exit the car and immediately go inside. As I get out, my mother approaches me.

"Don't you hurt that woman, you hear?" she says with a stern voice.

"I'm not hurting her. Whadda you mean?" I say.

"She didn't seem too happy with you before. You know, she lost a husband, and she has that child to raise. It's not an easy task for any woman, Michael. Don't treat her like all the other ones I've seen you with. You're thirty-four years old. When are you gonna grow up? Terry is different and, besides, she's James's niece. She has to make a new life for herself and her girl in a strange land, and she don't need you gettin' in her way."

She turns and goes inside the house.

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Chapter 18

Terry and I did talk about me keeping my thoughts to myself, especially around Caitlin, on the subject of God. She heard me out, and we came to an agreement. I wouldn't tread on her beliefs, and she would try to understand my lack of belief. We all began eating Sunday dinners together again. Terry, Caitlin, Nanna, James, my mom, and me. It's been great. Nanna and my mom have developed a soft spot for Terry. My mother often watches Caitlin when Terry sings at the bar. James and she decided it's probably best to play there during the week, on a slow evening. A couple of nights playing around the go-go dancers was more than enough for Terry—and the rowdy customers they attract as well.

January and February come and go. Work is okay, although, par for the course, Kevin remains somewhat unreliable. St. Patrick's Day arrived and even though it fell on a Sunday, Terry played at the bar on Thursday. She had a great mix of her standard Simon and Garfunkel songs along with a few Irish folk songs. Tuchi and Sharon joined in the fun, and we all sang and had our fair share of Jameson's. Sharon didn't drink, though, and Terry wondered why.

Sharon and Terry have developed a great relationship. They make each other laugh like two little schoolgirls. I also introduced Tuchi to Terry. At first, she was apprehensive, but Tuchi was polite, and she commented on it. Terry thinks he drinks to excess, though, and she knows he does cocaine. I'm glad most of my cocaine use is behind me.

I don't miss it, the kick it gives, the high, or how it lets you party all night long. I have behaved for the most part. The one night Tuchi and I did do some at Casey's, Terry took notice and read me the riot act. I promised her I would leave it alone. When Terry is happy and glowing

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with her bright light, there's nothing like it. When she's on the warpath, there's nothing like it either.

One Saturday night in particular, my mom watched Caitlin, and I attempted to cook Terry dinner on my hot plate. I tried to surprise her by cooking bangers and mash, that traditional version of pub food. My mother gave me her own recipe, but I had to simplify it extensively. The day before, I went and bought Italian sweet sausage, three russet potatoes, an onion, and canned brown gravy. After I peeled and boiled the potatoes, they were set aside. The sausage was parboiled, and then, I added the onion and gravy.

Terry was busy in her room, preparing for our date. "Something smells good, Michael. Any hints?" she asks.

"No." I hear her tune her guitar, and she happily begins to strum it and hum a song.

I don't have a potato masher, so I run up the steps and ask my mother for hers. She quickly finds it, and I rush back down the steps, masher in hand. Terry is standing there at the hot plate.

"What?"

"Sorry, Michael. The pan was boiling over and—"

"Oh, I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Well, I was surprised when I seen what you're makin'." She smiles.

I hold up the masher. "I had to borrow my mother's."

"Let me help ye' then." She takes the masher from me. "Ye' like ta' cook?"

"Not really," I say.

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“Me neither.” She laughs as she begins to pulverize the potatoes. “My mum used ta’ make this back home in Kilcrohane. My job was dealin’ with the mashed potatoes. Michael, I think somethin’ else goes in here?”

“You grew up near James then?”

“The same village,” she says. “The O’Mahoney clan never ventured far from home till Uncle James left for tha’ States.”

“Right.” I cut off a pat of room-temperature butter and drop it in the pot. “I’ve watched my mom do this a thousand times.”

“You’re a regular culinary wizard,” Terry says.

I pour in a bit of milk. “A bit of this.”

“A dash a’ that,” Terry says with a smile.

Together, we finish preparing the meal and settle on the floor around my coffee table. I never got a proper table to eat at, but it doesn’t seem to faze her one bit.

“It’s good, Michael. How’d ye’ make the gravy?”

“I can’t tell you. It’s a secret family recipe,” I say.

She continues to devour the meal. “We need somethin’ ta’ wash it down with,” she says.

“Wait, I almost forgot.” I go to the fridge and pull out two bottles of Guinness stout. I then retrieve two glasses and a bottle opener.

“Guinness . . . I’m impressed,” she says.

“Only at the finest restaurants can you get this kinda service.” I pop off the caps and carefully pour the ebony liquid into each glass. One glass begins to overflow. I grab it and sip the foam before it runs over the edge.

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After dinner, Terry fetches her guitar, and I pour two shots of Jameson's. We sit on the couch.

"*Slainte!*" she says as she raises her shot glass.

I raise mine, and the glasses clink gently. I pick up the guitar and pretend to know what I'm doing.

"I'm gonna sing you a song now," I announce.

"You play, Michael?"

"Of course," I say as I grab the neck and then hit several out of tune notes and sing, "Love is a many splendored thing." My voice makes an awful cracking noise.

"Oh, Jaysus, no," she says, laughing. "You're gonna make the dogs in tha' neighborhood start ta' howlin'." She takes the guitar from me. "Let me show ye' a proper chord."

"Alright."

She places her index finger on the uppermost string and her middle finger on the next string. "This is an E minor chord." She plucks the strings with her pick and it sounds good. "This is the first chord most people are taught 'cause it's in a lot a' songs, and it's easy." She hands the guitar back to me. "You try it."

"Like this?" I ask as I place my fingers where I think she had hers.

She repositions them. "Like so. Okay, now hit these three strings with the pick."

"Did you play professionally back home?"

"No. Everyone back home can play some sort a' instrument," she says. "In tha' village where Uncle James and I are from, ye' just show up at the pub. There's always music being played."

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I give it a go, but produce an ugly sound. “Ouch,” I say.

“It needs some work, that chord.” She smiles at me.

I put the guitar down and reach over for her. She comes to me and sits on my lap, facing me. We kiss a long, wet kiss. She runs a hand through my hair. Her rose-scented perfume surrounds me. I break off the kiss.

“Is this really gonna happen tonight, Michael?”

“Yes, if you want it to,” I say.

“Do ye’ have a johnny?” she asks as she jumps up and kicks her Converse off.

“A what?”

“A condom.”

“No, sorry.”

“Well, we better be careful then,” she says.

Then, she quickly undoes her jeans and slides them off. She stares me down and unbuttons her blouse, revealing matching lavender panties and bra. I move close to her, and we kiss a deep, lustful kiss. It’s long and wet and amazing. She unbuttons my shirt and slides it off my shoulders.

“What happened to your shoulder here?” she asks as she runs her hand over the scar.

“Oh, I was in the army and a—well, a bullet got me is all.”

“You was in the war then, in Vietnam was it?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll find out all about you, in due time, Michael Walsh.”

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I sweep her up again in my arms, and she kisses the scar. No other woman in my life has ever asked about my scars. I place her on the couch again and loom above her. Arms outstretched, she beckons me to her.

“You’re beautiful, so beautiful and so natural,” I tell her.

“I think you hypnotized me with those blue eyes a’ yours.” She kisses me, and I kiss her back. She plunges her tongue into my mouth and my tongue searches it out. I undo her bra as our tongues wrestle; not an easy task. It’s cast aside. Her bare breasts heave between us.

Reaching down to pull her panties aside, I enter her easily. Her body is ready for me, and I know now, I am getting to her. She breaks our kiss and gasps for air. As I propel my cock deep into her, her body tenses and trembles. She holds my head and brings it to hers. Her eyes meet mine and then they close. I am getting intense feedback from her like no other woman I’ve been with. Her panties begin to chafe me, so I reach down and rip the crotch in one motion.

“Those are my best pair. Thank you very much,” she protests.

“I’ll buy you another pair tomorrow.”

“My mum got me those in Dublin at a one-off shop. Ye’ ain’t gonna find those here in the States.”

“Can I get back to my previous activity, please?”

“Carry on then.” She smiles.

Terry is an energetic, passionate lover. We do it slow at first as we gaze in each other’s eyes. Then, she whispers in my ear, “Is that all ye’ got, Michael?” and we proceed to collide into each other till we’re both making way too much noise. I need a new couch. We stop to open the bed, and Terry helps in the most enthusiastic manner.

“Come here and turn around,” I say as I bound onto the bed.

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“Don’t root the hole off a’ me now,” Terry says.

“What?”

“Never mind. Go ahead and ravage me, Michael, no one’s watchin’,” she says with a roguish grin.

Her body is young and healthy. Her skin is flushed now as the blood flows to every cell. Terry is a natural redhead from head to toe. She keeps her bush trimmed sparse and neat. I kiss her, and then she gets on all fours. She shakes her head to free up all her hair, and its auburn flame ignites my ardent passion. Terry’s skin feels taut and smooth as I caress her backside with both hands. The tattered panties are pulled down to her ankles and off. Her vagina glistens with the fragrant scent of her own body juices.

I ease my cock into her, savoring every inch of penetration. She calls out, “Michael Walsh, how dare you!”

I’m amazed at her body as I plunge in and out of her. With the lights turned down, the emotion of the moment overcomes me. Terry moans, then puts a hand over her mouth. As I take hold of her hips, I help her meet my thrusts. Faster and faster we go. She turns her face toward me and grins. Finally, I pull out and come all over her back. She collapses flat onto the bed.

“Stay there,” I whisper. I grab a paper towel and wipe the semen off of her back and throw it to the floor.

“Thank ye’, sir,” she says. “Thanks for everything tonight, Michael.”

We lie down beside each other and press our bodies close together.

“I should be thanking you. You’re remarkable.”

“You won’t be sayin’ that when you see me in the mornin’ now, will you?”

“Are you gonna stay here with me?” I ask.

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“I wanna hold a man in my arms again, Michael, and feel your body next to mine tonight.

If that meets with your approval.”

“I’m in, but what about Caitlin?”

“She’ll be fine. Your mum probably has her bedded down for the night already.”

The remainder of our “date” was spent listening to my classic rock collection, my mom’s Broadway show tune collection, and drinking Jameson’s and Guinness. I read her the first chapter of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, then we shagged again.

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Chapter 19

Before St. Patrick's Day, Terry had asked me to write Sergey about visiting the spring again. She wants to visit on Good Friday. She said it's customary back home to visit holy wells or springs on that day. Terry told me the water will have extra curative properties on Good Friday. He wrote back to tell me that if we come up Friday, we could camp as well. Terry's overjoyed at the prospect. We even bought a new tent. Unbeknownst to me, Terry invited Sharon to come along, and Sharon, in turn, invited Tuchi.

We're lucky Sergey's allowing us back at all. Terry and I had a heated discussion about this. She reminded me that he thought we were the right type of good people who would enjoy the spring's gifts. Now we have five of us embarking on a camping trip to the spring. It's still quite cold out at night, so I warned Sharon and Tuchi to bring a warm sleeping bag. Terry bought some meat for hamburgers, and milk and coffee. A bottle of Jameson's is my contribution to round out at least one good meal.

Tuchi and Sharon follow my truck to the spring. His dog, Assassino, had his head out the window the whole way. Dog drool spilled down the door the entire ride. Terry and Caitlin are with me, and all our things are in the back of my truck. Of course, Caitlin plays her shifting of the gears game for the entire ride. It's a bright, sunny day as we take a quiet drive up to the spring.

Terry hasn't said much today. She told me it's respectful to remain quiet between the hours of noon and 3:00 p.m. We arrive at the base of the dirt road where we last saw Sergey. Tuchi beeps and sticks his head out the window.

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“We have to go in there?” he shouts. “I can’t bring my car up into all that.” He parks on the side of the road, locks his car, and Sharon jumps into the back of my truck. Assassino and Tuchi jog up the slope. Sergey waits at the top of the road, but he appears a little uneasy as we drive up. He holds out his arms to stop me.

“Who are these other people, Mike?” he asks.

“This is my good friend, Tuchi, and his lady, Sharon. We were hopin’ you wouldn’t mind if they joined us,” I say.

He inspects them up and down. The dog sits and licks its chops.

“Well, if they’re a part of your tribe, then I guess I could see my way to lettin’ them join you. My name is Sergey.” He holds out a hand to Tuchi.

“They call me Tuchi, and this is Sharon.” While they all shake hands, Terry gives me a thumbs-up.

“Okay, park your truck at the clearing. Don’t go too far, though, there’s a big drop,” Sergey informs me. “Is your dog cool?” Sergey asks Tuchi.

“He’s cool, bro. As long as I’m alive and happy, he’s happy.”

We all pile out of the truck with our belongings. Tuchi gets the rest of our things, along with the cooler from the back. Once I get to the clearing, it’s plain what Sergey means. It must be a seventy-five foot drop down to the spring. This would make a great dive platform. It’s unobstructed all the way to the water, but you would have to jump out a bit to avoid some rocks. As I head back toward the truck, Sergey kneels and gives Caitlin a hug.

“Sergey, you’re not scared of this guy Tuchi here?” I ask.

“He’s not any scarier than me, I figure,” Sergey says with a smile. “I’m more afraid of his dog.”

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“The scarier the better, right, Sergey? Then, people leave you alone.” Tuchi chuckles.

“You got that right, my friend,” Sergey says. “You know the way, Mike. I’ll be down later, and we can build a fire.”

“Thank you so much, Sergey, for letting us come back, especially on a most holy day as today,” Terry says. She gives him a hug and then he disappears into the woods.

“Careful on the way down. The brush is a little thick,” I caution them as we descend the path to the spring.

Sergey obviously cut a better path through the trees. The going is much easier than our last visit. Assassino plows between everyone’s legs and nearly sends half of us onto our asses. Once we get to the bottom, it’s evident Sergey spent some time to set up a campfire pit for us. The air is warm on the beach, and the inviting sun shines through the trees and plays on the water in a shimmering dance.

“Mikey, this is beautiful,” Sharon exclaims. “The water is so clear. I would have never guessed this place existed here.”

“I told ye’ it’s a special place,” Terry says.

“Let’s set the tents up, and then we can relax,” Tuchi says.

Terry grabs our tent bag and dumps the contents onto the ground. Sharon does the same and we all begin the tent assembly. The sun feels warm on my back as Terry and I wrangle the tent together. She takes off her jacket to reveal a white tank top. The sun rims her figure with a warm amber glow. She looks at me and smiles.

“The girls should stay in one tent tonight, Michael,” Terry says.

“Okay, since Caitlin’s with us, that seems appropriate,” I say. “No kissin’ and huggin’ for us I guess then.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“You’ll survive, I suppose,” Terry says with a mischievous glint in her eyes. I dash to grab hold of her.

“Maybe we should get the kissing done right now?” I ask her.

“Michael, everyone’s watchin’ us.” She tries to squirm away from my grasp, but I kiss her, and she kisses me back.

“Okay then, ye’ got that outta your system now.” She pushes me away and sticks her tongue out at me. Sharon comes over and whispers in Terry’s ear, then they both start to giggle.

“What’s the problem with you two?” I ask.

“Nothin’,” Terry replies. She goes to talk with Caitlin while Sharon comes my way.

“I like her, Mikey. She knows how to handle you. Treat her nice, please, okay? She’ll be good for you,” Sharon says.

“Yeah, I know. She’s a keeper for sure.”

“Are you ready to take on the whole situation of her and a kid and all?” Sharon asks.

“Yeah, I think I’m ready. I can’t let a woman like Terry get away, Sharon. Even I realize this could be my last chance for a happy future, you know.”

“Wow, Mikey, I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Someone finally got to you. Good for you,” Sharon says with a smile. She gives me a hug. “Do you think your buddy Tuchi could do the same? Do you think he’s got it in him?”

“If the right woman comes along, yeah—I think so.”

“Hello, Mikey, you *think*?” She holds out her arms and scans my face. “I’m right here. You think he’ll ever notice that I’m right here? You think he’ll ever open his eyes?”

“Well. . . .”

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Sharon grabs my arms. “I’m pregnant and so is your girl Beth.” Then she turns and walks away. She whispers something to Terry as they pass by each other.

“Sharon told me she’s pregnant,” I blurt out. “Did you know?”

“Yeah, she told me on St. Patrick’s Day. I noticed she wasn’t drinkin’ and such, so I asked her. I kinda knew, you know. Don’t ye’ dare tell Tuchi. She wants ta’ tell him tonight.”

“Fuck, he’ll have a heart attack, the poor guy.” I’m about to have one as well. “He’s gonna be blindsided.”

“The poor guy,” Terry exclaims. “But what about Sharon? Ye’ don’t think that she’s out of her mind? Ye’ don’t think that she’s all distraught about possibly havin’ a child on her own?” Terry asks. “She told me she’s keepin’ the baby, and I would do the same.”

“She doesn’t have to keep it, though,” I say.

Terry grabs my arm and pulls me aside, down near the water’s edge.

“Michael, how can ye’ talk that way on one a’ the holiest days a’ the year? Look around ye’. This place is a sacred site. This is like church for Sergey and his people. God created this place and all the other thin places. They’re sacred and so is every child,” Terry says. “What God creates, only God can take away. It’s a good thing you’re stayin’ with Tuchi tonight. You can reflect on your existence and be thankful you’re able ta’ enjoy it all.”

Terry resumes the assembly of the tent.

Well, Tuchi could be ready to settle down with one woman. Lord knows, he’s had his fair share. He’s been with Sharon longer than most of his other relationships. If he feels half of what I feel for Terry, they have a shot. I can’t help but wonder how to bring up Beth’s pregnancy to Terry. This trip may be the right time; when others are around and she can’t murder me in public.

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“Michael, can you help me with this firewood?” Sergey calls down to me. He stands at the clearing at the top of the ledge.

“No problem,” I shout up to him. “Tuchi, come on and help me, will you?”

“Sure, bro,” he replies.

Terry grabs me as I go past her. “Michael, don’t ye’ dare tell him.”

“I won’t.”

Tuchi and I hike back up to the top of the cliff. I stop him at the top. “Listen, Sharon is gonna be talkin’ to you later, man, about some important stuff. Heads up, okay?” I say.

“That’s all you got? Do you know what it’s about?” he asks.

“No but, ah, Terry told me Sharon wants to wait to tell you later. That’s all I got on it,” I answer.

Sergey waits for us with several bundles of wood beside him. We each take a pile and head back down the trail. Tuchi’s left leg buckles a bit under the weight of the wood.

Once Tuchi drops the wood near the fire pit, he motions to Sharon, and they disappear into their tent. Terry glares at me. I shrug and head back up the trail for more wood. Sergey follows me.

“Everything okay with your friend, Mike?” Sergey asks.

“I’m not sure if he’ll be okay in a few minutes.” We make it to the top of the path and Sergey presents me with a bandana.

“I have somethin’ for you and your friends, if you wanna get the full curative powers of the spring.” Sergey opens the bandana. “This is peyote. The old tribal leaders used it. They said its medicine helped to get in touch with their gods and ancestors. Take a little and chew it for a while, then swallow it. Afterward, cleanse your body with a bit of the water.”

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“When I drank some last time, man—I tell you, Sergey, I had the shits real bad.”

“I figured that would happen to you. The waters will let you know when you’re ready to take their cure. The same thing happened to me the first time I tried drinkin’ it.”

Next thing we know, a loud noise floats up from down by the spring. Sharon and Tuchi are arguing. She must have told him her news. You can’t make out all the words, but it’s not good.

“They don’t sound too happy,” Sergey says.

“My friend was just told that his girlfriend is pregnant.”

“I’ll stay up here for a while. See you all later, Mike,” Sergey says, and then he’s gone.

As I head down the path, Sharon and Tuchi are still arguing. Apprehension grips me when I get to the beach. The wood tumbles from my hands as I turn to go back for more.

“Michael, stop,” Terry shouts.

I dash up the path as Terry calls after me.

“Michael!” Something hard hits my head and sends me falling forward on the trail. Terry jumps on my back.

“Don’t you move, ye’ sack a’, well, ye’ sack a’ somethin’!” Terry screams “Sorry lot that ye’ are, Michael.” She hits me about the head and shoulders.

“Terry, stop! What are you mad at me for?” I shout.

“I told ye’ not ta’ say nothin’, now didn’t I?” she yells.

“All I told him was Sharon has something to talk about, that’s all.”

“Why did ye’ open your mouth? You’re a big chancer, ain’t ye’? I oughta’ beat tha’ life outta ye’ right now, Michael Walsh. Why do ye’ act like a thirteen-year-old boy?”

“If you get off of me, we can talk with each other calmly, please.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She climbs off my back.

“Fuck you, Tuchi!” Sharon screams as Terry and I start back to the beach. Tuchi comes past us at a fast clip.

“Later, bro,” he says. Assassino follows him.

“Tuchi!” I call his way, but he continues to clamber up the trail. When we get to Sharon, she has a hold of Caitlin.

“It’s okay, Sharon,” Caitlin tells her in her little girl’s voice.

“Michael, leave us be for a while, please,” Terry says.

I kneel at the edge of the pool and scoop a handful of the cool water. It feels refreshing on my neck, and it runs down the back of my shirt. The sun is fading fast, but the last bright, amber reflections still dance upon the water’s surface. My hands are dirty and as I rub them together in the water, Caitlin comes beside me.

“I’m sad for Miss Sharon, Michael,” she pouts.

“Well, Caitlin, life has some sad parts to it.

“Oh, I know. I cried for weeks and weeks when my dad went to heaven. I’m tired of all the sad things.”

“Me too.”

She kisses my cheek.

“Caitlin, are ye’ okay, luv?” Terry asks as she crouches down next to her.

“I was sad, but Michael made me feel better.”

“Good, let’s say a prayer now for Sharon and Tuchi,” Terry says as she dips her right hand in the water. Caitlin follows her lead. “Everyone, please.”

Terry glances in my direction, and I go along with it.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, let us pray dear Lord for Sharon and Tuchi. Let there be peace and love in their hearts on this most holy of days. Your sacrifice for us has shown us what love is. Please guide our hearts to love all your creations, born and unborn, Amen. Caitlin, go see how Sharon is, will ye’, please?”

“Okay, Mum.”

Terry turns toward me. “You’re lucky I fancy ye’, Michael Walsh.” She takes my hand.

“I couldn’t tell while you were beating the crap outta me.”

“Ye’ shoulda let her tell Tuchi in her own good time. I’ll have to beat tha’ devil from ye’ soon enough, Michael.” She gives me a playful smile. “Now, ye’ best go and apologize ta’ Sharon, you insensitive chancer. Caitlin, come here, luv,” Terry calls out.

Sharon walks our way holding Caitlin’s hand. She bends down to hug Caitlin, and they embrace for a few seconds. I could tell she’d been crying.

“Caitlin, come here,” Terry calls.

“Listen, Sharon, I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t—”

“None of this is your fault. Your buddy Tuchi, he’s the asshole. He wants me to take care of it. I’m having this baby, Mike, with or without him, and I’m gonna enjoy myself here with you guys tonight, too. His bullshit ain’t gonna stop me from doing my thing. Somehow, I’ll have to figure it all out, right?” she says with forlorn eyes.

“Right. You’ll figure it out, and I’ll talk to him for you as well,” I tell her.

“Good luck with that,” Sharon says. “He told me, ‘I wanna be free and unattached to any one person.’ ‘Whadda you call what we been up to?’ I asked him. He didn’t know how to answer. I guess he’ll go through his life bouncing from one girl to another,” she laments. “He

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doesn't even know himself. Count yourself lucky. Maybe Terry'll help you grow up. I'm ready to grow up, too, and I'm gonna have a baby, so let's be happy, okay?"

"I'm happy if you're happy, Sharon," I tell her, and we hug.

"Let's light a fire!" Sharon exclaims, trying to work up some enthusiasm. "I'll get the food, and we'll make some burgers."

"Great, sure thing," I say.

While I stack some wood in the fire pit, Terry and Sharon rummage through the cooler. It's dusk now and we need the campfire's warmth and light. The logs ignite with the help of some kindling and a match. Before long, the flames rage, and the wood crackles and spits.

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Chapter 20

As the sun goes down, Terry emerges from the tent with her guitar. She wears my favorite red flannel shirt, and it looks amazing on her. Atop her head is my Yankee's baseball cap. Her hair's pulled back in a ponytail and to complete the ensemble, always jeans and Converse sneakers. She's ablaze with the campfire's glow dancing across her face. Her flash of a smile toward me lets me know she's happy. She takes a spot across from me, near the fire.

“This is U2's song ‘40,’” Terry announces. Her fingers begin to pluck a mournful, rhythmic baseline.

I waited patient for the Lord. . . .

Sharon and Caitlin sit in the sand near me. Terry's subdued voice climbs up and around the rocks that surround us. The words spin in the dark air above us as they float on the embers from the flames. Out of the background, I see a figure emerge. Sergey comes out from the shadows and steps into the brilliance of the flames. He takes a seat next to me.

When Terry finishes, we remain silent for a few seconds. “I'm famished, Michael, can we set up the grill and cook?” Terry asks.

“I don't mind doing it,” Sharon says.

“Yeah, thanks, Sharon, we should eat. I'm hungry too. Sergey, will you stay and have a burger?”

“Sure, I can use a burger, thanks. My mother used to sing around the fire here, many years ago. I was probably the age of your girl here,” he tells Terry.

“I feel like a song can free your spirit, Sergey, ye' know?” Terry says.

“The old tribal members did the same thing with their chants and ceremonies,” he says.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Once I pile some glowing embers to the side of the fire pit, Sharon brings a grill grate and places it over the fire. She puts a burger on for each of us and begins to tend them.

“Who wants a cheeseburger?” she inquires.

“Me, please,” Caitlin chirps.

“Sergey?” Sharon points to him with a spatula.

“Sure, thanks,” he replies.

“I’m Sharon by the way. We never had a formal introduction.”

“Well, nice to meet you formally. Sorry your fella couldn’t stay with us.”

“I’m not,” Sharon answers. “We’ll have more fun without him anyway. Terry, Mikey, cheese?”

“No, thanks,” Terry says.

“Yes,” I reply. “Terry, where did you put the Jameson’s? It might be time for a sip or two.”

“I’ll fetch it,” she says.

“Sergey, would you like a bit of Irish whiskey?” I ask him.

“Okay, I’ll take a little of it.”

Terry comes back with the bottle, a soda for Caitlin, and a few plastic cups. She hands us all a cup, except Sharon. The bottle’s passed from person to person and we each take a pour. I raise my cup.

“Thank you, Sergey, for having us here and sharing this special place. Happy Easter all,” I pronounce.

“Happy Easter and *slainte!*” Terry exclaims.

“None for you, Sharon?” Sergey inquires.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“No.”

“She’s having a baby,” I announce.

“Michael, ye’ shouldn’t be tellin’ her business ta’ tha’ whole world, please,” Terry says.

“That’s all right, Terry,” Sharon says. “At least some man in my life is excited about it.”

Caitlin runs over to Sharon and wraps her arms around her neck. “Don’t cry again, Sharon. I get so sad when a grown-up cries.”

“It’s okay, honey.” Sharon gives her a kiss on the cheek. “I’m very happy about my baby. I . . . I’m just sad that Mister Tuchi doesn’t wanna be the daddy, that’s all.”

“Well, everyone needs a daddy. I miss my dad terribly. I pray ta’ him every day,” Caitlin says. Sharon grabs her and swings her into her lap.

“You’re a good girl, and I know your dad hears your prayers,” Sharon whispers to her and gives her a long, tight hug.

As we sit and finish our burgers, the sense that it’s becoming a special night takes over my thoughts. The feelings of love I have for Terry and sharing this sacred place with Sergey are remarkable. We sing and laugh with the warmth of the fire surrounding us. Sharon brought the fixings for s’mores, which went over so well, Sergey asked for a second helping. She then busied herself with cleaning up and putting things away.

Sergey excuses himself, comes to me, and whispers in my ear, “If you wanna try the peyote tonight, I’ll be back at midnight, and I can take you through the elders’ native ceremony,” he says.

“Okay, how will I know when you’re here?” I ask.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Oh, you’ll know,” he replies. And with that, he leaves after saying his goodbyes; when he gets to Caitlin, he kneels, and they hug each other.

“I’ve never had such a wonderful Good Friday as tonight, Michael,” Terry says with a sigh. She comes close. “Michael Walsh, I’ve fallin’ for ye’ so hard.” She grabs my face, then kisses me full and heartfelt. She rests her head on my chest and whispers, “My heart and soul are warmed by your presence, Michael. I hope ye’ feel tha’ same.”

“I do, Terry. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, woman,” I proclaim.

She holds me tight. “If ye’ get your act together, ye’ may be marryin’ material someday,” she says.

“What?”

“You love me, and I love you, don’t we?” she asks. “Ye’ have some growin’ up ta’ do, but I’ll stick it out.”

“Well, it’s the first time I ever heard you say you love me.”

“Well, I kinda fell for ye’ when Uncle James sent a picture of ye’ back home. You were seventeen or eighteen and ye’ was in your football outfit,” Terry gushes. “I was still quite young, but ye’ looked so exotic and so American.”

“What tha’—”

“I recognized ye’ from your first feeble attempt ta’ say hello in the pub,” she says.

I shift back a little in surprise. “What? Why did you kick me and all then?”

“Well, I couldn’t make it easy for ye’ now, could I? How’d I know the tart grabbing your balls wouldn’t a’ flattened me?”

“I told you, she’s nothing to me.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Terry's eyes well up. "How could I know that ye'd stay and wanna mix it up with me?" she says.

"How did you know what I looked like now or where I lived or—"

"Your mom sent me a photo and such before Caitlin and I came over, so—"

"So, why would you beat the crap outta me when you knew who I was?"

"I'm so sorry, Michael, may the saints forgive me, I was jealous and . . . it's tha' truth. Please forgive me."

"I can't believe it! You beat me into submission, and I fell for it or I . . . why?"

"I don't know, except that, I just couldn't stand for that tart fallin' all over ye'."

I grab the back of her hair and pull her to her knees and kiss her hard. We slide to the ground as she returns my kiss. Terry rolls on top of me and smiles a pirate's smile.

"Do I have total control over ye' now, Michael Walsh? Say it, say it, please, Michael," she chides.

"I'm yours completely, Terry. I'll put up no resistance," I say, laughing.

"Good man, 'cause I'll beat ye' silly again if ye' resist me." She strokes my face with her hand.

"I never wanna get kneed in the balls ever again," I say as Caitlin runs over to us.

"Mum, don't hurt Michael, please. Ye' been real mean ta' him in tha' past, ye' know, Mum."

"I promise, luv. Listen, whadda ye' think about me and Michael getting married someday?"

"Really?" Caitlin gushes as she jumps on Terry's back. They fall together in a heap on the sand.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Terry looks at me with love in her eyes as they both roll about.

“I’m no pushover, though,” Terry says. She takes hold of Caitlin and stares me down.

“I told you the first night I met you, I was not gonna let you alone,” I tell her. “Do you remember?”

“I do, but I thought ye’ was just in tha’ throes a’ passion like I was.”

“No, you’re the gal for me, babe,” I say, and I rush to give her a kiss. We all three begin to tumble in the sand.

The stars in the night sky are lit in a way I’ve never seen before. They dance and flutter in a playful fashion as though a silent soccer game is being played in the heavens. I ponder the future of—of me.

I’ll be a stepfather soon, perhaps. Terry comes my way.

“Oh, Michael, I can’t tell ye’ tha’ feelins’ I’m havin’ right now. I should show ye’, ye’ know what I’m sayin’? Caitlin is in the tent with Sharon, so why don’t ye’ give me a tour a’ yours?”

“Okay, let’s go,” I say. Terry pokes her head into Sharon’s tent.

“Caitlin, luv, Michael and I are right next door if ye’ have any problems, okay?”

“Okay, Mum, and tell Michael not ta’ leave any love bites on ye’ like he did last week.”

“Caitlin, now, I told ye’ it was a bug bite, didn’t I then?”

“It looked like a love bite ta’ me, Mum,” Caitlin says.

“Goodnight, and thanks, Sharon for keepin’ my wild beast tamed for tha’ night.”

“No problem. I’ll tie her up till morning,” Sharon says.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Once Terry gets into my tent, she begins disrobing in a furious fashion. She wears a glint of a smile.

Should I tell her about Beth now? She's going to kill me!

“Come on then, Michael, let's shag. We can't shag unless all your clothes are off.”

“Right.”

“Get my bra, please,” Terry says as she turns to let me set her breasts free. We both scramble to get naked as quick as we can and when we are, we turn to each other. The emotion in her eyes is palpable and overpowering. The impact of her female being at the height of its powers is imposing, and I am awestruck.

“What, what's your problem then?” she asks.

“I have no problem with you bein' completely naked,” I tell her.

“Well, why ye' lookin' goofy at me and all then?”

“I'm in awe of you is all. You're gorgeous and, and so natural at it. How do you do it?”

“Well, I read a book. It tells ye' how ta' seduce men and be successful,” she chirps.

“Money well spent, if you ask me. You definitely paid attention.”

She pushes me onto my back and straddles me. Her fingers gnaw at my hair like an out of control lawnmower. Terry's nails explore every inch of my scalp, and it makes me hard. She leans in and kisses me. Her tongue searches the inside of my mouth as though it's starving for sustenance. I take hold of her ass and squeeze. She reaches down and places my cock between the lips of her pussy. Terry begins to stimulate it in an oh-so-slow, yet enthusiastic fashion.

“If you keep doing that, I'll definitely come all over you,” I say.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Go ahead then. I’ll still have my way with ye’.” And with that, she reaches down and places me inside her. My only thought now is the rapture of her love. Her power has consumed me, and I don’t care.

“Terry, I love you,” I whisper. “I have something to tell you.”

“I love ye’ too. I hope ye’ know it emphatically,” she says as she gazes deep into my eyes.

She begins to rise and fall on my cock, and her eyes close. Her mouth purses, and her lips become flush with blood. She takes hold of my shoulders and slams hard into my groin with the determination of a rodeo rider. Her head falls toward me and her long, fragrant hair surrounds my face. It envelops me in a curtain of her love.

“Michael, kiss me full, please,” she whispers, and I do. Her breasts press against my chest while she digs her nails into my head again.

“Ouch,” I yelp.

“Sorry, ye’ have me all horned up, Michael.”

“I need to leave with some hair on my head is all.”

She pauses her assault on my loins. “Any other requests that ye’ have while we’re shaggin’?”

“Yeah, please never stop what you’re doin’ right now,” I say before planting a kiss on her lips. Once again, Terry raises her pelvis up the length of my cock. She stares in my eyes for my reaction with a wicked expression. My hands take firm hold of her ripe breasts and I squeeze.

“Michael!” she gasps as she resumes pounding into me.

Her pussy is drenched, and her action is aggressive, yet painless. I close my eyes and concentrate on her body’s abandoned assault on me. She rises and falls on the length of my cock

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

as though she's taking a carpenter's measure. Terry's actions and their ferocity soon increase to a frenzied pace as she grinds into me. I grab hold of her shoulders.

"Let go, Michael," she says.

"Sorry, I—"

"Lie still," she gasps, and her attack on my groin continues as she begins to gasp for air.

"Jeysus, yes," she sighs. "Hold on, Michael, don't move."

She grinds hard into my pelvis. Her lips part and her face contorts into a mix of painful agony and rapture. She shakes her head in a massive, wild burst of emotion.

She has an orgasm, and I'm happy to make it happen for the woman I love. Terry falls in a heap of flesh onto me. The sweat sluices between our bodies as she holds my face.

"Michael Walsh, ye' rattle me like no other," she says.

"Terry O'Mahoney, I love you." We kiss, and she pulls away.

"You're a beautiful man and a beautiful lover, Michael." She strokes my face. Then, I begin to ejaculate inside her.

"Ohh, Terry get off, I'm coming!" I yell, but it's too late, and we let it happen.

"Jeysus, ye' got me so feckin' worked up. I better go on the pill if I'm gonna be hangin' around with you," she says. "What did you wanna tell me?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

Why didn't I make sure Beth was on the pill?

Chapter 21

From behind me, a blazing light cuts through the darkness. When I turn toward it, I'm blinded by its brilliance. It brings with it a ghost-like figure that appears to float across the spring. As I try to adjust my eyes to the light's intensity, I fall to my knees in utter fear as it moves closer to me.

"Mike, Mike, it's me Sergey. Are you okay? I didn't mean to scare you, although I like it when I do." He laughs.

"What the fuck, man! I thought I was being called to heaven or some fuckin' thing," I moan.

"Yeah, this gets people's attention whenever I float across the spring on my paddle board." He smiles and turns off a battery-operated spotlight.

"Are you outta your fucking mind? You know I been drinking and whatever, right?"

"Sorry, I like doin' that to people. It does freak them out. Listen, do you still have that button I gave you earlier?"

"Button?" I question.

"The button of peyote I handed you before."

"Oh, yeah, I got it in my pocket."

"Take it out, and I'll show you how the old medicine men performed their ceremony to their gods."

"Okay. I have it right here."

"Let's go and start a fire first, okay?"

"Sure, we still have plenty of wood."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

We gather up some of the wood and put the logs in a careful triangle configuration at the center of the fire pit. Sergey places a few pieces of kindling below the logs, he lights a match, and the kindling ignites. We both stand in silence as the fire brightens the night around us. The flames crackle and the wood pops as we settle next to its warmth.

Sergey pulls out a pocketknife and begins to cut apart the button of peyote. Trepidation floods over me. Having done something like this once before in Vietnam, I remember it being freaky.

“Sergey, I’m not so sure about this. Do you know what you’re doin’?”

“Listen, if you want what this place has to offer you, relinquish all of your hang-ups and fears, okay? Nothin’ can happen to you if you’re open to the universe. And anything can happen—if you let me guide you there, Mike.”

“Okay, you’ve done this with other people here I’m guessing?” I ask.

“I learned this from the elders. They would perform their ceremonies here many times as I was growing up. No one would come and bother us except the occasional group of curious kids. That’s when my dad would turn into this scary Spookadoodle guy you remember. If anyone came up that trail and into the compound, he would get his shotgun and shoot it in the air. That’s all it would take to have people runnin’ for their lives. We would laugh so hard when he did that, I must admit,” Sergey adds with a bit of glee.

“Dude, that scared the shit outta us back then. We came up here one time on our bikes, and we left a guy here for fear of our lives.”

“That kid’s the cop who hassled me at the diner, right?”

“Yeah, that’s him, his name is Chester Hournauy. He became one ugly human being, Sergey.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Well, my dad caught him and brought him back to the house in the woods. He was shakin’ in his boots while he crapped his pants. I stayed in the background as my dad tried to calm him down. That kid was a total mess, man. My dad mentored him for a while and let him come to help keep the place together and all. When he started bringin’ girls up here late at night, my dad confronted him over it. I still see a police car drive through here sometimes. I always wonder if it’s him.”

“All I know is, the less you have to do with that scumbag, the better off you are, Sergey. I can’t begin to explain to you all about Chester.”

“Listen, let’s forget that guy and concentrate on the positive forces around us. This place we’re at, is a special place of worship. The elders would hold their rituals here. It would always include peyote as a means to get in touch with the Great Spirit, Kitanitowit.”

Sergey then reaches out and places a quarter of the peyote button in my open palm. He puts a piece in his mouth and begins to chew. With a gesture of his hand, he encourages me to do the same, and I do. Its bitter taste reminds me of the drip of cocaine down the back of my throat. Given that I put it aside since I’ve met Terry, I barely even miss it. The consequences of doing this peyote, though, pass through my mind.

“Let the power of the great spirit embrace you, Mike. It’ll only take you where you wanna go, no further and no less. If you let Him, he’ll unfold the secrets of the extraordinary universe in which we live. I’ll remain right here at your side and, remember, you are a child of this universe. You are already home, brother,” Sergey says.

After several minutes go by, Sergey pulls out a bottle of water and hands it to me. I chug a mouthful to relieve the harshness of the peyote. As I pull the bottle from my mouth, my whole

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

center of gravity goes south. My heart begins to beat as though it's inside my head. I find myself on all fours as vomit heaves from my gut.

Sergey has vanished.

The sand between my hands has turned to quicksand and it pulls me down. My body's on fire as I crawl to the water's edge like some primal animal. I need to drink more water. When I plant my face in the cool liquid, someone pulls me up and away from it.

"You're not ready for the waters yet, Mike," a voice calls out from behind me. No one is here, though, and I begin to panic. My body is like a furnace, so I remove all my clothes. While I do this, something—a presence near me—breathes and pulses and flutters.

"Sergey, where did you go? Is that you?" I ask aloud. I soon lose my balance and fall to the ground. When I roll on my back, the stars above me are a brilliant silver spread across the dark sky. One begins to call my name.

"Michael—relax and breathe in and breathe out. Think of where you are, and know that you're safe. Nothing can hurt you here except you," the star tells me. "Remember, you are a child of the universe before you. Explore it with your mind. Close your eyes, and let your mind's eye guide you."

As those words float through the air and pass into my brain, my body loses all feeling of weight or presence. It's as though the body is gone and I have only my mind or my head. I live inside it now. Undulating waves of overpowering serenity pulse through every corpuscle of my being. The universe, the world, or all mankind's love is being pumped into me with a slow, smooth mainline. Tears flow from my eyes.

"Am I dreaming, God, or, or are you real?" I ask the sky.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“You’re not dreaming, Mike. You’re feeling the power and love of the Great Spirit. He’s a god to some, or He’s whatever you need Him to be,” the voice says.

“How long will this last?” I ask.

“It’s different for everyone,” the voice says.

“Can I die?” I wipe my tears away.

“You’re not dyin’, Mike, you’re being born.”

“What?”

“The great father and mother will hold you to their breasts and suckle you tonight. You’ll ingest some of their spirit and power. Lie still and let them tend to you,” the voice says.

I stumble toward the water and kneel down to rinse the sweat and sand off me. My body is numb, and the water revives me somewhat. My hands cup the cool liquid, and I drench my hair with it. It feels good.

“Do you feel okay, Mike?” Sergey’s voice is behind me. His muted silhouette stands out against the dark trees.

“How long have I been like this? I feel like I just ran a marathon,” I say.

“A couple a’ hours or so.” Sergey chuckles.

“I’m naked and crying and I feel great, man! I mean, I . . . I can’t describe how I feel right now.”

“You don’t have to describe it, Mike. Enjoy it, and remember the presence of the spirit. It lives inside you now.” He places his right hand on my shoulder and hands me a towel. “Dry off and we’ll stoke the fire.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

As Sergey begins to gather some wood, I hunt for my clothes in the dark. My underwear is at the water's edge. My socks are twenty yards away and full of sand, and my pants, they're nowhere to be found. Sergey lights the fire ablaze again while I rinse out the socks in the water. The towel comforts me and warms me against the chill of the spring night. My socks will find a place near the warm flames next to me. Sergey finds the bottle of whiskey in the sand and hoists it aloft.

"Thank you, Great Father, for your bounty. What does Terry say with a toast, Slatte?" he questions.

"*Slainte*, she says. It's an Irish thing."

"*Slainte* then," he toasts, and with that, Sergey puts the bottle to his mouth and swigs a healthy mouthful down. He chokes on some of the whiskey as he hands the bottle to me. I gulp a mouthful and it burns a good burn inside my chest.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"Three a.m., I reckon. You been crawlin' around in the sand for a while." He laughs.

"I called for you several times, but I could never see you. Were you here or was I talkin' to the gods?"

"Yes."

"Yes to what? I—"

"Yes to both," he explains. "I let you talk to whatever god it is you need to talk to without gettin' in the way. I was in the shadows over here. You were always safe, my friend."

"That was fuckin' amazing! We should bottle that shit, Sergey."

"We can't bottle those gifts, Mike. You were ready to receive the gift; not everyone's ready and if you're not, it could be real bad stuff."

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“How did you know I would be ready?”

“I knew as soon as I watched you with the little girl. She let me know you were ready. Your heart is already open and available and she’s dancin’ with it, you just ain’t seen it yet.”

“Sergey, you got that right. Terry and Caitlin have definitely taken possession of my heart, for sure. Terry is the best thing to ever happen to me, and that’s sayin’ a lot. I thought I would never hear myself say such things about a woman, you know?”

“It’s all good, Mike. It’s a shame your friend Tuchi doesn’t feel the same about the lady Sharon, eh?”

“Well, he’s an asshole, and he’ll die an asshole too. I can’t help him, but I can help myself to some more a’ that whiskey,” I say.

Sergey takes a swig and passes the bottle to me.

The fire rages now while we pile more wood onto it. The damp socks steam into the chilled air as they dry. Sergey and I are content to pass the whiskey bottle back and forth with minimal chatter. When the socks dry, I slip them onto my cold feet. Their heat is soothing.

The entire night, well, except for the episodes with Tuchi and Terry earlier, has been a memorable one. When we talk in the morning about Beth, I hope all will be well.

Sergey begins to tilt to one side and proceeds to fall over. He then wraps himself into a neat fetal position and starts to snore. It’s a clear night tonight, so no rain should fall on him. An extra blanket from my tent will keep the cool air away from him, and I drape it over him. Well, goodnight, Sergey.

The whiskey bottle is nearly empty, so I may as well finish it. The warm liquid drenches my throat as it passes down to my stomach. The sizzling flames before me emit amber and red fireflies into the air above. They grab my imagination as I gaze in wonder at those short-lived

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

lights. Our lives are like one of these transient remnants of wood. The tree grows, we burn it, it nurtures us with its warmth, and then it flies away to the heavens. I feel unencumbered for the first time in many, many years. I resolve to free myself of the festering guilt over Beth's pregnancy and come clean with Terry.

"Michael, Michael!" Someone jars me awake with their touch.

"What?" I gasp. "Whadda you want?"

"Michael, wake up," Terry says. "You'll catch your death a' cold out here. You're half naked. What in God's name did you do last night?"

"Oh, hi, I guess I fell asleep is all." I grab her hand. "Terry, I have something to tell you. What time is it?"

"It's eight somethin' in tha' mornin'," she says. "Please get yourself up and get in tha' tent, Michael, before anyone wakes up."

Terry helps me to my feet and brushes the sand from my body as she guides me to the tent. I feel unsteady.

"I thought I was dreaming. Am I dreaming now?" I ask her.

"No, you're not dreamin' now. Put these clean clothes on so ye' don't freeze ta' death. Why didn't ye' stay inside tha' tent last night?"

"Well, I had to take a piss and then Sergey showed up. We were drinking and watching the fire all night and, and I—I got so tired."

"Luv, please don't scare me again like that with findin' ye' in such a condition of . . . I thought ye' were dead or dyin'. I'm not gonna lose another man, am I, Michael?" Terry asks.

"No."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She hands me a pair of jeans.

“Get dressed while I tend ta’ Caitlin, then I think it’s time we get home, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, that’s more like it, and keep it up.” She wags a finger at me and flashes an impish smile.

As I continue to get dressed, I realize sand has taken up residency in places on my body where sand shouldn’t be. A shower will be the first thing to do once we get home. We’ll have to drop Sharon off at her place. Tuchi never even gave it a second thought when he left yesterday. Everyone soon begins to gather outside.

“Michael,” Caitlin calls.

“Yes?”

“Good morning,” Caitlin spouts, and I kneel down to accept a hug. “I was a bit frightened by a creature of the dark last night. Miss Sharon was fast asleep, but I heard the beast. It must have had ten-inch-long teeth and breath like a dragon, I figure. Didn’t ye’ hear it, Michael?” Caitlin asks.

“No, no—listen, we better collect our things ’cause we wanna get home soon, okay?”

“Okay then,” she replies, and with that Terry comes over.

“Was Caitlin spinnin’ one of her tall tales again?”

“She said she heard a bear of some sorts last night. For all I know, it was me,” I say.

“You are a bear of some sorts, now ain’t ye’?” Terry says and plants a playful kiss on my lips. “Let’s gather all our things and take down tha’ tents, okay?”

“Right, but I—”

“But nothin’. Move it, buster.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

All this activity is done in a quick, quiet fashion. Clothes are shoved into backpacks and a bucket of water douses the remaining coals of the fire. Terry grabs a carton of milk from the cooler and gulps a hearty mouthful. As I bring our things toward the path, past Sharon's tent, she emerges and turns to face me.

“Your hair, it's, it's—”

“It's straight. Yes, I know. I'm tryin' a new style on for size,” Sharon says. She prances away while she flips her long locks in my direction.

“I like it for one, Sharon,” Terry chimes in and hands me the cooler.

“Thank you,” Sharon calls back.

I can only shake my head in disbelief and head up the path toward my truck. A note is stuck on the windshield: Thanks for the blanket and whiskey—Sergey.

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Chapter 22

On Easter, we all went to the morning mass together: Terry, Caitlin, my mom, James, Nanna, and I. It was strange for me. This hasn't happened since I was much younger. It was in high school when these times with my family faded away. That's how it was for me and my friends anyway.

My mom prepared her usual Easter dinner of ham, boiled potatoes, and a small turkey with stuffing. This isn't the traditional Irish dinner according to Terry.

"It's a suitable substitute," Terry says. "I never liked tha' lamb either." She chuckles.

"James told me the same thing years ago, so we decided to have ham. My mother makes me cook a turkey as well." Mom rolls her eyes.

"Marion, stop being so dramatic with the turkey thing. You enjoy the turkey, too, don't you?" Nanna asks her.

"Yes, Mother, I do." And with that, my mom rushes off to the kitchen.

"I hope I didn't create a row over tha' food? I—" Terry says.

"Don't concern yourself at all, luv," James says. "We go through this every holiday here. Don't fret over it, please."

"Pay her no mind, honey." Nanna snickers. "She's a bit anal if you know what I mean?"

"Beggin' your pardon, what's that?" Terry asks.

"She's a tight ass. Her butt cheeks are so tight together that she has no free-flowing thoughts, is what I mean." Nanna laughs. James waves Nanna off and heads toward the kitchen. I bring Terry into the living room.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Welcome to the family, Terry,” I say. “We should’ve gone to Friendly’s for dinner, ’cause you can’t make a scene there.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Michael.” Terry takes hold of my arm. “I meant no harm. I—”

“Don’t worry, babe. This always happens between Nanna and my mom. They have this hate-hate relationship.”

“Ohhh—okay,” Terry says. “This is our first holy holiday together. How’d ye’ feel in church then? Ye’ been goin’ regular now, Michael.” She takes hold of me with an excited energy.

“Well, I . . . I enjoy being with you and Caitlin but—”

“But what?” Terry asks as she stands on her tiptoes so her arms can encircle my neck.

“Ye’ don’t feel like ye’ belong there then, Michael? Ye’ don’t feel safe and all?”

“Well, I was gonna say—”

“Well, well, well. What ye’ gotta say then? Take tha’ rocks outta your mouth. You’re talkin’ like a five-year-old.”

“I told you many times before, I’m somewhat uncomfortable in church. I can’t explain it. I’m not a church person.”

She presses her head into my chest. The thought crosses my mind that now may be the opportune moment to come clean about Beth and her pregnancy.

“Please try ta’ find it in your heart ta’ let God in as you’ve let me and Caitlin in your heart.” She jumps up, straddles my hips, and I take hold of her butt. We kiss.

“I’ll try, but . . .” I exhale. “Listen, I—”

She jumps off me and a bag of pot in my front pocket peeks out. She grabs it and waves it in front of my face.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Don’t tell me you’re still a pothead?”

“I don’t smoke pot anymore, Terry.”

“What’s this then?” she scolds.

“Okay, I’m busted. I’ll stop.”

“I can’t stop ye’ from doin’ what ye’ want. Ye’ have ta’ make up your own mind.” She places the bag of pot in her pocket and heads back to the dining room.

“Dinner is served,” my mom calls. She comes out with the ham and places it at the center of the table. Caitlin runs out from the kitchen with Nanna and James.

“Michael, will ye’ sit next ta’ me, please?” Caitlin asks.

“Sure, I will.” I sit next to Terry, who then moves over, and Caitlin rushes into the seat between us. Terry avoids my eyes.

“Michael, don’t ye’ love tha’ fresh ham?” Caitlin grabs my arm. Her eyes are ablaze with joyful anticipation.

“Caitlin, would ye’ like some then?” James asks her.

“Yes, please, thank you.” James places one piece of the ham on her plate.

“One more, please, Uncle James,” she exclaims. He obliges.

“Would ye’ want some potatoes then, luv?” James asks.

“Yes, please, three, please,” she says.

“Are ye’ sure?”

“Oh, yes, Uncle James, I’m so starved—I think I may expire soon,” she says with a hint of little girl drama.

“Okay, then, here ye’ go.” He proceeds to plop down three large potatoes onto her plate. I rush to help support it as Caitlin’s grip falters, and the potatoes begin to slide off.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Thank you,” Caitlin says with eyes alight. James hands me the plate of ham. I pass it down to Terry.

“No, no, you go first, Michael. That’s what you’re used ta’, isn’t it?” She throws me an exasperated look. The room goes quiet for a second. At that moment, Nanna lights up her pipe in a flurry of flames and smoke.

My mom shouts, “Mother, I’ve told you a million fuckin’ times not to—”

“Mar, don’t say the f-word in front of James. He’s religious.” Nanna cackles and knocks the tobacco from the pipe.

“Sorry, Caitlin,” my mother says.

“Oh, it’s okay. My mum says feck sake every time somethin’ goes a bit. . . .”

Terry takes hold of her tight and covers Caitlin’s mouth. Everyone chuckles.

The rest of the meal went well, aside from the fact Terry ignored me. James came around the table and served us wine while we ate. The ham, as always, went well with a generous helping of mustard and fork-tender potatoes. After a chocolate Easter egg for dessert, James calls me over.

“Mike, let’s get some whiskey. Shall we ask Terry or—”

“No way, James, she’s mad at me. You and I should partake alone, okay?”

“Okay then, let’s go,” he says.

We get to the sitting room and he pours two tumblers of Jameson’s. “*Slainte!*” he says and we down the liquor in one gulp. Terry comes in.

“I have ta’ go, Uncle James. I’ll see ye’ tomorrow. Caitlin has an upset tummy.”

“I’ll come with you,” I tell her.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“No thanks, mister. You stay in your little playpen, thank you very much, nothin’ personal ta’ you, Uncle James.”

“Wait a minute. I . . . why are you so—”

“So *what?*” Terry asks. “Sometimes, ye’ can’t see past your nose, Michael Walsh, can ye’? Ye’ better see a doctor ta’ correct your cross-eyed life soon.” She turns and leaves.

James pats me on the back. “So, how’s tha’ whiskey hittin’ ye’, boy?”

“I’ll have another, please.”

“Okay then,” James says as he pours two more and we throw them back. He then pours two more. “Four’s tha’ charm, Michael, when ye’ have a woman mad with your shenanigans,” James says. We down them both.

“But we only had three, James.”

“Sorry, lad, I was never that good with math for sure, one more then.” Into the glasses, he dribbles two more short pours of the whiskey with a wicked smile on his face. He beams as he raises the glasses up and I take hold of one. We proceed to make the crystal kiss in a cautious manner.

“*Slainte*, Mike, health and happiness to ye’,” James says with a rosy face. “Terry’ll come ’round and change her bearings over this little tiff, for sure.”

“I know, but it kills me when she gets the devil under her nails. James, I love her madly. She’s good for me, and I know that she loves me back. She’s told me so.”

James places a hand on my shoulder. “I’m proud a’ ye’ for standin’ toe ta’ toe with her. It’s nothin’ short a’ miraculous. She’s always been a firebrand from straight outta tha’ womb, so my sister tells it. She’ll kill ye’ or she’ll love ye’ ta’ death. Boy, like most a’ tha’ women in my family. Either way, you’re hers and you’re better off puttin’ up your hands in surrender.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“For sure. James—listen, I’m gonna go and see if I can talk with her right now. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Okay then, good luck. Ye’ want a knife or somethin’?”

“Do you have a chainsaw?” I ask, only halfkidding.

We both laugh.

I knock on the door between our rooms. “Terry, are you there?” Nothing. I knock again. “Terry, Caitlin?”

“Michael, we’re here,” Caitlin answers. Terry tries to hush her.

“What do ye’ want, Michael? Do ye’ want your dope then? Can ye’ not live another moment without it?” Terry says.

“Mum, what’s dope?” Caitlin asks.

“Oh, are ye’ happy now? Ye’ got my lovely, innocent daughter hittin’ me up for some a’ your dope! Are ye’ happy now, Michael Walsh?” She flings the door open, stands there, and scowls at me.

“Terry, calm down. I, I. . . .” She throws the bag of pot at me and slams the door shut. All the locks on her side of the door slide shut, one by one. This is something she hasn’t done since we hooked up. She then begins to kick and pound the door.

“Michael Walsh, I don’t need any man feckin’ with my life again. I don’t need tha’ bullshit, and pain—PAIN!” she yells while pounding against the door. I remain silent and take a few steps back. “I love ye’ desperately, I do, Michael, but I ain’t gonna take on tha’ pain and disappointments, I can’t. I can’t do it again. So feck off till ye’ grow up, ye’ asshole!” she

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

screams at the top of her lungs. Terry kicks once more at the door, and her foot flies through the wood. *Stand back, Mike, because the next thing to get hit are your balls.*

As I pick up the bag of pot from the floor, I remember the rolling papers are in a drawer. A party of one is about to begin. The hum of the whiskey courses through my head, but the sting of Terry's words leaves me somewhat unsettled. They hurt, so I'm prepared to get a bit numb and shut out the world right now.

This is the best pot I've ever smoked except for the stuff we got in Vietnam. Tuchi and I would hide it in the minefield. We'd tie a long string to a small bag full of pot and launch it into the middle of it. When we wanted to get high, we pulled the bag in. One time, Tuchi put a rock in the bag to make it travel farther. It hit a mine and exploded. Every GI in the place sent a barrage of M-16 rounds into the parameter of our outpost, thinking it was the Vietcong.

I clean out any stems or seeds and roll a fat joint. My pants and shirt come off, I light the joint, and turn on the MTV channel. A Heineken will do fine as well. I take two big draws on the joint. A swig of beer and, no—Madonna is on again. I rush to turn the TV off. What album is appropriate instead? *Let it Bleed* by the Rolling Stones fits my mood. As I find the album and place it onto the turntable, I puff on the joint. "Gimme Shelter" is the first song. I know it well. Tuchi and I would listen to this album every day upon its release, needle down.

Guitar notes chirp from far away, along with a bass drumbeat. A scratching sound from a riffed gourd permeates my consciousness. The groove becomes heavy and ominous.

*Oh, a storm is threat'ning
My very life today. . . .*

A bluesy harmonica and guitar play, along with a relentless assault from the drums. Then, a female singer's voice cuts in, aggressive and urgent.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Rape, murder!
It's just a shot away. . . .

The pot has gotten me high. The smoke has dissolved into my bloodstream and my mind.

Someone knocks on the window.

“Who is it?”

“Open tha’ door, Mike, it’s Tuchi.”

When I unlock the outside door, Beth sashays in with him. “Hold on, Beth, what are you doing?”

“I’m here for tha’ fun, Mikey. Remember fun?” She proceeds to take hold of me and kiss my cheek. It’s obvious she’s already loaded.

“Relax, let’s keep it down, okay? What are you two doin’ here anyhow?”

“We figured, let’s get the old crew together and do what we used ta’ do,” Tuchi says.

“Yeah, Mikey, let’s get it on like we used ta’, before you got serious about some bitch you met in a bar,” Beth says.

“Come on now, let’s be friends, okay?” I say. Her belly bulges from her now thin frame and it gives me a shudder.

“Ohhh, Mikey, we’re more than friends, ain’t we?”

“Get inside, please,” I say. They both stagger in, and I can tell they have been partying hard today. Beth looks horrible. Her appearance is unkept and pasty. She’s never come off quite as raunchy as this. Tuchi grabs for her ass, and she rushes away from him. She proceeds to throw all her belongings—purse, shoes, and cigarettes—on the floor.

“Are you gonna cop a squat and take a shit, too? Get comfortable why don’t you,” I say.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I just may, dependin’ on how fucked up you two get me tonight.” She scowls, then lights a cigarette. I let her light it and decide not to respond. She still wears some ratty G-string and bra outfit from a job she must have come from.

“Where have you two been tonight?” I ask.

“I picked her up from Chester’s place,” Tuchi explains. He then begins to pour out a pile of cocaine onto the stereo cabinet.

“Hold on, Tuchi. Terry is right next door, and you know I ain’t been indulgin’ anymore.”

“Well, you don’t mind if we do some, Mikey, do you?” Beth asks.

“Knock yourself out.”

Tuchi leans down and snorts a fat line. Beth follows him, comes back up, and holds her nose. She points the rolled bill at me as though I should follow her. My hand reaches out to take the bill in slow motion as my brain tries to double-check my emotions. Beth comes close to me and stares me down.

“Do one line for old time’s sake,” she says as she strokes my face with her hand.

“Just do it, bro. It’ll make you feel better,” Tuchi says.

Terry comes to mind as I bend down and snort the fat line of cocaine. It hits the back of my throat with a familiar ripping burn and drip. I did miss the rush that will soon course through my body.

“Line up another one, Tuchi,” I tell him.

“That’s tha’ Mikey we all know and love.” Beth applauds while Tuchi prepares another line for me.

“What happened to the baby thing?” I ask her under my breath.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Oh, I forgot about that,” she says as she waves me off. “I took care of it,” she whispers in my ear.

She looks gaunt but I can see that her belly has a bump. “Are you sure, ’cause you have a bit of a belly there.”

“Would I be doin’ coke and drinking if I was havin’ your child, really now?”

The Stones still play in the background.

Well, we all need someone we can lean on. . . .

Beth rubs her hands together with glee and smiles at me. She strokes my back with enthusiasm as I bend down and snort the line. The burn and sudden rush begin to compound the first line, and I lose my place in the universe.

Beth begins gyrating to the music. It’s a sultry, slow dance in time with the slide guitar sounds emanating from the stereo. She strokes her breasts, then raises her hands through her hair, all the while staring me down. She grabs my hand and tries to get me to join in. I’m not interested, but she continues to demonstrate her best sultry moves to the music. She’s still quite an impressive seductress.

“Are you okay, Mikey? You need ta’ get your sea legs again. You ain’t been hangin’ with tha’ right people lately, hey, boy?” she says with a laugh.

“Bro, listen, you still got a bottle of whiskey?” Tuchi asks.

“Yeah, over in the stereo, you know it,” I try to explain, but I can’t level my world out right now. Next thing I know, we’re all doing shot after shot. The Stones finish. Beth starts to rummage through my records.

“What’s this—Dusty Springfield’s ‘Take a Piece a My Heart’?” she asks.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“That’s one a’ my mom’s records, be careful, please,” I say. She places the 45 onto the turntable and drops the needle. A piano begins to play.

*Didn't I make you feel
Like you were the only man?*

The down tempo, '60s groove of the song takes over her body. She grabs her head and starts to gyrate her hips. She sets her gaze on Tuchi. He’s set up three more lines of coke and she slinks over toward him. He turns to see her in all her raunchy brilliance. Beth takes hold of his face and kisses him. He reciprocates. This is arousing. She breaks it off and throws me a fiendish smile.

“You want another piece a’ my heart, Mikey?” she asks with a wicked grin. She then puts out a hand in my direction.

I take her hand, and she pulls me into her. Next thing I know, the three of us are on the couch, entwined with each other. Tuchi smiles and gives me a wink. We have never shared the bounty of a woman’s pleasures together before. There’s always a first time for everything. Without talking, we get up and open the couch. Beth grabs the bottle of whiskey and downs a mouthful. She hands it to me. I put it to my lips and swallow a full gulp. Tuchi grabs the bottle from my hands and proceeds to down a mouthful and then some. The whiskey falls from his mouth and down his chest.

“That’s what I’m tellin’ you, people!” he shouts with abandonment. He spits whiskey in my face. I tackle him, and we fall onto the bed. Beth is all over us in seconds. She jumps on top of me and turns me to her. She plants her lips onto mine with an intense, juicy kiss.

“Take her, bro,” Tuchi says. I reach around and undo her bra. It pops off like a broken rubber band. She plants her breasts in my face, and I make a meal out of her nipples. They become firm as I suck on her flesh. I rip her G-string off with one hand.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Mikey, I missed you, boy,” she says. “We were fuckin’ our brains out, then you shacked up with that Irish bitch and it—”

“I don’t wanna talk about her right now, okay?”

“Okay, how about we talk about puttin’ your cock inside me, Mikey?” Beth serenades in my ear.

“Tuchi’s here—you can ask him to do it.”

“His cock’s gonna be in my mouth while you’re fuckin’ me,” she whispers. With that, she slaps Tuchi, who’s beginning to fall asleep, and wakes him.

“Take your pants off, you drunken fool,” she says. He does what she demands.

Beth helps him complete the task and positions him in front of her on the bed. She grabs his cock and proceeds to get him hard in her mouth. This is exciting. It’s sexy beyond belief. It’s our own private porno movie. It’s fucking amazing if you ask me!

I undress, and as I close in on Beth from behind, she grabs her ass cheeks and spreads them in anticipation of my entry. Her womanly parts are no longer as luscious as I remember, and she’s thinner.

Mike, plunge your engorged cock into her now.

“Mikey, don’t be soft on me,” Beth says as I hesitate. “Remember, you ain’t never been soft on me,” she pouts. Again, she puts Tuchi’s dick in her mouth and continues to suck it as he moans with pleasure.

Spreading her legs, I then grab hold of her hips and—and—I can’t do it. Something stops me.

Mike, fuck her. You’ll never be here again.

I release her.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“What’s tha’ matter, boy? Come on, Mikey. Make me a dirty girl. It ain’t tha’ first time I been with two men and it won’t be tha’ last, neitha’,” Beth says.

She springs around on top of Tuchi and slips his cock inside her as she stares at me.

Tuchi is on another planet, and it’s surprising that he can still remain erect. I go for the bottle of whiskey and begin to drink in earnest. Beth is gaunt. Her arms are riddled with track marks from shooting whatever it is she’s been shooting up.

“Mikey, fuck me, boy, come on,” she pouts as she begins to ride Tuchi’s cock with determination.

“Beth, he’s out cold. His prosthetic leg is falling off, for God’s sake,” I say. “Leave him alone, will you?”

“Get over here then, and fuck me. This should be you anyways.” She stops her motion and glares at me.

“Beth, come on. I . . .” She leaps off of him and projects herself at me. We fall in a heap of noise and flesh onto the floor with a thunderous crash. My head may be bleeding.

“What tha’ feck is going on with this little whore, Michael?” Terry’s voice comes from behind me. She stands over the both of us with a broom in her hands. Beth rolls off me, and Terry begins to thrash me with the broom. The devil is in her eyes as she goes to town on my naked body.

“Terry, stop,” I shout. Beth gets to her feet and tries to grab the broom from Terry. Terry drops it, gets in a boxer’s stance, and plants a right fist square onto Beth’s jaw. Beth’s eyes roll back. When her head hits the floor, it sounds like a ripe watermelon thrown to the ground. She lies there naked and out cold.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I sorted ye’ out then, didn’t I, whore that ye’ are!” Terry spits on her as she looms over Beth’s listless body. “Tend ta’ your whore, Michael,” Terry exclaims, and then she stomps back into her room. The locks are clasped, one by one, again. She moves something in front of the keyhole in the door, then it goes quiet. My heart erupts into my throat.

What the fuck have you done, Mike?

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 23

When I check on Beth, I notice her chest rise and fall. She'll live, so I turn her on her side and throw a blanket over her. I may not be so lucky when it comes to Terry's fury though. Tuchi is still passed out on my bed as well.

When I settle into the bed next to Tuchi, my aching body tries to relax. It feels as though every breath may be my last breath.

An unbearable pain stabs me in my left shoulder. I try not to cry out.

Will you ever get home and live your life again, Mike—a normal life?

I can hear the choppers before they come into view. Their silhouettes stand out now against the dimly lit sky as they approach low and fast. We all know what's coming. They shoot a barrage of rockets past our position, into the VC's line. A rapid set of concussive explosions and fire rock the earth. Death is the VC's destiny now, not mine. Taking hold of Tuchi, I ignore his wails of unadulterated anguish. His lower leg drags along the ground as I try to pull him through the brush. I stop to pull out my Ka-Bar knife from its sheath. "Kill me, Mike!" Tuchi screams. He grabs me close and pleads with eyes ablaze, as though he were mad. "Cut my throat and go, bro. I'm dead anyway, Mike!" he pleads.

"Fuck you, Tuchi. We're gettin' outta here, man. The choppers are comin'!" I shout. I pull him off me and my knife cuts through the remaining tendons holding his lower leg onto his thigh.

Somehow, I hoist him up on my good shoulder and begin to run toward where the choppers have landed. Several GIs jump out and return fire past us and into our former position.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

A medic comes racing toward us as my legs give out.

A blaring alarm sounds as an acrid smell fills the air. My heart races as I open my eyes to see Beth's hair, as well as the covers on the bed, in flames. The room fills with a cloud of dark, heavy smoke. She jumps up, pain and fear across her face.

"Your hair's on fire!" I scream.

"Mikey, put it out. My fuckin' hair's on fire!" she yells. "Get some water, something, quick!"

I pull her to her knees, and as I urinate over her head and face, she wails in pain.

"Hold still!" I shout.

"Fuck me! Stop pissin' on my head, asshole!" she cries. I snatch the smoldering covers, rush them outside and realize, I'm naked. Dejected, I head back into my smoke-filled room. Terry stands in the heavy, acrid air and holds Beth by what's left of her hair. Tuchi is still fast asleep.

"What in God's name have ye' done ta' the whore, Michael?" Terry asks. She clasps a handful of what remains of Beth's hair in one hand as her other hand steadies Beth's chin.

Beth is in complete shambles, and sobs. "Put some clothes on, ye' worthless piece a' flesh," Terry tells her. She releases Beth who proceeds to fall to the floor in a heap of tears. James and my mother rush in with fire extinguishers in hand.

"What the fuck is going on in here?" my mom shouts.

"Someone set this tart on fire." Terry points to Beth. "They're havin' a grand old party in here and no one's payin' attention ta' tha' whore."

"Shut the fuck up or I'll—" Beth says.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Or you’ll what?” Terry says. “Or your melon’ll hit tha’ ground again, whore? So feck off.”

“Stop calling me that, you pompous English bitch!” Beth shouts.

“I’m from Ireland, ye’ manky tart. Put some clothes on while you’re at it. Your tits are saggin’,” Terry says, and she walks away.

“Open all the windows for fuck sake!” James orders me. I have rarely seen him so rattled.

“I want you out of this house now!” My mother sobs. “Not tomorrow, not in five minutes, now!” She is screaming in my face as James tries to hold her back. “I’ve had enough of you and your fucked up friends! You could have killed us in our sleep!”

She aims the fire extinguisher at Tuchi, who’s still passed out on the bed, and sprays a stream of CO₂ in his face. He wakes up with a face full of foam. “Get the fuck outta my house, Tuchi!” my mother wails.

“Mike, listen, ye’ better go somewhere else for a while so I can sort this all out with your mother,” James whispers to me.

My mom goes to the stereo, which is still playing, yanks the record off and smashes it atop the wood cabinet.

“Party over,” she says.

“Tuchi, let’s go,” I shout.

“I was just sleepin’ is all,” he says, bewildered.

“Shut up. Let’s get tha’ fuck outta here,” Beth shrieks.

I approach Terry, but she turns and stalks away.

“Go, Michael, please,” she says in a low, rueful voice.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

After my parents and Terry leave my room, I gather my smoky clothes and get dressed. Beth, Tuchi, and I are all in a miserable, pathetic state. What time is it? We dress in silence. A putrid stench of burnt hair permeates the place. It turns my stomach. Beth's hair has melted to her scalp, and she smells of urine as her mascara runs down her cheeks. Tuchi wipes the CO₂ off his face with his shirt.

"Tuchi, why did you two come and bother me tonight? I was happy sitting on the couch alone, havin' a beer. Why do you have to come in my space and crap all over the place?" I say.

"Hold on, bro. You didn't complain when we were gettin' our party on and Beth gets naked and you think you'll get your dick wet, did you now, bro?" Tuchi points an angry finger at me.

"Listen, when is it ever gonna be your fault, ever? I was minding my own fucking business when you come with her and you—"

Beth tries to kick me.

"*Her*, you fuckin' sack of shit!" Beth shrieks. "No one ever complained when *her* was sucking your dick, did you, Mikey?" she bellows.

"Yeah, *her* never bought any coke or was ever asked to chip in either, now was *her*? We partied left, right, and sideways, and no one ever asked for nothin', did I?" I say. "Like you said to me once before, it was all a mutual agreement, wasn't it? We both benefited from it, didn't we?"

"Fuck you, Mikey. Look at me." Beth cries, her hands in the air. "My fuckin' hair is gone, and my scalp is burned. What tha' fuck! Call 911, you fucking asshole!"

"I can't help it if you decide to light a cigarette and fall asleep while you're all fucked up," I say.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She tries to kick me and lands on her ass, crying all the while.

“Listen, man, let’s just forget all this.” Tuchi takes my arm and stops me.

“Tuchi, get the fuck away from me. I can’t keep doin’ this, man. What is Terry gonna think of me now? She’ll leave me in the dust. I love her, and now she’ll probably wanna have nothin’ to do with me.”

“Bro, that chick’s just another piece of ass, come on,” he says.

I turn in his direction and wind up a right fist headed for his jaw. He does a lightning-fast block, twists, and folds his legs under mine. Instantly I’m on the floor with him on top of me.

“Bro, you know better than to pull that shit on me.” He pushes off me and stands. He’s right. He still maintains a black belt in Tae Kwon Do. “Beth, let’s go,” he says.

She gets to her feet and as she passes me, she kicks me in the ribs.

I just had a fight with my best friend. I probably lost the love of my life, and my mother just threw me out of the house. My body curls into a fetal position. It becomes raked with pain, anger, and a mounting sense of anxiety. The distant siren of a fire truck breaks through the clouds in my brain. I raise myself up and feel a powerful need to destroy someone or something.

I seize the bottle of whiskey and propel it into the TV set. The refrigerator is thrown onto the floor in a flurry of rage. My mind is hotter than a boiler. My heart pounds as the anger courses through me. Terry rushes back inside with her daughter at her side as I turn to destroy anything else.

“Stop, stop, Michael. Caitlin is here, so please stop!” she cries.

I fall down in a heap of sweat and shame. Caitlin rushes to me and hugs me.

“I’m sorry, Caitlin, I apologize. I don’t wanna scare you, honey. I didn’t mean to—”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“It’s okay, Michael,” she tells me. “My mum throws things when she gets tha’ devil under her skin. I remember—”

“Alright, Caitlin, enough, please,” Terry interjects. “Michael, I think it’s best that ye’ leave now. Come on, luv, go upstairs by Uncle James, and I’ll be right there, okay?”

“Okay, Mum. Goodbye, Michael,” she says with sad eyes.

“Goodbye, Caitlin.”

She runs up the stairs while Terry scowls at me.

“You know, I never did anything with Beth tonight. I was just relaxin’ when they came over. I, uh, I—”

“Ye’ don’t think I knew what’s goin’ on over here, Michael? I heard everything, and I can see through tha’ hole in tha’ door, ye’ feekin’ eejit. Look what ye’ done ta’ tha’ place. Look what ye’ done ta’ us, Michael.” Her eyes well up with tears. “If I seen ye’ throw your willy in that tart, I’d a’ cut your clackers off, and she’d be talkin’ ta’ Jeysus right now!” She shakes a fist at me.

“I’m sorry. I’m a bit drunk and—”

“Oh, so every time we have a little tiff, you’re gonna get shit-faced? You’re gonna start wavin’ your pipe at any manky Sally that crosses your path? Is that it?” she asks. “Well, that ain’t how it’s gonna be with me, ye’ big chancer.”

“No, I didn’t go there with her. I didn’t, Terry. If you were—”

“If you’re gonna let a fox inta’ the chicken coop, she’ll eat all tha’ eggs and then kill all tha’ chickens for tha’ sport of it. Be careful, Michael Walsh, tha’ devil’s watchin’ ye’,” she says with a bit of melancholy in her voice.

Terry turns and storms upstairs.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

As I finish dressing and gather up some clothes, the question crosses my mind of where to stay. No one wants to be around me right now. It's past midnight, and I still have to work tomorrow—today. Geez, it will be somewhat different to see Tuchi on the job. We haven't had a real fight since high school, and we never had one over a woman. Kevin will wonder why we're not our usual buddy-buddy selves.

Kevin? I think suddenly. Yes, maybe Kevin will let me crash by him for a while till this whole thing blows over. Although I'd been to his place only once before, I recall the lingering aroma of stale piss in my nose. He's in the next town over. I grab my Colt 45 from the dresser. As I head outside, the firemen rush past me. Beth is being lifted onto a stretcher and into the back of an ambulance that follows. She flips me the finger.

It's now ten minutes later, 12:30 a.m. I pull up to the drab, one-story brick apartment complex in Hamburg where Kevin lives. A light's on inside his apartment, and I knock. There's some noise behind the door before it opens.

"Mike, what brings you here?" he asks with a smile. "You don't look so good, Mike, come on in."

The smell from his small apartment hits me in the face. A mixture of greasy fried food and beer, with the aroma of piss lingering somewhere in the background. The apartment is a studio not much bigger than my former abode.

"Sorry about the mess, Mike. The maid never came last year." He chuckles. "I was just ready to get some sleep. Can't be late for work now, can we?"

"Right, not with Tuchi, that's for sure. Listen, Kevin, I was thrown out of the house tonight and was wonderin' if I can crash here for a bit?"

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Your mother threw you out then?” he asks and scratches his head.

“Yeah, they’re all pissed off at me. Easter night went south once Tuchi and Beth came over and we started havin’ too much fun.”

“Your mother got pissed, I’m guessing?” He stares at the floor and rubs the side of his face.

“Yeah, Beth almost burned the place down. She was smoking in bed and her hair caught on fire,” I say. “It was a huge fucking mess, Kevin.”

“What? Knowing your mother, it’s no wonder she didn’t kill the lot a’ you.” He puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Terry almost beat me to death with a broomstick,” I say with a smile.

“You mean the Irish gal from the bar, the one from church, right?”

“Yeah, well, you know, we been seeing each other for some time now.”

“I had a feeling she was warming up to you. It’s the Irish, though, Mike. The women can be volatile if you cross ’em. Tread carefully, Mike, tread carefully.”

“Tell me about it. But you know, I’ll take it gladly if you ask me. She’s the one, Kevin. She’s pulled me in.”

“Well, now, Mister Casanova has finally been tamed. We need a drink then,” he declares. He proceeds to get a bottle of Jameson’s and two glasses.

“I don’t know, Kevin. I’ve had my share of whiskey tonight. I—”

“Nothin’ doin’, you’re in love, and you always have to celebrate love, Mike, remember? It doesn’t come around often and when it does, cherish it,” he says.

“I guess so.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“When you have it, you feel great, right? When you don’t have it, you feel terrible, so celebrate it. You may not have this feelin’ forever.”

He hands me a glass. We clink them together and down the whiskey.

“It may have slipped through my hands tonight, though, Kevin. After some time passes, maybe this mess I created can be repaired. Tuchi and Beth didn’t help me none, either,” I say.

“Tuchi was there, too, right?”

“Yeah, and we had a bit of a fight, you might say. I tried to hit him, and he knocked me down.”

“I wouldn’t mix it up with that one-legged maniac.” He laughs. “Remember what he did to those two guys who tried to manhandle Filominca that one time? Remember how he beat them both senseless?”

“I remember, ’cause it was you and me who dragged them outside.” I laugh.

Kevin goes to his fridge and comes back with two beers. He pops one open and hands it to me.

“Remember how pissed your mom was after I gave you your first beer? She’s still mad at me for that.” Kevin chuckles as he sits on the couch. He motions for me to join him.

“How did you meet James and my mom again?” I ask. “I recall you tellin’ me a long time ago that you and James met in the war or something, right?”

“Right, well, we were fightin’ in Italy at the battle of Monte Cassino in 1944. He had joined the British army even though Ireland was neutral. The Americans and British, among others, were up against the Germans and Italians. It was a fuckin’ mess, Mike.” He waves an excited hand in the air. “We bombed the place to a pancake and they still got troops in there to defend the high ground.” He holds his head, eyes wide.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“You got wounded, right?”

“Yeah, that’s how I met James. We were both wounded close to the end of the battle. He kinda took me under his wing, him being a battle-hardened veteran and all. You have to remember, he joined the British army in 1939, so he had seen a bit more action than I had by then. I was barely seventeen, Mike. We spent a lotta time together in that hospital. After the war, we kept in touch. James decided to come to the States in 1951. You were just a little guy.”

“Wow, did you know my dad back in the day, Kevin? What was he like?”

“What? Oh, your dad, yeah—I like your dad. I liked him is what I mean to say. He was a great friend to me and James.”

“Why did he leave my mom, though, and why would the guy leave me? I was only a year old,” I say. “Could it really have been that bad with my mom and all?”

“Well, Mike, you know what they say, shit happens and—shit happened with your folks.” Kevin winces and turns his gaze toward the floor. “It was quite unfortunate.”

“I guess.”

“Yeah, shit happens and that’s why God made whiskey for us to be happy,” he exclaims. He then jumps to his feet for the bottle and pours two more glasses half full and hands me one. I take the glass from him. Maybe it will put me to sleep. The whiskey runs down my throat and warms my body and spirit.

“Listen, Kevin, if I can stay here for a few nights, where would I be sleeping?” I ask him. “I need some sleep.”

“I’ll give you a blanket for the couch; that is all I can offer you, sorry.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

He goes into a chest at the foot of his bed and pulls out a thin, well-worn blanket and pillow.

“Here you go. Sleep well then. The bathroom is around to the left. It’s small, but in working order. I don’t have an extra toothbrush or anything, sorry.” He shrugs.

“No problem, I’m gonna go back and pick up a few things after work tomorrow,” I say. “It’ll have to be a covert operation so as not to be seen or heard, you know?”

“I read you loud and clear. I’m setting my alarm for six so, see you then, goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I say and with that, the lights go out.

Chapter 24

The alarm goes off at 6:00 a.m.

My head pounds like a bass drum as I try to wake Kevin. He’s still in la-la land. He has to have some aspirin or something similar in the bathroom. If I thought the smell of his apartment was bad, the condition of his bathroom is horrifying. The drywall on the ceiling has fallen down. Several years’ worth of toothpaste foam has dried onto the mirror of the medicine cabinet. I tear off a piece of toilet paper and open it.

There’s a bottle of Tylenol that has expired, but I grab two. My bladder is full, but as I approach the toilet, apprehension and a bit of nausea grip me. This bathroom makes me think I may come down with cholera or at least a bad case of diarrhea. My ass cheeks and nasal passages tighten when I raise the toilet seat and gaze upon a nasty piece of shit inside. I put the seat down fast and piss in the sink.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

A shower is definitely out of the question. As I go back to put my clothes on, Kevin begins to rouse. The room smells of urine and whiskey. Some food or coffee is in order before I vomit.

“Kevin, listen, I’m gonna run to the diner, and I’ll meet you at the job, okay?”

“Okay, Mike, see you in a bit,” he answers groggily.

I sit in my truck and gather my thoughts. What have I done?

You’re reduced to staying with a sloppy, drunken, piss-faced guy who you don’t know intimately. Mike, you’re deep in the shit factory now.

How do I redeem myself and crawl out of this hole I’ve dug? The only thing that comes to mind is going back to Terry and laying myself at her feet.

I pick up the usual three coffees and proceed to the jobsite. Tuchi is already there when I arrive. He most likely just got here himself, but he makes it seem like he’s been here for an hour.

“Here’s a coffee,” I say, and place it at the side of the work area.

“You’re late, man,” he says, but I don’t respond.

This present job is a small addition to a house and we’re well toward the end of it. The walls are up. The roof is on. We have to put on siding and then the exterior is finished. Kevin does most of the interior stuff like drywall and floors since he’s older. We keep him away from a lot of the outside work. Kevin pulls up late as usual. Tuchi comes down from his ladder and approaches both of us.

“You know, I’m fucking sick and tired of you two assholes showin’ up late every fucking day! Who’s gotta be tha’ grown-up around here, huh?” Tuchi spews.

“Oh, you’re a grown-up now, are you? Since when?” I ask.

“Since I run tha’ job is since when.” He walks in my direction.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“And this is from the guy who knocks up his girlfriend and won’t take ownership of it. You’ll take ownership of everything else, though, will you?” I say right in his face.

“Be careful, Mikey, I could have left your ass in Nam.” He glares at me. “Who’s the guy that always got your ass outta dicey situations, huh? Who’s tha’—”

“Who’s tha’ guy that dragged your ass from the jungle while you’re begging me to slit your throat? Who’s that guy, Tuchi?” I spout.

“Yeah, yeah—big hero and all with your medals and what not,” he says. “Okay, mister war hero, thanks for tha’ billionth time, and get back ta’ work.” He waves his arms and turns to leave.

I throw my work glove at the back of his head. He spins around and drops me with a roundhouse kick. It hurts a little. It hurts more that we’re fighting. I leap to my feet and bull rush him, slamming his body into the ground hard. From behind, a mitt grabs my collar. Kevin has a hold of both of us like a puppeteer working his marionettes.

“All right, you two, enough, stop tha’ bullshit and let’s get this effin’ job in tha’ bag,” Kevin says, and then lets us go.

“Okay, okay!” Tuchi yells. “Just do your jobs and leave me tha’ fuck alone.” He goes back to work in silence. Now may be the time to finally go into business for myself.

Tuchi remains unapproachable, even though I’ve tried several times. He’ll talk to me only if it pertains to the job.

April goes by, then May arrives, and I haven’t seen Terry or Caitlin either. I’ve avoided Casey’s Tavern as well. Right now, my only company is Kevin. We’ve fallen into a ritual of sorts like two old married people. When work is done, I shower at the local YMCA and return to

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

his place. I thought of trying to clean the bathroom at least, but then realized, I don't have great medical coverage. We share some beer and whiskey while he regales me with his war stories. I reciprocate with my own stories and, frankly, these forthright discussions have been good for me. Not one bad dream has visited me since staying here with Kevin.

I made up my mind to see Terry and my mom on Mother's Day, hoping to start to repair the damage I created on Easter. Because this holiday always falls on a Sunday, I have a plan that involves church.

Kevin and I attend the nine o'clock service since I know they both will be there, too. I wait in ambush at the back of the church with two bouquets of flowers, one each for Terry and my mother. Caitlin is the first to spot me.

"There's Michael, Mum, Michael's here!" she squeals.

"Yes, luv, calm down, I see him," Terry answers. I present her with the flowers.

"Happy Mother's Day, Terry," I say.

"Thank you, Michael. How ye' been then? All is well with ye'?"

"Oh, yeah, all is well, you?"

"Yes, all is well. Maybe, ye' coulda brought yourself around and checked if ye' cared ta'."

"I, I guess I . . . I thought you needed to have some time to yourself is all," I reply.

My mom comes into view down the aisle. She notices me and stops. "Happy Mother's Day, Mom." I thrust the flowers in her direction, and she accepts them.

"Thank you," she says as James comes down the aisle.

"Mike boy, how ye' been, lad?" he asks.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Good, James, all is well. Well, not *all* is well, but most is well.” I throw Terry a look.

She bites her lip and scans the ground.

“Mum, can Michael come for dinner tonight, please, Mum?” Caitlin asks as she pulls at Terry’s pant leg.

“Well, that depends on Aunt Marion and Uncle James. We can’t invite any old fool off tha’ street ta’ dinner now, can we?” Terry gives my mom a sideways glance.

“Come over at five o’clock, I guess,” my mom says.

“Michael’s comin’ for dinner, Michael’s comin’ for dinner.” Caitlin jumps around like a baby kangaroo as we all pass through the vestibule.

She’s so adorable, this little girl. Perhaps she’ll help me wedge my way back into Terry’s heart. Maybe, she can work on my mother’s as well. I hope for both.

“Thanks for tha’ flowers,” Terry says. She whisks past me, smells them, and throws an inviting glance in my direction. Kevin grabs my arm.

“Mike, maybe you’re back in her good graces,” he says.

“I hope so. Listen, do you have an iron?”

“Yeah, I have one, but it doesn’t work, sorry.”

“Great, I have to do some laundry and iron a shirt for later. You know, I’ll sneak downstairs at my mom’s and throw in a load a’ wash, Terry’s been staying upstairs since the fire anyway. Kevin, they’ll never know I was there.”

“I hope so for your sake,” he says with a smile.

“Gotta go. I’ll see ya later.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

I park the truck a block away and head to the house. The spare key still lies in its hiding place, and I'm in.

Be quiet, Mike.

The hallway is gone now. Major renovations are in progress on the place. Why didn't they call me and Tuchi? Oh, yeah, we are personae non gratae. Should I have expected any less? Where are my clothes then?

My bladder is full, so I head to the bathroom. No changes here yet, but the smoke smell is gone. That's a good sign. What will I wear later, jeans and a buttoned-down Oxford?

Mike, you don't own a shirt like that. Jeans and a tee shirt are always fine—no, not for tonight. You need something special to make an impression. What? Relax, Mike, it will come together. Don't stress.

Someone knocks on the door. I remain silent.

"Michael, is that you?" It's Terry. Remain as quiet as a mouse. "Michael Walsh, if you're in there, show yourself. Don't be a coward your whole life, please," she says.

I open the door. Terry holds the broom in her hand. I back away.

"So, tha' ghost has reappeared then, is it so?" She comes inside and points the broomstick at me. Snatching the broom, I then snap it in half across my thigh. Her face goes ashen, and I back her up against the wall.

"No more broomstick, Terry," I say as I throw it to the floor.

She slaps my face. It stings, but it hurts so good to be around this woman. Her fiery spirit and power motivate me.

"That's for chasin' that tart Beth around while you're all chubbed up," she says.

I place my hands under her armpits and lift her up against the wall.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“What you gonna do now?” I ask her.

“I’ll kill ye’, Michael, I will, if ye’ don’t kiss me.”

She wraps her legs around my body, we kiss, and my soul fills with her intoxicating essence. We break the kiss, and I press against her hard. Her breasts are in my face now and I bite the buttons off her shirt. One by one, I pluck them off. Her shirt falls open to expose her round breasts, hiding inside a lacy white bra. Terry slides down the wall till her feet meet the ground. She lets me undo her bra, and it’s cast aside. She begins to weep. I reach for her chin.

“What? Why are you crying? Don’t you want this to happen?” I ask.

She nods her head.

“Well then, why are you so sad?”

“I’m not sad, Michael. I’m happy my babies will have you as their father. She plants her face in my chest.

“What?”

“Ye’ heard me. I’m havin’ your babies, Michael, someday,” she cries, “and I want you to be their father. Please don’t abandon me and leave me tha’ way Tuchi left Sharon. It’s not right. It’s not fair. I forgive ye’ for any transgressions ye’ may have done,” Terry says. “I know ye’ never stuck your willy in that tart on Easter. I know ye’ love me. Don’t ye’, Michael?” she asks with fear in her voice. I drop to my knees.

“I’m ready for this,” I whisper. “I’m ready for anything you have that comes my way, Terry.” With that, she slides down to where I kneel and embraces me. “Will you marry me, Terry O’Mahoney?”

She glances up at me and nods her head yes. Somehow, at this moment, she has become my family. She’s everything. We share a passionate kiss, long and ardent.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

She breaks away from me, gets up, and locks the door. She grabs her belt buckle and undoes it, then she undoes the top button of her jeans. I lie back on the floor and give her a smile. She smiles back, takes hold of her zipper and down it goes in one fluid motion. Terry begins to wriggle her jeans down past her hips and then past her thighs. Her white lace panties glow in the dim light of the room. She needs to steady herself with a hand on the wall as she kicks off the jeans in my direction. I applaud her performance.

“Thank you, kind sir. I’ll be dancin’ here all week. Stand up, please,” she commands.

I oblige.

She waves me over toward her with both hands. She undoes my jeans button and zipper. When her eyes meet mine, they display unconditional love. We both peel the jeans past my knees, and they fall to the ground. Terry pulls down my underwear past my ankles and off. My cock becomes erect. She takes hold of it and guides it into her moist mouth. She slides her lips down the shaft, and my cock is deep inside her throat now. Then her lips glide back up, sucking every inch of me.

Holy crap, Mike. Maintain your composure.

She releases me and comes to her feet.

“I’m not what ye’ call an oral expert, just ta’ let ya know,” she says.

“You could’ve fooled me. I give you a ten for execution alone,” I rave.

“Oh, shut up and let’s shag, please, Michael,” Terry says urgently.

She pushes me onto the floor, climbs on top of me, and begins to grind against my groin with her pelvis.

“Take off your panties,” I say.

“If ye’ wanna get inta’ my giblets, rip ’em off a’ me.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Are you sure? They’re not expensive and all?”

“I got ’em at Kmart for a dollar ninety-nine.” She grabs my chin hard with one hand.

“Rip ’em ta’ pieces if ye’ want me, Michael.”

Clutching her panties, I then pull the crotch away. Terry continues to slide her pelvis up and toward my face. I know what she wants. Unlike her, I consider myself an oral sex maestro.

I clasp both her butt cheeks and pull her pussy onto my face. My tongue begins to probe every wet, juicy morsel of it. It plunges inside her like an untamed snake. Next, I explore her clitoris with slow, deliberate strokes. Terry chirps with excitement the moment my tongue comes upon this erect piece of flesh. I have her complete attention now.

“Stay right there, Michael,” she calls out in a deep, throaty voice.

My tongue’s pace continues to build to a fever pitch as though I were Jimmy Hendrix playing his guitar. “Jeysus, don’t stop,” she sighs as her thighs clamp around my head.

Her fleshy womanhood throbs with pleasure as I devour it. Her feminine juices drive me forward with a vengeance for several minutes. Then, finally, she orgasms.

“Michael, oh Jeysus, Michael, you’re a wonder! You’re a wonder ye’ are now,” she declares.

She slides down my body till her face meets mine. She reaches down and slips my cock inside her drenched pussy. She grabs my hair and pulls my head to one side and begins to suck on my neck as though it’s her mother’s bosom. Terry then begins to slide up and down on my throbbing shaft. Her passion is alarming, but at the same time, I know we are where we should be in space and time.

“Terry, you’re gonna kill me, woman,” I say in her ear.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“It’s a brilliant way ta’ go, ain’t it then?” she says. “Ye’ don’t know if you’re comin’ or goin’, do ye’? I think you’ll be comin’ soon,” she whispers.

With a few more vigorous thrusts of her pelvis, I come inside her. She then slides off of me and onto the floor. We both lay next to each other in two heaps of complete exhaustion.

“You wanna have my baby then?” I ask her.

“Are ye’ okay with it?”

“I love you, Terry, and we’re gonna be a family. What’s not to like about that?”

“I didn’t know if you’d follow your buddy Tuchi down another path, ye’ know?”

“Listen, me and Tuchi had a big fight the night of the fire. I told him that I love you and couldn’t lose you, and he thought it was all a put-on or something,” I say. “We don’t talk much anymore unless we have to for work.”

“Ye’ said that about me?”

“Oh yeah. I went to hit him. He can’t mess with my woman.”

“Oh ye’ did?” Terry asks with a fiendish smile. “You’re my knight in shining armor now, ain’t ye’ then, Michael?”

“Oh yeah,” I reply as I tickle her ribs and make her shriek with laughter.

“Stop, please. They’ll hear us upstairs,” Terry pleads. I release her and climb on top of her. Her face glows with the force of a brilliant star in the sky. The moment takes me, and I caress her face.

“You’re so beautiful here on the bathroom floor. You could be anywhere and still glow the way you do, couldn’t you?” I ask her.

“I’m happy, Michael. I’m so happy.” She kisses the palm of my hand.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I wanna always see that look on your face, Terry. I promise to always keep you happy then. I’ve had enough of the life that didn’t include you—you and Caitlin.”

“I won’t have ta’ worry about ye’ chasin’ around any more dodgy floozies then?” she asks. I shake my head no. “I won’t have ta’ worry about ye’ gettin’ your party on with tha’ white nose-candy neither?”

I nod my head in agreement.

“Brilliant,” she says with the biggest Terry smile.

We remain still for some time as I lay my head upon her chest. Then it dawns on me, I have to do laundry and shower.

“Terry, I forgot, I need some clean clothes. I have to get moving. Do you know where my clothes are, babe?”

“You get in tha’ shower, and I’ll run a load for ye’, okay?”

“Is there time to do two loads? ’Cause I also need some clean underwear,” I say.

“There’s time ta’ do two of everything this afternoon, Michael,” she answers with a devilish grin.

“Where are you goin’ with this?”

“I’m gonna put a load a’ wash in, and then I’m gonna meet ye’ in tha’ shower is where I’m goin’,” she says as she runs her hand through my hair. “Will ye’ be there?” she asks.

“I’m running a shower right now,” I say, and I get to my feet. The shower is on, and I jump in.

“I’ll be right back, Michael.”

“Goodbye,” I say as Terry shuts the door.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

I finish up with my shower, towel off, and wait for Terry's return. She sneaks in the door.

"Listen, Michael, we'll have ta' take a rain check on the second course a' tha' foolin' around, okay?"

Terry stands there in my robe. "Where's my clothes?"

"Here they are. Come and get 'em," I say.

"Now, Michael, I know what'll happen if I get over there by you. Please give me my clothes. We don't have any more time ta' play this game."

"Oh, this is no game, babe. I'm dead serious. You ain't gettin' these back unless you come here and take 'em."

"Do I need ta' get tha' broom then?" she asks with a smile.

"The broom is useless now, so come on. They're right here. All you have to do is take 'em from me." I wave her clothes in the air.

With that, Terry rushes me, and I grab her. She surrenders to my grasp and we kiss. I lift her and place her butt on the sink. She laughs a hearty laugh.

"Okay, mister troublemaker, out so I can shower, please." She begins to run the water warm and then turns on the showerhead. "Out, please, and put your clothes in tha' dryer." She gestures with a thumb. "Here, wrap a towel around yourself. You're a dangerous man when you're naked." She smiles and waves me away.

Later, Terry shows me the redone apartment and points out all the changes with the new construction. It includes two bedrooms, a proper kitchen with a living room, and would soon include a remodeled bath. She gestures to the alterations, and muses over paint colors like a newlywed decorating her first house.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

We agree to get married August 2, which is two and a half months away. This date allows enough time for the remodeling to be finished. It also gives Terry time to work on my mother and get me back in her good graces.

At least Mother's Day dinner did go well.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 25

The next couple of months race by. Tuchi and I still don't talk much at work. I remain at Kevin's until, hopefully—once the construction finishes—I'll be able to return home. Terry has been playing at Casey's during the mid-week as usual but has also picked up a few nights at more acceptable venues, like a few local restaurants. Tuchi hasn't been at Casey's, I figure, because Sharon has taken over more bartending hours there.

Timmy and Chris haven't been around either. James has had to hire some other dancers to fill the void left by Sharon, Beth, and Chris. It's rumored that Beth still works at Chester's establishment. I hear nasty things about the place, and I'm not surprised. I've seen Tuchi's car parked in the lot once or twice on a Friday. He's more than likely hanging around for Beth is all.

Things between Terry and me couldn't be better. Aside from the fact that we can't live together yet, all is peachy. We go to dinner and she shows me pictures from magazines of furniture and color treatments she likes. For me, to see the happiness on her face, is everything. I've also been giving her driving lessons. Sometimes these lessons can get a bit scary, though.

Memorial Day weekend and the Fourth of July breeze by with the comforting warm temperatures of a New Jersey summer in the highlands. The one negative to this summer is that I don't have Tuchi to pal around with. In some ways, it's easier. The cocaine has faded out of my life and I've come to a sort of understanding with booze. I do enjoy beer, but I've laid off any of the hard liquor for now. A cold beer is great on a hot summer's night.

Our wedding date is still set for one week from tomorrow, August 2. We have decided not to make it a big deal. The mayor will do the honors, and we'll have a small celebration afterward at Casey's. I would normally have had Tuchi as my best man, but maybe I should ask

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Kevin. Caitlin will be the flower girl, and Sharon said she would be happy to be the maid of honor. James will give away the bride.

Today is July 25, a scorcher. It's Terry's birthday, and I take her out to lunch. We find a quiet sandwich shop nearby. The only requirement I have is that the place has air conditioning. On our roofing job that morning, the sun's rays became merciless. You can sweat out ten pounds while the hot sun radiates off a dark shingled surface. I hope the oppressive heat will relent when the sun goes down.

Later that evening, I was planning to help Terry get her sound equipment to a small cafe she plays at on Thursday nights. Tomorrow night she'll play at Casey's.

While we are at lunch, Terry tells me Chester had come around the house that morning and hassled my mom and James over the permit for the construction in the basement. He'd been passing by in his Corvette with Beth. It seems he now has this perverted desire to wield his cop power over building permits. He gave them several tickets when my mother couldn't find the permit. My mother couldn't believe the condition of Beth when Terry confirmed she was the same girl I used to date.

They both went to talk with her because she looked in such a state. Beth ignored Terry, but she became all sugar and smiles for my mom.

When Mom inquired if she was all right, she said, "Oh, I'm fine, Mrs. Walsh. Everything is fine, thanks." My mother had an uneasy feeling about the whole situation, according to Terry. Beth was obviously pregnant and not even remotely healthy looking with track marks along both arms.

When Chester ended their conversation, he hustled Beth back into the car and sped off.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Terry described the vibe she got from Beth as a silent plea for help. She couldn't put her finger on it, but when they drove off, Beth gave her a long, mournful stare. Terry said she appeared like a caged, frightened animal. She saw the humanity in Beth's face, and it struck her hard in the heart as a woman. Terry said a short prayer for her then and there.

Beth apparently lied to me, and the thought that the child may be mine starts to play with my head. I wish someone would pray for me now. I may need some kind of divine intervention soon.

Terry and I got together later in the day for her gig, as planned. I did my usual YMCA shower, then we went for burgers at the Airport Diner. James and my mom babysat Caitlin. Terry's performances are as angelic as always. I had been missing her voice and her bedtime song to Caitlin. One day soon, all three of us, along with a new baby, will be a family.

As we pass by Kevin's, I ask Terry if she wants to see the conditions I've been living in. He's out somewhere, so I let her in.

"Jeysus, Michael, it smells like tha' jacks of a soccer team."

"What?"

"A toilet is what I mean. Is this where ye' been sleepin' then, ye' poor soul? I give ye' credit for standin' the stink. It's a proper horse stable is what it is," Terry says. She moves her gaze from one heap of messy takeout containers on the floor to another pile of dirty clothes in the corner.

"You feel sorry for me then?" I ask.

"Ye' need ta' get a shot a' antibiotics before tha' next time we fool around is what I'm thinkin'."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“You’re already infected, so why don’t we just do it here, now? Besides, he keeps it so cold, I don’t think any germs can survive the frigid conditions.”

“For feck sake, Michael, put your head on straight and look around. I ain’t even takin’ full breaths a’ tha’ air in here for fear of a hospital stay in tha’ near future. I’m so sorry ye’ have ta’ stay here. Can’t ye’ go to a hotel or, or—”

“I can’t afford a hotel week after week, Terry. Kevin was the only person who came to mind when Mom threw me out. He brought me here many years ago, and tha’ place hasn’t changed one bit. Tha’ guy’s a nice guy and all, but he never had a woman in his life or someone ta’ get him outta this bachelor lifestyle. You know how many guys live like this? Tuchi’s place doesn’t smell, but it’s just as messy, let me tell you.”

“Why don’t ye’ help ’em clean tha’ place a bit?”

“I tried some, but I am definitely not into cleaning up after another dude.”

Terry wraps her arms around my waist. “Well, I guess it’s lucky then that I came along and saved ye’.”

“For sure,” I reply. We kiss and as I grab a handful of her butt, the door opens. It’s Kevin.

“Ohhh, crap, sorry. I’ll leave you two once I get my—”

“No, Kevin. Terry was just leaving,” I explain.

“We weren’t gonna stay anyway. I gotta go do my show and, and—” Terry stutters.

“Are you sure?” Kevin asks. “Cause I can go and—”

“No, no, we have to leave—” I say.

“Okay, nice to see you again, Terry.” Kevin smiles.

“Nice ta’ see your apartment. Thanks for puttin’ up Michael.”

“Oh, no problem, anytime. Right, Mike?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“For sure.”

“Listen, ye’ best get me ta’ tha’ show then, Michael.” Terry pulls on my sleeve.

“Kevin, listen, I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Sure, sure.”

Terry and I dash out the door and into my truck. We flash each other a smile. She slides next to me and I begin to show her the same driving game Caitlin and I play. Start the engine. Clutch in, then first gear. Give some gas, now second gear, clutch, etc. Her hand rests on top of mine. Then, I let go of the stick and let her do third and then fourth gear. Terry gives me the biggest smile, and it travels directly to my heart.

The realization that Kevin keeps his apartment frigid hits me hard when I return. He’s a big guy and with this heat wave, he obviously needs the air conditioner cranked high. He has a baseball game on and a beer in his hand.

“Mike, the Yankees are on. Grab a beer. It’s one nothin’ against tha’ Red Sox in tha’ fifth. Home game, Mike, so I think they’ll hold ’em tonight. Guidry’s pitchin’, and he’s havin’ a good game. Can you grab me another beer while you’re there? Thanks.”

“Sure.” I get two cans of Bud and plop down on the couch next to Kevin. We pop our beers and touch the cans together in a toast. It’s clear Kevin has carved out his little corner of the world and is happy in it. Who am I to look down my nose at him or cut him short on my respect? Tomorrow is Friday, and we have to work. Still, we share a few more beers.

Sometime later, I wake up on the couch to find the television still on. Kevin is asleep in his bed. The air inside the apartment is arctic now. Needing something more to warm me, I find my way to the chest at the foot of his bed. A well-worn, thin blanket sits atop the other contents.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Underneath it, my eyes gravitate to an old issue of *Playboy* magazine—May 1961, sixty cents, the cover shows. A photo of a blonde with deep red lipstick adorns the cover. A man's hands cover her eyes. His left hand bears a square Playboy ring, and she peeks between his fingers with a smile.

I open the centerfold to find her in a sheer, long nightgown. She lies stretched out along carpeted steps and glances over her left shoulder at the camera. This is a cool vintage magazine, and I'm intrigued. I place it on the floor and go back to find more. Here's another one, but as I pick it up, several old, black-and-white photos fall out. One shows two young GIs with old M1 rifles. The back reads: Me and James—March, 1944—Italy.

This must be the younger Kevin and my stepfather, James, during the war. Wow, I don't want to invade Kevin's privacy, but he's fast asleep, and he'll never know I snooped. I rummage through a pile of old photographs in the chest; many are from the war, guys in jeeps and GIs on leave at some beach. Then, I come upon a tattered old photo album with a brown leather cover.

I pick the album up, and a photo falls out. The corners are frayed and bent. It's a black and white shot of the same man who was with James in the other photos, except with a woman and a child. The man has his arm over the woman's shoulder, and she is holding a small boy. The adults are smiling at the camera. Behind them, I see the familiar neon sign of Casey's Tavern. On the back it says: Me, Marion, and Mike, 1951.

That's definitely my mother, and the man looks like he could be a younger Kevin. Is that little boy me?

Hold on.

I rush over to the TV's flickering light and sink to my knees. As I turn the pages of this old, worn-out photo album, the contents of my stomach surge into my throat.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Photo after photo show a happy couple with this little boy. Then, I come upon a photo of the old war buddies, pull it from the album and turn it over. On the back, it reads: James and me, 1951, opening day.

I drop the photo and turn toward Kevin.

Tell me this isn't happening. Someone or something, tell me that this is a dream, and I'll wake from it soon. One photograph after another shows various combinations of Kevin, James, and my mother. On one page, a singular photo of the little boy rivets my attention. I pluck it from the corner brackets holding it to the page and turn it over. The writing says: Michael Coye, one year old.

The rest of my stomach contents rise to my mouth and onto the floor. My head begins to pound in time with my heart. I clutch it with both hands but can't stop the onslaught of adrenaline that flushes through my body. The agonizing realization that Kevin may be my father begins to crush in on me. With trembling hands, I shuffle through page after page of photos that all show the start of my life.

No, no, please! Why? I struggle to my feet and have to steady myself. The room spins like a roller coaster.

Take deep breaths and calm down, Mike.

There's a bottle of booze on the table, and I rush to get some down my throat. Open a beer and chase it fast. The beer is gone in seconds. I feel like I could have a fucking heart attack any moment.

The piss-drunk man who sleeps in front of me, who I've known my whole life, is my father?

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

A sheathing anger begins to grip me. My body is wracked with anguish. They've all lied to me my entire life. My life is a lie. I jump to my feet as an uncontrollable flood of angry tears roll down my face. Somehow, I've made it into the bathroom and shut the door behind me. The whiskey tastes good, and I hope it will calm me down.

Every nerve in my body hums with an unspeakable pain. I despise them all now. It feels as though a sinister act has been perpetrated against me. The betrayal is absolute. Someone has to give me answers. I put the whiskey on the toilet tank and bound out.

“Wake the fuck up!” I kick his bed.

“What tha' hell!” Kevin blurts out. “What's goin' on? Mike? What's with tha' gun? Mike, put tha' gun away! What tha' fuck are ya up to?”

I grab the photo album and throw it at him.

“That's what's up. I found this in that old chest of yours.”

“Well, you got a lotta nerve rummaging through my stuff,” he says.

“I've got a lotta nerve? What about you? What about my mother?”

“Okay, okay, calm down and then we can talk, okay, Mike?”

“Explain the photos. Explain all the years, Kevin! Are you my father?”

“Well. . . .”

“It's an easy answer.”

He can't seem to look me in the eye. “Yes, yes, Mike, I'm your father. I—”

“All these years! All these fuckin' years, you all been keeping up this big lie! Never once, ever—you never thought that maybe, maybe I coulda had a dad like all the other kids?” My words choke me as they spew from my mouth.

“I always loved you like my son, Mike. I always—”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Bullshit! My entire life, my mother explained that my dad ran away to Alaska when I was one and—”

“That’s true. I did go to Alaska, but I came back. I came back for you, to be with you. I—”

“You’re a living piece of shit, Kevin—Dad,” I spit out.

“That’s true. I guess I was such a piece a’ shit that me and your mom couldn’t make it work. We couldn’t make anything work after a while.”

“So I get to go through life thinking my dad abandoned me and is dead? That’s the price you made me pay for your fucked-up relationship with my mother?”

“I never abandoned you, Mike. I came back to be a part of your life, and I have been! Who took you to your first baseball game? Who taught you how to throw that football the way you did? I sent you a birthday card every birthday of your life,” he says. “Mike, I always been here, just not in the way that you may have wanted or needed. I—”

“I should get my Colt and end your pathetic life right now!”

Kevin raises his huge hulk of a body to its feet and approaches me.

“You’re already dead to me anyhow. Look at you,” I tell him. “You smell like piss and look like a homeless person.” I back away.

“Well, now you know why your mom never wanted to tell you. I’m an embarrassment, I guess, and you’re better off for it, even though you may not think so. You could take my life right now, Mike, but killing me won’t solve any of your problems. *Your* nightmares and *my* problems come from killing other people in the wars,” he says. “Killing another person doesn’t solve anything.”

“Fuck you, Kev—Dad!”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 26

I jump in my truck and drive away. In the rearview mirror, Kevin stands at the door in his underwear. The truck takes me toward Limestone Waters. I'm not sure why, but some force pulls me toward its solace. The radio plays "Sway" by the Rolling Stones. A snare drum bangs out a beat which reinforces my deranged thoughts.

*Did you ever wake up to find
A day that broke up your mind. . . .*

The sun will rise soon. The clock in the truck shows 6:10 a.m. I feel like a vampire who's ready to take his last victim before he crawls back into a cold, dark coffin. There must be a way to make some kind of sense out of my life right now. There's still a vial of coke in the glove box. I pull over and find it. The spoon is filled and put to my nose, but something stops me. I decide to get a bottle of whiskey at the all-night liquor store nearby.

I park the truck up the dirt road toward where Sergey would usually disappear into the woods. My feet lead me down the path toward the sandy beach. The heat is oppressive, even at this early hour. My clothes come off, and I jump into the chilled spring. At first, the cold water is refreshing, then my legs cramp up. It hurts as I struggle to get back to the beach.

Sergey's voice comes from the shore, "Mike, grab the branch!" I reach to grasp a piece of wood he extends out to me. As I get closer to the beach, where I should be able to stand in the shallow water, I find I can't.

The cramps are excruciating as I crawl out from the water.

"What are you doing up here so early?" Sergey asks, kneeling beside me.

"I couldn't sleep, so I figured I'd come and have a swim."

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“It’s kinda early ta’ be drinkin’ whiskey, ain’t it, Mike?”

“Yeah well, I figured . . . well—maybe I should leave.”

“No way, man. Stay and relax for a while till you get it together. Just don’t get back in tha’ water, okay?”

“Sure thing, Sergey, no worries,” I tell him.

He hikes up the path and disappears. My body relaxes as the suffocating summer morning temperature begins to warm me.

The sand and my surroundings bake from the hot sun. It feels like it may be noon or so. Once I pull myself together and get back to the truck, the clock shows 2:15 p.m. It’s hard to believe I’ve been out here on the beach for that long. My body shut down. Even though a deep wound festers inside me, I’m a bit refreshed now. The whiskey was never opened and that’s for the best. Sergey appears from the woods.

“How you feelin’, Mike?”

“Okay, I guess. My body needed to rest.”

He shakes my hand. “Listen, I’ve seen that cop car up here again, so be careful next time you come,” he warns me.

“Do you think it’s that cop who towed your truck?”

“Looks like the guy,” he says.

“Sounds like Chester. He’s up to something. Listen, don’t mix it up with that whack job, Sergey.”

“Sure thing, Mike, see you soon,” he says, and then he’s gone.

When I drive back toward the end of the trail, Terry stands there. I roll the window down.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“What are you doin’ here?” I ask her.

“Kevin called your mother and told her about your discovery,” she says. “He told her you were really, really upset. I can’t blame ye’.”

“Is that James’s car? You don’t know how to drive!”

“Well, I borrowed it ta’ see if you’re okay and you are, thank God.”

“You don’t have a license.”

“Oh, for feck sake, Michael, I don’t give a crap about that. I wanna be sure my future husband is alive and well. Are ye’ well, Michael? Are ye’ okay then?” she asks.

“I still feel myself slipping down some rabbit hole. I need something. I . . . I’m so—”

Terry takes hold of me and squeezes so tight that she takes the breath from me.

“I’ll help ye’. I’m right here in front a’ ye’, Michael. If you’ll take tha’ help?” Terry pulls back and examines my face.

“You’re the one bright light in my life right now. Terry, I have something to tell you.”

She looks down and notices the Colt.

“What are ye’ doin’ with a gun sitting next ta’ ye’? You’re not gettin’ all crazy and homicidal now, are ye’, Michael?”

“No, no.”

“Hand it over,” she demands. “I ain’t gonna be worryin’ about you waving a gun around.” I reluctantly give the gun to her. “Any bullets, if you please?” She holds out a hand. I get the clips from the glove box and hand them to her as well. “Your mother said she would like ta’ talk with you.”

“It’s not happening, Terry. Fuck ’em all. I, I can’t—”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Listen, let’s go and get some late lunch at tha’ diner, and we’ll talk about tha’ wedding, and we won’t talk of anyone else but us. It’s gonna be you and me against tha’ world from now on anyways, so feck ’em all then.” She grabs my face and kisses me.

After lunch, we lingered at the diner without many words spoken. It felt good to eat, and the food sparked my energy and cleared my mind.

Terry drives back to my mom’s as I follow. Her driving sucks. I park around the corner to avoid any family. She picks up her guitar and sound equipment, and we head to Casey’s now in my truck. A light summer drizzle falls from the sky. It’s refreshing and perhaps it will cool off this oppressive, unhinged day.

As I enter the bar, I lock eyes with Sharon. She’s behind the bar tonight and a radiant glow surrounds her. She waves me over in a frantic fashion.

“Mikey, how are you? Come here and give me a smooch. Where you been?”

“Oh, here and there, I guess. Boy, you’re really showing now, huh? When’s the baby due?”

“Late September, early October—seen your buddy Tuchi lately?” she asks with a bit of sarcasm. “He’s definitely avoided this place.”

“Only at work and even then, we haven’t been gettin’ along much.”

“You finally woke up to the fact that he’s an asshole?” she asks.

“Now, Sharon, put the claws away ’cause, ah, I definitely don’t wanna get scratched by them, please.”

“Oh, you’re safe, Mikey. Terry saved you, and you’re better off, so don’t fuck it up with her.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Have you seen Beth?”

I hear she’s workin’ at that cop’s place as a bartender, and I heard she’s as pregnant as I am,” she says with a small grin. “Any idea who the father is?”

“You may be lookin’ at him.”

“Really?” She looks in Terry’s direction and back at me. “I’m not surprised. Does Terry know this?”

I let her question float in the air and drop at my feet. “Okay—listen, I have to talk with Terry before I go. Love you, babe, and we’ll talk soon, I’m sure.”

“Okay then, bye, Mikey,” she says and blows me a kiss.

Seeing Sharon has somehow galvanized me. How did she pull herself out of the black hole while Beth—she keeps sliding deeper into the pit?

Chester. Chester is the answer.

He’s like an anaconda that bites your head and wraps his body around you to squeeze the life force out. I’d seen it in Vietnam. He has no remorse doing it, either. He enjoys it all. He’s a cruel, malignant growth on us all. I have to help Beth somehow. In many ways, I love her. She may be carrying a child of mine. She has no one in her life, and I have to help her. I have to own up to the fact that I’m probably the one who got Beth pregnant.

As I approach Terry, my gut twists into a tight ball. I may puke or I may shit myself—or both.

“Terry?”

“Yes, luv?” She turns to me. “What’s wrong? It looks like ye’ seen a ghost.”

I take hold of her. “You love me madly, right?”

“Of course I do.” She puts a hand to my face. “What’s wrong?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Well, ya know Beth, right?” I say, my voice quivering.

“How could I forget that one?” she says with a smile.

“Well, I um—” I swallow hard. “I may be the father of the child she carries.” Terry’s smile melts into an open-mouth stare. “I thought she got an abortion, but, uh—but—”

She grabs my shirt with her left hand as her right hand slides off my face and forms into a fist. I know what’s coming and close my eyes. Her fist smashes into my nose with an awful thud. I open my eyes as she gets to the bar. The blood drips slowly from my face and spatters the floor around my feet. She must have taken boxing lessons as a kid, for sure.

Sharon comes to her and pours her a shot of whiskey. Terry downs it fast and slams the glass down on the bar violently. Sharon hands her a bar rag and Terry heads back my way.

She throws the towel at me. “Clean yourself up, you pathetic fool.”

“No kicking, promise?”

“I promise.”

“Terry, this was all before we met.” I blow my nose in the towel.

“All cleaned up now?” she asks. “Let me see. Did your nose stop bleedin’?”

I lower the towel. “Terry, I—”

She slaps me across the face. “That’s for bein’ the world champion of chancers I’ve ever met in my entire life. Your nose is bleedin’ again, chancer.”

“I tried to tell you so many times. Then, she lied to me and told me she took care of it and I—”

“You better thank tha’ saints above that she didn’t terminate that pregnancy.” She closes in on me and I remain on guard. “And you’re gonna take responsibility for that child, Michael.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Yes, and I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but when you told me you saw her and she was pregnant, I knew I had to own up to it.”

Terry takes the blood-soaked towel and wipes my face. “Be the man you know you have to be.”

“That’s what I came to tell you.” I take her face in my hands. “Terry, I have to get her away from Chester. She’ll die in that place. I’ve gotta go and get her out of there!”

“Michael, are ye’ sure ye’ can do this? Don’t let me worry over ye’ again,” she says.

“If I don’t call you here in an hour or so, get my Colt, and go to Chester’s bar and find me, promise?”

She winks and points a finger of reassurance at me. Sharon waves goodbye as I hurry out the door. Chester’s bar isn’t far from Sussex. He redid an old shots-and-beer joint that had been boarded up for some time. We all wondered where he got the money to do it. When his mom disappeared while we were in high school, he had no money or help—or friends either by then.

Trepidation flows over me as I pull into the lot. I turn off the truck and sit still for a moment to gather my thoughts. Tuchi’s car happens to be parked nearby. I know he’s been avoiding Casey’s and me. Losing his friendship still grates at me every day. The short walk, through the drizzle and heat, crystallizes my resolve. The building has been renovated and turned into a glossy, neon-clad establishment. The sign flashes Titillations in red and purple colors.

Once inside, the sleazy sights and sounds fill my senses. The music blares as multiple girls dance in skimpy outfits on the stage. A sinister haze of dim-colored lights and cigarette smoke permeates the place. When I peer to my right, I see Timmy nursing a beer at the bar. He notices me and raises his eyebrows.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Timmy, how the fuck are you, man?” I shout over the music.

“Hey, Mike, what are you doin’ here?”

“I came for Beth. You seen her?”

“Oh, yeah, she’s here, but she’s in a bad way, Mike. She’s pregnant, but she still parties her ass off.” He points to my face. “What happened to you?”

“Mike, how are you?” From behind me, I hear Chris’s voice. “I miss you. How you been?” she asks. “Mike, your nose, it’s—”

“I’m okay. Why are you dancin’ here, Chris? We need you back at Casey’s.”

She hands me a few napkins.

“Just don’t cozy up to Chester is all, please,” I tell her.

“For sure. Listen, I gotta dance now, but we can talk later, okay?” She kisses me on the cheek and runs off.

“Timmy, I know you’re sweet on Chris. You better keep an eye on her in this place,” I tell him.

“Absolutely, Mike, but she’s not as helpless as she looks, you know.”

“Okay. Listen, where’s Beth?”

“She was just behind the bar a minute ago,” he says.

Beth comes back around, behind the bar. She is not well. Her belly has popped, but the sexy, luscious Beth parts are gone. I know she’s in trouble.

I see Tuchi coming around the corner of the bar. “Tuchi, what’s happened to Beth, man?”

“I don’t know. Somebody knocked her up I guess,” he says. “Any ideas who it might be?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Listen, let’s kiss and make up already, please. I’m gonna try and get her outta here tonight. I can’t let Chester seize one more soul,” I tell him.

We hug and he gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“I miss you, bro,” he says. “What happened? Did Terry kick ya in the face?”

“Ha ha. Can you back me up, or what?”

“Oh, yeah. You know that I been itchin’ for a good fight. I been hangin’ around here figuring what to do about her.” He calls over the bartender. “Give us two shots of Jameson’s and a beer chaser, please.” Tuchi slaps down a twenty-dollar bill on the bar. “I’m happy we’re back into the ass-kickin’ business, bro. It’s been too long. Remember, Mike, efficiency of motion, okay? Chester’s goons aren’t gonna just let you leave with her.”

“Hold on, guys. Let’s think this thing out for a while,” Timmy chimes in.

“Fuck you, Timmy,” Tuchi says.

“Listen, Timmy, you sit back and let me and Tuchi handle this, okay?” I say.

“Are you sure, Mike?” he asks.

I bend down and kiss Timmy full on the lips. His eyes go wide. Me and Tuchi do a high five. Beth sees me and comes over.

“Whadda you want, Mikey?” she asks.

“Beth, let’s go outside and talk, please,” I say.

“Wow, Batman and Robin have come to save my ass. Is that what this is?” she says.

“You’ll never see this on TV, folks. If you wanna fuck in the parkin’ lot, it’ll be one hundred bucks, up front, boys. No more fucking you two for free.” She holds up a defiant hand.

“I just wanna get you away from Chester’s all-the-drugs-you-can-shoot banquet hall, is what,” I say. “You shouldn’t be here doing drugs in this condition.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Look at you, Mikey, all nice and concerned and all. Why would I—?”

One of Chester’s biker goons comes behind the bar and takes Beth by the arm. This guy is the biker Tuchi knows from his club days, and he’s massive.

“Let go of me!” Beth cries.

Tuchi jumps over the bar and tries to stop the thug. The monster slaps him down to the ground with a brass knuckle punch to the nose. I jump the bar and break a bottle over the goon’s head, and he proceeds to put an elbow into my face. As I get to my feet, I see him drag Beth toward the back of the place and into a room labeled: Private. Blood flows from Tuchi’s nose, and he has to collect himself for a second. He wipes his face with his tee shirt.

“Bro, let’s go,” Tuchi says. We run to the door where Beth disappeared. It’s still open and when we enter, Chester steps out of the shadows. His goons pull their guns as Chester raises his hands.

“Hold on, guys, hold up. These are my old friends from town, remember? It’s cool, relax,” Chester says. “You don’t look so good, fellas. Sit down and see what your girl is all about.”

With their guns still pointed at us, his bruisers shuffle us onto a couch in what appears to be a VIP room. Dark wood and an eerie purple black light flood my eyes. I wipe the blood from my nose onto the cheap velour of the couch.

“Chester, you motherfucker, I’ll—” He pulls out his revolver and points it at me.

“Shut tha’ fuck up, Mike, or I’ll have to kill you just to quiet your foul mouth. There’s a lady present, for God’s sake.”

One of his goons chuckles.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

He sits Beth down at a small table and begins to open a packet of white powder. Chester proceeds to lay out several lines on the table's glass surface. He takes a straw from the small bar along the side wall and snorts one, then another line in quick succession. "Whoa, that's good shit man!" He rubs his nose.

Tuchi and I look at each other, and he gives me a bloody, untroubled smile. Chester takes out another small bag of powder and waves it in Beth's face. "This is what you been waitin' for, ain't it now?" he asks her.

He hands it to Beth. She retrieves a spoon from her bag with a little piece of cotton. She then dumps a small amount of the tan powder into the spoon followed by a drop of liquid from her drink. Chester lights a flame under it with a lighter.

"Mike, come here. I can't help her anymore, I'm afraid of needles. Go figure, right? Come, and help this poor girl get her fix on," he says.

I hesitate in silence. He gets off his knees and approaches me. He cocks his revolver and points it at my forehead. "Get up and help the bitch, will you?" He gestures with his free hand. I get to my feet and go to her.

"It's okay, Mikey. I need it anyways. I'll be okay. Just follow my instructions and we'll be fine," Beth says. A solitary tear rolls down her cheek.

"Put on that song she likes," Chester shouts to the second henchman who stands near the jukebox. The goon pushes two buttons.

Wind chimes sound. Then, a haunting, flickering guitar slashes the room in two. It's so loud, I can't think. Robin Trower's "Bridge of Sighs" grips the core of me. It sends me back to a violent time in my life. The slow groove reminds me, I killed people once, and I'm still capable of killing. It chills me and comforts me in the knowledge that I'm a survivor.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

The sun don't shine. . . .

The notes sound so far away, and it helps me detach from what I would feel as a caring, human being. I want to end this agonizing experience, for Beth and for me.

I kneel in front of her, and she hands me a syringe. “Take two hands and draw up the liquid in tha’ spoon. Pull back on the plunger, good—okay, slow, okay, you got it, Mikey.” She stares at me with mournful eyes as the guitar overhead screams like a dinosaur taking its last breath. The menacing animal pushed deep inside me for years rears his hideous head.

He looks like the devil to my mind’s eye. He may be my brother, or he may be Chester’s father. But I know it is me.

Been a long time crossing bridge of sighs. . . .

Mike, you will skin every inch of Chester’s flesh off his body like the Vietcong did with us in Vietnam.

I’m prepared to do it, I am. Beth wraps a small flexible band around her arm and grabs my hand. She guides the syringe toward a vein that’s popped, and together, we place the needle into it. She plunges its contents into her vein. Her head leans back as I stand up.

“Thanks, man. She’s our product tester,” Chester says. “If she pisses herself, I know it’s good shit.”

“I’ll kill you one day soon, Chester. I swear,” I tell him.

“You coulda done it in Nam, man. Why didn’t you do me then, Mike? You know why, bro? You’re a pussy.” He waves his gun at me.

Someone knocks on the door. Chester points his revolver and prompts the biker flunky to answer.

“Hi, my name is Terry, and I’d like ta’ suck Chester’s dick, please.”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Oh, whadda we have here? Mrs. Mike Walsh, his favorite pussy!” Chester exclaims.

Terry thrusts her way in, pulls out the Colt, and points it at Chester. From behind her, other people scramble into the room.

“DEA, DEA, freeze!” someone orders.

It’s Timmy and Chris—and they are both packing. The biker goons open fire on them and Chris lays one out dead with a shot to the head. Timmy shoots the other gorilla in the shoulder. They point their guns at us, aiming back and forth.

“Drop your guns!” Chris yells.

“I taught you how to dance, bitch, relax,” Beth slurs as she pisses herself. Chester grabs her and puts his revolver to her head.

“I’ll kill this bitch now if you don’t let me leave!” he shouts.

He drags Beth toward the back exit.

“Let him go, Timmy,” I say.

“Listen to the man, and I’ll just back out slow,” Chester says.

He opens the back door and leaves. No other shots are fired.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chapter 27

“Holy crap, Terry!” I exclaim. “Were you gonna shoot Chester?”

“I tried, but I had tha’ safety on.” With that, she releases the safety and pulls the trigger. A round goes off into the ceiling, and Chris and Timmy point their guns at her. “It’s workin’ fine,” Terry says.

“Drop the gun,” Timmy yells.

I take the Colt from Terry, release the clip, and hand it back to her.

“Hand it over, Terry,” Timmy says as his gun remains aimed at her. “I told you at the bar who Chris and I were, and you still put us all at risk by doing what you did.”

“First of all, who are you, Timmy? DEA, for real?” I ask him.

“For real, Mike. We been watchin’ this place, with the help of the local police force, for quite some time,” Timmy says. “Chester hasn’t exactly been a model citizen . . . or cop.”

“Listen, guys, let’s get this motherfucker,” I say. “He’ll kill Beth if we ain’t on him soon, Timmy. Let’s get this asshole.”

Timmy looks at Chris and they both look back at us. “We can’t let you two get involved in this stuff,” Timmy says.

“Ain’t we friends here, Timmy?” Tuchi asks. “Chester should have died in Nam, man. Mike and me were Special Forces, man. We both know things about him, sick things. Let’s go!” he says.

“What do you think, babe?” Chris asks Timmy.

“If you think we can trust these two idiots, sugarloaf, I can trust them, I figure.”

Chris smiles and nods her head.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Great, so let’s go. I may know where Chester’s headed, if I’m thinking right,” I say.

“Hey, Chris, you were rockin’ the G-string tonight,” Tuchi says to her.

“Do you want me to shoot your ass, Tuchi?”

“Sugarloaf, lock and load, babe,” Tuchi tells her.

“Can you find him, Mike?” Timmy asks.

“Yeah, I know where he’s goin’. He’s headed for Limestone Waters.”

Terry tosses me the Colt. I pop the clip back in and shove it in my waistband. “Let’s take Tuchi’s car so we don’t look like G-men, okay?” I say.

“Great, let’s go,” Tuchi says.

“Let me call backup to clean this mess up first,” Timmy says. “Chief Richards has been helping us with this investigation.”

We rush out into a steady rain. Tuchi gets into the driver’s seat. I get in next to him. Timmy, Chris, and Terry cram into the back. When Timmy slides in, Tuchi’s dog, Assassino, jumps in Terry’s lap and greets Timmy with a ravenous chomp of the jowls.

“Is this dog cool, Tuchi?” Timmy asks.

“He’s cool if you’re cool,” Tuchi replies.

Tuchi leaves the lot fast and with purpose. When I turn around toward Timmy, the dog is face-to-face with him and stares him down.

“I like how you did your eyes, Chris. It’s pretty,” Terry tells her.

“Oh—thanks,” Chris says.

“Listen, Tuchi, pull up to where we need to go, and Chris and I will take the lead, fellas. You guys stay with the car, and I’ll give you my radio,” Timmy says.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Timmy, you’re a nerd, and you’re this DEA guy? You must have had some military background, dude?” Tuchi asks.

“I was a Green Beret during the Korean War,” he says. “Special Forces, eh, Tuchi? I knew you were special, but more like in a special needs way.”

“Very funny, Timmy. See my dog there?” Tuchi asks. “It only takes one word and you’ll have no face left, so . . .”

As we head along the dirt road toward Limestone Waters, I see that my guess was right. We pull up behind Chester’s black Corvette. I jump from the car and pull out the Colt. The thought that this gun has saved my life many times comforts me. It feels reassuring in my hand.

Timmy and Chris crowd around us. “Hold on, guys,” Timmy says. “I know you two are ex-military and all, but I can’t let you up there and let this thing get outta control. I mean—”

“Fuck you, Timmy,” I say. “I’m goin’ in to save Beth. She’s pregnant with my child. Whatever happens to Chester is collateral damage.”

“Listen, bro, we been here before. I’ll go right and you go straight, cool?” Tuchi says.

“I got it. Do your job like I know you can, okay?”

“We’re gonna lay this fucker down, Mike. You know it,” Tuchi replies.

“I know it, bro.” I give him a hug.

“I’ll see you for sure when his ass is down,” Tuchi says, and he heads into the brush. Assassino follows close behind.

“Tuchi, no!” Chris calls out. It’s too late. He’s melted into the woods.

“Sugarloaf, you and Terry stay here, and call for backup,” Timmy tells Chris. He gives her a kiss and his radio.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Come on, Timmy,” I say.

The adrenaline courses through my veins. I’m back in Vietnam, and we have a mission. I need to save Beth. Saving her is saving myself. My life depends upon it. My heart pounds inside my chest as Timmy and I crawl toward the top of the cliff. The rain begins to drench the dirt, and I reach down for a handful of mud. When I rub it on my face, it reminds me I’m from the earth, and I’m going to put Chester back into it soon. The Colt goes in my waistband, and I creep up to the summit of the cliff. Timmy stops and shoves a clip into his government-issue handgun. A light flashes from the right. I know Tuchi is in position. Chester’s voice comes to us through the muddy darkness and rain.

“Get up, bitch!” he shouts. “I’ll kill you here right now if you don’t get your ass up!”

“Drop the gun!” Timmy shouts.

“Who’s there? I’ll fuckin’ kill this whore. Stop in your tracks!” Chester yells.

“It’s Spookadoodle, Chester. I’ll shoot you dead if you move,” I say in a witchy voice.

“Fuck you, Mike. I killed that old man years ago, so fuck you!” he spouts. He puts his gun to Beth’s temple. “Show yourself, or I’ll put a round in this bitch’s head and throw her over the edge.” He walks her toward the cliff’s drop-off.

I step toward them with my Colt leveled on Chester. The rain makes it difficult to discern his figure against the trees.

“Drop the gun, Mike, or I’ll kill her,” Chester says.

I slowly move closer and aim at his head.

“Drop the gun, motha’ fucka’,” Timmy shouts.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Chester, what made you the most fucked up dude I’ve ever known? Why do you have to always prove you’re the most powerful asshole around?” I ask. “Why can’t you respect any life, Chester? Why don’t you respect women or even yourself?”

“Oh, mister philosopher. You’re concerned about my well-being now, especially at this place? Go fuck yourself! This place is where I realized that I have no friends,” he says. “This is where I realized that I was all alone in the world, Mike. You guys all abandoned me!” he yells. “I thought I was gonna die up here, remember? Remember how you all laughed when I told you I shit myself and thought my life would end?”

“Drop the gun, or I’ll shoot!” Timmy shouts.

Chester shoots him in the shoulder, and Timmy drops like a bag of coins.

“We were kids, Chester. We didn’t know what the fuck or anything. We were just kids. Don’t let that fuck with the life of a person. How about you let Beth go, and we’ll call it fair play?” I propose.

“Mike, Mike,” Timmy cries out.

“Kids can’t protect themselves, Mike,” he says with a bit of sadness. “You know what my mother did to me when I was a kid? She laid her naked body down on me and had her way with me. Should I elaborate, or do you know what would have gone on?”

“Chester, we all had miserable lives. My dad abandoned me. Don’t let it play on your head, man.”

“Oh, I don’t let it play on my head, Mike. One day, I just decided to take control of my life, startin’ with my mother. I choked her till all the life force left her body. I remember the feeling of pure power that act gave me. Remember the little blondie I played around with in high school? I buried her body right here after I fucked her. Right up over there. I come to visit her

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

every now and again,” he says without emotion. “She was my first one. There were so many of ’em in Nam, man.

“No one gave a crap about those gook whores, except you and Father Bill. Billy boy, well, he liked the boys better than the girls anyway. We used to run all over the Da Nang area, me and Bill. I had my fun, and he had his fun, I guess. Life is funny sometimes, ain’t it, Mike?” Chester says matter-of-factly. “We all wanna be respected and liked. We wanna have all the nice things in life, right? Look at you. All of a sudden, you give a crap about this whore, go figure. I’m scratchin’ my head over it.”

“Mike!” Timmy calls. Chester shoots him in the leg. “God no!”

“Chester, you’re one sick motherfucker, ain’t you? I’m hopin’ I can still get my chance ta’ kill you,” I say.

Out of the drenched darkness, Assassino’s muscular gray body lunges from the underbrush. He launches himself into the air and, before Chester can turn or shoot, the dog bites down, deep into Chester’s right shoulder.

He screams a hideous scream, and a round from his gun fires and grazes my arm. Beth runs toward me as Chester tries to shoot the beast clamped onto his body. We crouch low to the ground to avoid the bullets. He flails around, sending gunshots and gruesome screams into the air. To avoid shooting the dog, I hold my fire. I hear the click-click of Chester’s revolver now and know he’s out of bullets. As we stand, he rushes in our direction.

“Get it off me!” Chester cries.

I take aim and fire at Chester, but the bullet misses its mark in the murky light and downpour. The full force of his body propels me back into Beth and the three of us, plus the dog, fall over the edge of the cliff. Beth hits a boulder first, with a dull, painful thud. I tumble down as

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Chester releases me, and my thigh cracks with a sickening noise against a sharp outcropping.

The fall goes on forever, and then I hit the water hard.

Its chill envelops me.

It's too dark to see much. Once I struggle up to the surface for a breath, Chester's cries pierce through the deluge as Assassino continues to assault his flesh. My leg—my leg is broken and useless, so I can only kick to swim with the other one. The pain takes me back to a place and time in Vietnam. It would rain like this in the jungle as men died and men killed each other. Has my time come tonight? If it has, I'm at peace with it.

Through the pelting rain, a flash of lightning shows Tuchi's figure as he dives headfirst off the edge of the cliff. He arches out and cuts through the air with perfect form, piercing the surface of the water next to me. His head pops up above the water.

"Where's Beth?" he shouts to me over the storm.

"Behind you, Tuchi, she's behind you!"

He swims over to her as her head disappears. He reaches down and comes up with her wig. Then he does a dive that only a whale can do, headfirst with his legs and feet following. My one good leg begins to cramp, and I struggle to keep my head above the water. The rain makes it difficult to catch a breath. As my body slips into the spring's cavernous depths, I glimpse the shimmer of a faraway white light.

Here, beneath the surface, it's quite silent and peaceful, and a calm comes over me. Flashes of lightning cut the darkness above while the white light comes toward me. I close my eyes and begin to surrender to it. It's cold, and my leg throbs with an uncontrollable agony. Once I die, all my pain should fade away. Please stop the pain, God, if you can hear me.

Swim toward the light, Mike, and all your questions will be answered.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

I do, and a hand seizes my hair and pulls me to the surface.

“Mike, bro, are you okay?” Tuchi asks. “Grab hold of Sergey’s paddleboard and hold on to Beth. Sergey, get us to the beach,” he yells over the downpour’s onslaught.

You’re not dying, not today, Mike.

“Where’s Chester?” I ask.

“Assassino committed him to the waters. He’ll never bother anybody ever again, bro,” Tuchi says. Beth, with wispy traces of regrowing hair on her head, lies on the paddleboard next to me. I shake her.

“Beth?” I shout.

She opens her eyes and gives me a weak smile. The rain cascades down her face like a thousand sorrowful tears.

“Mikey, you saved me, thanks,” she says, “I think the baby’s coming.” She closes her eyes again.

I feel the shoreline rise up under my feet, and I try to stand but can’t. My body is drained of all its energy. Tuchi tends to Beth first and drags her to the beach as she goes into labor. Sergey jumps into the water and helps me next. My one good leg is weak, and he drags me up the beach. Once on shore, I lie near Beth. She has a massive gash on her side from the rocks, and she begins to pant heavily as contractions take over her body. Tuchi sits himself down, takes off his jeans, and unstraps his prosthetic leg. He rolls onto his side and begins to vomit.

“He must have swallowed some water,” Sergey says.

“Yeah, he’ll get over it. Did you see the other guy in the water, Sergey?” I ask.

“That dog was chewin’ on his head, and then, I watched him slip below the surface.”

“Couldn’t you save him?”

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“The waters decided who would live and who would die tonight, Mike. The water knows best. It’s always been this way with Limestone Waters. I’ve never questioned the wisdom of this place. We’re just men, and some things in this world, we’ll never understand.

“I’d better tend to this lady here,” Sergey says.

Assassino, now on the shore, continues to chew on a piece of Chester’s scalp. Chris and Terry run through the rain, down the path toward us.

“What happened?” Chris asks. She kneels next to me as the storm begins to let up. “We could hear shots fired.”

“Jesus, Mike, the bone is sticking out of your pants. What the fuck! We need an ambulance at Limestone Waters, quick,” she calls on her radio. “Where’s Timmy? Where’s Timmy, Mike?”

Terry kneels down near Beth. “She’s havin’ tha’ baby!” Then, she sees my leg. “Michael—Jeysus, mother a’ God, your leg! Chris, we need an ambulance right now, please. Did you see his leg? For tha’ love a’ God, call an ambulance!”

“Where the fuck is Timmy?” Chris yells.

“Terry, she called an ambulance already. I’m alive, and I ain’t gonna die today, babe,” I say.

Chris drops next to me in the mud and grabs me. “Mike, where’s Timmy?” she asks.

“He’s up there, at the top. Chester shot him.”

“Oh my God!” she howls. She jumps to her feet and dashes up the path and out of sight.

Sergey holds Beth’s hand, and she lets out a monstrous wail. “God, the baby’s coming. The baby’s coming,” she cries.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

Terry rushes to her and peels off the loose pants she is wearing. She then removes her panties just as the baby's head begins to emerge from between her legs.

“It's comin'! It's comin'! Terry exclaims. “Push!”

“God!” Beth screams. And with that, the infant's body slides out and into Terry's hands.

Sergey opens a pocketknife and cuts the cord. He takes a piece of string from his coat pocket and ties a small, tight knot at each end. Beth collapses in a heap. Terry stands and takes the baby to the water's edge. She gathers a handful of the water and pours it over the newborn's body, then rubs vigorously. The infant begins to wail.

She turns, baby in her arms. “It's a boy,” she says with a smile. Sergey takes off his coat and Terry wraps the child in it.

The ambulance eventually arrives. The paramedics place Beth and me on stretchers and haul us up the path to waiting ambulances. Timmy was already loaded in the back of another one and off it went. Terry rode with me, and Tuchi climbed in the back of the ambulance that carried Beth and the infant.

Tuchi gave his keys to Chris who met us at the emergency room entrance.

Chris approaches me, but I pretend to be unconscious. “Terry, I have to interview Mike. Was he out of it or did he tell you anything else?” Chris asks her.

“Oh, he passed out with tha' pain. I think they gave him somethin'. He's in bad shape, Chris. We best let him rest. I'm sure he'll need surgery tonight,” she says.

“Well, okay. I need to get ahold of Tuchi then. See you later.”

She heads down the hallway with purpose.

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Tuchi had already slipped into the ER with Beth. Chris waves her DEA badge in the air to no avail. She still wears her G-string under a DEA jacket. We are all haggard and tired from the ordeal. As they wheel me into the trauma section of the ER, I pass Beth and Tuchi. I ask the orderly to stop next to them. Beth takes my outstretched hand. Her face is pained, and a tear runs down her cheek. Tuchi turns away.

“Listen, Beth, I’m sorry, babe. I never. . . .”

She releases my hand and puts an index finger to her lips to silence me. She shuts her eyes, and I know it’s time to move on. The orderly pushes me away, and Tuchi gives me a thumbs-up.

In quick succession, I get an X-ray of my leg and more pain medication. Three doctors come to talk with me. Someone takes a blood sample from my arm. Someone else asks me difficult questions in front of Terry.

“What’s your religion?”—Undecided.

“Do you do recreational drugs?”—Sometimes.

“When was the last time and what?”—Cocaine, can’t remember.

“Do you drink alcohol?”—Yes.

“Last time?”—Earlier today..

“Do you have a living will?”—No, do I need one?

“Who should we call in case of an emergency?”—The woman standing next to me, Terry O’Mahoney.

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Terry squeezes my hand, raises it to her lips, and kisses it. “Yes, Michael Walsh, you crazy madman. I will be your next a’ kin soon enough. Oh my God, it’s next Friday. It’s in a week, Michael. We’ll have ta’ postpone it then, won’t we?” she says, disappointed.

“No, we’re gonna get married next week, August second, just as we planned. No waiting, Terry. Tonight has shown me that waiting isn’t gonna cut it.”

“Okay then, it’ll happen one way or another for sure, luv,” she says.

Another doctor comes over.

“Mike, hi, I’m Doctor Mitchell. I’ll be performing your surgery. Do you have any questions for me?”

“Yeah, doc, will I ever be able to hit the double Lutz again in my life?” I ask.

He gives me a puzzled look and then smiles. “Oh—well, I can’t guarantee the double Lutz, but I can guarantee that you’ll walk again. How’s that?”

“Well, okay then. Let’s do this.”

“Okay, I’ll come and talk to you once we’re done,” he tells Terry.

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll be here waitin’.” She leans down and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “No funny business now, Michael,” she says.

“We’ll pull out the big wooden mallet and hit him over the head if he steps out of line, don’t you worry,” the doctor says. He smiles and then leaves.

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Chapter 28

Soft sounds of people's voices filter past the background haze of waning anesthesia. Through drowsy eyes, I see Terry's figure near my hospital bed.

"He's wakin' up," Terry says.

My mother and Terry stand over me as if they're at a final viewing of my body.

"I'm not dead yet, people," I say.

"You could have been killed up at that spring, Michael. We could have lost you, you know," my mother says.

"Would anyone have missed me anyway? Why are you here, Ma?" She comes over to me and puts a hand on my face.

"I'm here because I'm your mother, and I love you," she says. "You may not see the love, but the love has always been around you, Michael."

"You don't take away some kid's father on a whim or . . . or whatever." I look into her eyes.

"That may not have been the best decision I ever made, I grant you that. Your father—Kevin—was in such a bad place, I had to banish him from our lives. James, thank God, was our salvation, and he's been there for us all through the years. He helped me get back on my feet and run the bar. Kevin had these fancy dreams and all, but dreams need to be nurtured and fed. He fed himself with the drink, and that's why he's who he is today. I didn't want that kind of life for you. I needed something better for you . . . and me," she says with tears in her eyes. "I'm so sorry if I hurt you. It must have hurt you real bad." James hands her a tissue. "I can't change the decision made all those years ago, Michael, I can only ask for your forgiveness."

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James scans the floor with his eyes. Then, looking directly at me, he says, “Your father, Kevin, he’s a good man. Life hasn’t always been so kind to him, though. No one can protect any one of us from ourselves.”

When I regain my full vision, I notice my leg is in a cast, elevated up on some sort of pulley system. The pain begins to creep back, and I break out in a sweat.

“Michael, what’s wrong?” Terry asks. “You’re very pale. Are ye’ in pain?”

I nod.

“I’ll get tha’ nurse.” She rushes from the room.

“Rest up and we’ll see you back home soon,” my mother says.

“What? I’m comin’ back? You had a change of heart?”

“Well, since I found out that we’ll be grandparents, and you and Terry are getting married, yes, I had a change of heart,” Mom says. “She assured me that you’ll have no choice but to grow up once you’re a father, and I’m sure she’s right. At least, I hope she is.” She leans in, gives me a kiss, and whispers, “Terry is a gem to cherish for the rest of your life, Michael. Cherish her as I wished I’d been cherished by your father, and your life will be grand, your heart will be full, and you’ll be a happy man.” She touches my face, turns, and exits the room.

I hear a light clattering noise in the hallway outside my room. An IV pole comes into view and then rolls into my doorway. Beth is attached to it. She stops at the threshold.

“Hi, Mikey, can I come in?” she asks.

“Sure, sure, come on in, Beth. How you doin’?” I ask.

“Okay, I guess. How are you, Mikey?” She sits in the chair at my bedside.

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Terry comes back into the room. “Tha’ nurse said she’d—” She sees Beth and stops in her tracks. “Okay, then, I’ll be back later,” she says and pivots around to leave.

“No, no, come back. I came to see how he’s doing is all.”

Terry lowers her head in silence.

“I should thank the both of you for helping me, for saving me and the baby, really. Thank you,” Beth says as she tears up.

“Well, I didn’t do much,” Terry says. She steadies her gaze back upon Beth. “I shoulda shot that bastard Chester when I had tha’ chance. It’s not every day that I’m pointin’ a gun in people’s faces, though,” Terry says. “We’ll be there for you and the baby, right, Dad?” Terry gives me a look.

“Oh, Mike’s not tha’ father. I came to tell him that,” Beth says as she turns to me.

“I’ll be leaving now.” With that, Terry pivots on her heels and rushes out.

“She’s gonna be good for you, Mikey. I can tell. Not like me, you know, a three-time loser, drug addict. I never had anything for you—and you, you was always a nice guy, you know.” Beth’s eyes become pools of water. “You proved it when you came to rescue me, and all I could do was throw insults at you and Tuchi.”

She begins to cry.

“Come on. We were all on the party train. I took advantage of you, and you took advantage of me. We both knew the rules,” I say. “You just got caught up in Chester’s web and climbed down the wormhole. I tried to tell you.”

“Yeah, well, I was so angry with you, and I guess my pride and payback sent me inta’ the wormhole—and that hole got deep, Mikey. The first time Chester shot me up with what I thought was coke, he added some heroin. The games really began after that. I couldn’t get enough a’ that

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shit. I felt special at first until I finally realized that he was just a pimp who turned me into a common whore.” She sobs. “I was ashamed of myself, so how could I go back to you or, or anybody, for help?” The tears pour down her face as emotions choke her words.

I hand her a box of tissues from my bedside table. “I’m not the father of the baby then?”

“I knew I was pregnant by someone else, and I didn’t care.” She cries harder. “I used the money you gave me to take care of it on drugs.”

“I’m glad you kept the baby, Beth, really.” I take her hand. “And now it’s over. Chester’s dead, and we’re still here. The baby survived. We made it. You and I are survivors. I didn’t go through Vietnam to have that scumbag do me in, that’s for sure. You didn’t go through your shit to give into Chester’s diabolical ways either,” I say. “You’re too strong of a woman for that.”

She gets up and gives me the tightest, heartfelt hug. She sobs in my arms.

“I’m sorry, Mikey. I’m so sorry I put you in such a predicament. We coulda been killed. I never meant to get so outta control. I never meant to be this person I became. I—”

“Okay, okay, Beth—you’re alive, and you have some remorse. You think I don’t have some, too? We almost burned my mother’s house down. That woulda been bad. I coulda treated you better too. I was as selfish as you were,” I say.

She pulls away from me, and I look in her eyes. “Listen, you’ll bounce back, I know you will. You still have it together, somewhat. I love the wig. It looks great.”

“Oh, thank you.” She caresses it, and we begin to laugh.

“Knock, knock. Can I come in?” Sharon enters the room. “Hi, I heard what happened. Beth, are you all right?”

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“I’ll survive, I guess. I had surgery on this big gash I got from the fall and they tell me, I’ll ah—I’ll have to go into rehab for the drugs. My baby will also be in baby rehab. I can’t tell you how bad that makes me feel. Aside from that, I’m fantastic. How you been, Sharon?”

“Well, as you can see, I’m pregnant.” Sharon pats her belly.

“Do you know who the father is?” Beth asks.

I let out a chuckle.

“I see you still have that certain somethin’—that’s comforting,” Sharon tells her.

“Mikey, I have to go. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” Beth says. She gives me a kiss on the cheek. “See you, Sharon, and congratulations.”

“Thanks, bye,” Sharon replies as Beth leaves. “She’s still a bitch.”

“Be nice. The poor woman is all fucked up,” I say.

“You’re right there—but for the grace of God. Like I told you before, you’re a good guy. You didn’t have to go and do for her what you done,” she says. “What made you do it?”

“You know, once Terry came into my life, I started to look around me, and I began to notice stuff a little more. She made me feel things I thought I would never feel again after Vietnam. I was always this faraway, macho tough guy, you know? Tuchi and I were still boys when we came back, Sharon. We never grew into our years.

“There was always the feeling of, I was missing something, that I had the right to do whatever I wanted—and I did. Like Beth . . . I could never invest myself in a woman like her, and she deserved someone who could. I can’t be that guy any longer. Terry, for one, would never stand for it, and I can’t pretend it’s me anymore. I wanna be happy. I want more than all that.”

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Sharon begins to clap a soft, slow clap. “Wow, Terry surely has a magic wand. I’m amazed at the transformation. You’re like a butterfly coming outta the thingy or whatever.” She chuckles.

“Very funny, but I mean it, I—”

“I’m busting your balls. It’s fantastic and you should feel lucky you found a woman like her,” Sharon says.

She leans into me and gives me a quick peck on the cheek. Over her shoulder I see Timmy and Chris standing at the door.

“Sharon, check it out. Timmy and Chris are here. Hey guys, what’s happening?”

Timmy is in a wheelchair and Chris wheels him into my room. His arm and leg are in a cast.

“Mike, how you doin’? I hear you’re gonna be okay,” Timmy says.

“We’re alive, right?” I tell him.

“Listen, you should have never done what you did, though, Mike. We were gonna bust Chester any day, so I was surprised when you came in and threatened him. I coulda shot your ass, you know.” He smiles and pulls out an imaginary gun and points it at me. “You two will have to come see me soon to be interviewed, if only to satisfy my boss and the local police.”

“Sharon, how are you and the baby?” Chris rubs Sharon’s belly.

“I have a couple more months and the baby’s coming,” Sharon says.

“You must be overjoyed. Where’s Tuchi? He’s the dad, right? I mean, you were a couple and I . . . I—”

“It’s okay, Chris. He’s the dad. I just need him to accept responsibility is all,” Sharon says.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“I’m the dad? Are you sure I’m the dad, and it’s not this asshole in the bed here?” Tuchi says from the door. We all turn in his direction.

“Fuck you, Tuchi,” Sharon replies.

“That’s what got you inta’ this situation in the first place, ain’t it?” he asks.

“You tell me? Are you ready to take responsibility for fuckin’ my brains out for two years and doin’ this?” Sharon points to her belly.

“Are you ready for this, for me? Are you ready to put up with my shit, ’cause I got a lotta shit, woman.” Tuchi raises his arms in the air.

“I been puttin’ up with your shit for the last two years, haven’t I? What surprises do you think could be left for me to uncover?”

“Oh, babe, you’ve just scratched the surface with me. I’m a multidimensional, complex person with very specific wants and needs. Can you handle it?” he asks.

They both approach each other.

“I know what you want, and I know what you need. You have to understand that I also have some wants and needs, just like you do. Can you handle that?” she asks him.

Tuchi rubs his goatee and peers aloft with wondering eyes. “I think I can probably handle some of your shit, I guess,” he says.

Then, he takes hold of Sharon. They begin to kiss passionately. They’re French kissing in a way the French probably never intended. He clutches both of her ass cheeks and squeezes them. Sharon tries to put one leg up and around him, but she’s too pregnant to do this. Chris covers her eyes.

“We’re engaged, everyone!” Chris finally says. “We’re getting married, and you’re all invited.”

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Sharon and Tuchi stop their exhibition. We all stare at Timmy and Chris.

“Say what?” Tuchi growls.

“It’s true, and we have you guys to thank for it,” Timmy gushes. “If it wasn’t for being assigned to this investigation together, we would have never met, so thanks, guys. Tuchi, I may have to arrest your ass anyway, though.”

“Say what?” Tuchi repeats.

“Well, we started the investigation in conjunction with the local cops, thinking you two guys were the big suppliers of the cocaine. Then we started seeing a lot of heroin in the area. We soon realized you guys were just users and had no connection with trafficking. But, I’d like to have a conversation with you, Tuchi, and find out where you got all the coke you guys were doin’.”

“Chester, Chester,” Tuchi rattles out. “Chester’s the dude!”

“Uh-huh, well, I figured since you two helped us put Chester out of business, I would go easy on your ass anyway.”

Timmy smiles and Chris wheels him close to shake our hands.

“Okay, sugarloaf, let’s go,” he tells Chris. “Take care, guys, and we’ll be sending invitations to our wedding to Casey’s, so please come and celebrate with us. You guys are okay people.”

“Thanks, Timmy,” I say.

They pass Terry at the door, exchange a few cordial words with her, and then make a hasty exit. Terry enters the room with disappointment on her face.

“What’s wrong, babe?” I ask.

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“Tha’ nurse said ye’ have ta’ stay here at least two weeks in traction. We gotta push back tha’ wedding date,” she laments.

“I promised you we would get married on August second, and we’re gettin’ married on August second. Sharon, can you help Terry to make this happen?”

“Okay, let’s get the mayor to come over here and officiate the—” Sharon starts.

“I would love to get Father Bill here to do it instead. Can we do this, please?” I ask her.

“Tuchi, can you talk to Bill?”

“I’ll ask him,” he says.

“And, Tuchi, I want you to be my best man. No refusing it,” I tell him.

“No problem.” He comes and gives me a hug and a high five.

“Sharon, you’ll be tha’ maid of honor, I’m hopin’ still?” Terry asks her.

“Absolutely.” They hug each other as the nurse comes in with a syringe in her hand. I forgot about the pain with all the company.

She puts the syringe into the IV line and empties its contents. “This should take care of you for several hours,” she says and then leaves the room. A slow, steady warmth encases my body as the pain trails away. I can understand how easy it would have been for Chester to get Beth hooked on this stuff.

“Mikey, we’re gonna get outta here. You need to relax anyway,” Sharon says.

“Yeah, take it easy, bro. I’ll get back to Terry after I talk to Father Bill, okay?” Tuchi says.

“Thanks, I’ll talk with you soon,” I tell him. Terry stops him before he leaves.

“Tuchi, I just wanted to say thanks. Thanks for bein’ there for Michael. Thanks for bein’ a good friend ta’ him.” She gives him a kiss on his cheek, and it takes him a bit by surprise.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“Oh, it’s nothin’. He’s my brother, and this is what we do. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him.”

“Well, I’m glad ye’ were here to do what ye’ did,” Terry says.

“I gotta tell you, you’re a pretty ballsy chick to do what you did, rushin’ in with the Colt in your hand. I tell you, you don’t see that every day,” he says. “Mike here, he’s lucky to have a woman like you watchin’ his back. I’m getting tired a’ watchin’ his back anyways. You seem very capable.”

“Oh, thank you,” Terry says.

“Shit, my Colt. You just reminded me. It must be at the bottom of the spring with Chester. Well, I guess I don’t need it any longer,” I say.

“I kinda liked tha’ feelin’ of it in my hands, though,” Terry says with a smile.

“You’re deadly enough with a broomstick. Let’s leave the guns to others, okay?” I say.

“Right ye’ are, Michael Walsh,” she says.

“Okay then, people, we’re outta here,” Tuchi waves as he and Sharon exit the room.

“Terry, I gotta close my eyes for a while.” I yawn.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a bit then. You rest.” She blows me a kiss and I shut my eyes.

The thoughts and images of the last several days occupy my mind as I lie here.

Mike, you are one lucky guy to have survived it all.

I’m glad I saved Beth, and I would gladly do it again.

Promise yourself, here and now, to be a righteous man and a loving husband.

It all happened so fast once Terry came into my life. It all snuck up on me and hit me over the head. Love is like this, I guess. People say it all the time, and now I know it’s true. In an instant, your life pivots. My world is changed now, and I’m much better off for it.

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Chapter 29

At first, I thought I would lose my mind from boredom while being stuck in this hospital bed. Yet, with Terry's help, I've come to realize it was the best medicine for me at this crossroads. I have been able to regain my strength and my purpose for living. The compass of my life has been rearranged. Several lazy days breeze by and it's the Monday after the Chester incident now. The pain is subsiding with the help of medication.

One bright spot has been Terry's pampering of me. A man can get used to being pampered and she does coddle me like no other woman ever has.

Terry gave me a back massage yesterday after she returned from church. She told me she talked with Father Bill and he agreed to do the ceremony for us. He was to come by today and visit with me. During my back rub, I began to get a bit frisky and tried to get Terry to fool around in the hospital bed. The thought of it mortified her, but she did close the curtains and jump onto the bed. We had a passionate necking session.

"Hey, Mike, are you up for the company?" Father Bill asks as he pokes his head in the door. Fortunately, Terry and I were done making out, and she had gone home.

"Sure, Bill, come on in. Terry said she talked with you about the wedding and all. Thanks for doin' this for us. I may be here another week, and I promised her we would have the wedding on August second, so thanks again."

"I'm happy to do it for you. It's time you settled down anyway, isn't it, Mike?"

"Yeah, I'm jumpin' off the merry-go-round, Bill."

"How are you doing after all this stuff with Chester?"

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“It reminded me of Nam, Bill. It put me right back in the shit.”

“When I heard, I said a prayer for both of you.” He pulls up the chair next to my bed. He’s clearly shaken and stares at me with despairing eyes.

“I’m okay now, but why would you waste time praying for a fucked-up person like Chester? He’s not worth it,” I say.

“Would you say that I was worth it, Mike? If I told you some of the things Chester and I did running together in Nam? Would you say I was worth it?” he asks again. “You probably would say no as well.”

“What are you talkin’ about? I knew that you two worked together in the quartermaster’s corps in Da Nang. What went on that coulda been any worse than for the infantry?”

“It wasn’t about the fighting or being in danger. For Chester, it was the influence and control of people and things he lusted after, the power of it, you know? Do you know what kind of valuable merchandise and supplies we had complete supervision over? If Chester did you a favor, he expected one in return . . . and over time his favors dealt with women and drugs. Me, I was just trying to make some extra money.” Bill stares at the floor. “We would divert supplies because no one was watching us, and then we could sell it to the GIs cheap. Mike, the amount of material thrown at us to manage was staggering, and it made it easy to abuse the system.”

“Yeah, so who’s gonna fault you for that? We were kids in a war, man. Don’t beat yourself up, Bill. We all did some fucked-up shit.”

“Well, by the time my tour was up, I was a full-blown heroin addict. I learned to, uh, I learned to hide it well,” he says with a quavering voice. “Chester supplied me and many other strung out GIs who were using to numb the fucked-up reality of the place.”

“No one’s gonna fault you one bit for goin’ down that path, not one bit. Forget it.”

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“Some things I can’t forget about, Mike. Remember the night we all went to that brothel and Chester strangled that poor girl? That wasn’t the first time he’d ever done such heinous things. I soon learned that going out and hanging with Chester often meant a body would show up the next day. I became trapped in a vicious cycle of my own poor judgement, addiction, and remorse.” He holds his head in his hands. “He made me help him dispose of one of those women’s bodies once. I still see her lifeless stare in my dreams. Then, when I discovered I was gay, Chester held it—and these other things—over me when we came home.” He lifts his head as his eyes become weepy.

“You were caught up in the Chester web, Bill, like this girl Beth was. He had her all turned upside down, too,” I tell him.

“I had a choice, Mike. I could have refused, or I could have killed him myself. I wish you had killed him that night at the brothel. You would have saved me and a lot of others from Chester’s monstrous power.”

“Well, it’s done now. Better late than never, right?”

“Before we got home, he threatened to expose my sexual orientation if I ever talked of what went on over there. I promised myself, if I got clean, the rest of my life would be dedicated to righteous living. Somehow, it’s helped me get through the years back here,” he says with lingering sadness in his voice.

I place a hand on his shoulder. “Listen, Bill, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You were under a spell. He was evil personified, man. You know evil when you see it, and its name was Chester,” I say. “You were dancing with Lucifer, and now you’re dancing with God. It’s all good.”

“After I officiate at your wedding, I’m leaving the priesthood,” Bill declares.

[Type here] [Type here] McMahon – Limestone Waters

“What? Why?”

“Mike, I can’t hide from who I am. No more hiding behind a collar, no more running from the past. You kind of helped me come to this decision.”

“Me? How?”

“Well, once I heard Chester was gone, I guess this weight was lifted off of my shoulders. Did they ever find his body?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ve never talked of these things, even in my own confessions with Father Joseph. We’ll never speak of these things again if we can make a pact as friends, Mike.”

He holds out his right hand and I take it as his friend, knowing another person has been set free. Father Bill stands, pulls a tissue from my side table, and wipes his eyes. “I best head off—”

“Mike, can I come in?” Sergey asks from the door.

“Sure. Sergey, this is Father Bill. He was just leavin’.”

“Nice to meet you, Father,” Sergey says while they shake hands.

“Same here, Sergey. Have a great visit. Mike, what time Friday then?” Bill asks.

“One thirty or so. Give my mother a call and ask Terry, okay? You have the number?”

“I’ll talk with Terry then. See you on Friday,” Bill says, and he leaves.

“Sergey, sit down, how you doin’?”

“How are you?”

“Okay.”

“You had a rough time that night at the spring. I couldn’t help you till the end, but somehow, I knew you would prevail, Mike. The waters always bring forth what’s inside the man.

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You can't be false around the water. Righteousness will always prevail. You've shown yourself to be true to its spirit, its power. You'll be stronger for it, and you'll flourish and prosper as the Great Spirit would want for a true warrior. You are now and always will be a member of the Munsee Tribe, Mike. I welcome you, brother."

"Wow, thank you, Sergey, and thanks for coming to our rescue that night. I'm not sure we all coulda made it without your help."

"My pleasure."

"Hey, I'm marrying Terry here on Friday. Will you come?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm definite on it, Sergey. No refusing, okay?"

"Should I get you something, or do you need anything? Some booze or somethin'?" he asks.

"No booze, just you. Well, maybe—maybe you can't, but can you fill up two mason jars from the spring? Is that possible?"

"Well, I wouldn't do it for everybody, but figurin' that you're a member of the tribe now, I can do that for you." He shakes my hand. "One thirty, right?"

"Right."

"Okay, Mike, I'll leave you be and see you on Friday then. Be well."

"Sergey, thanks again, man."

"See you then," he says, and walks out.

So, this is how it went this week. My life's been transformed, not only by what went on with Chester. The great tragedies and joys of my life have raced past me and alongside me. It feels

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like I've doubled in age. My body is weak, and my mind is tired. Life could have ended that night for me at the waters, and the thought still chills me. The most amazing woman on earth loves me and wants to marry me. I almost lost her. I almost lost my best friend as well. Sergey and the waters helped me, too. He's some kind of spirit creature—or something I can't quite put my finger on, and I'm glad we met.

I'm finally happy to accept that Kevin is my father, even though he may not be the best father figure one can have. He did come back for me after Alaska, and he did stay in my life. That has to count for something. Thinking back over the years, he had been present for many of the memorable moments. He went to many of my football games in high school, and he did attend my graduation. We're like intimate strangers.

I wish the circumstances could have been different, but it can't be changed now. Hopefully, Kevin will remain in my life, in my new family's life.

I pick up the bedside phone and call him. An answering machine picks up with a generic voice. I leave the details of the time, place, and date for the wedding.

The next two days are spent making plans for the wedding. Terry had to be sure the hospital would be okay with it. Some details went back and forth, but eventually, it was all cleared. I'm out of traction now and the nurses have been great in helping me stand and walk. Terry brought over the one suit I own, and it still fits me. She decided on a simple white chiffon summer dress. Sharon arranged for a few bouquets for her, Terry, and Caitlin. Tuchi and I will wear a flower on our lapels.

Does Tuchi even own a suit?

Terry doesn't know if Kevin will be there. She left a message, and he hasn't replied.

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The day of the wedding arrives. Tuchi helps me get into my suit. My leg is in a cast still, so we cut the pants up the side. It's a fashion statement. My family showed up early and we are all cool with each other. My mom and James are all smiles. Nanna lit her pipe, and the nurse's station thought we started a fire.

When Father Bill came, he went around greeting everyone. He appears happy and unburdened. Beth came by in street clothes to say goodbye, and Terry asked her to stay for the ceremony. Timmy and Chris are here, too. Sergey strolled in behind them with the mason jars, but no sightings of Kevin yet. Sharon pops her head in the door.

"Okay, get ready," she announces. Caitlin enters, dressed in a simple white dress and holding a small bouquet of flowers. Then, Terry follows her into the room.

The white flowing dress she wears is stunningly simple and simply stunning. It fits her loosely but in an elegant way, reaching almost to the floor. This beautiful woman before me will be my wife, and the emotion wells up inside me. This is a day I'll cherish forever. The thought of Terry, a woman of such strength and presence, wanting to be with me, it's amazing.

She and Caitlin stand next to me.

"This will be a simple ceremony per Terry and Mike's request," Father Bill says. "I'm just here as a sort of referee. Let's—"

Father Bill's eyes widen at something behind us.

We all turn. Kevin stands at the door.

"Sorry, I'll be over here, sorry," Kevin says as he leans back against the wall.

I turn to Tuchi.

"You want a new best man, don't you?" he asks.

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“Do you mind?”

“No, I understand.” He approaches Kevin, takes off his lapel flower and pins it onto Kevin’s shirt. Tuchi gestures for him to stand next to me. Kevin is hesitant at first, then walks toward Terry and me.

“Are you sure about this?” he asks us.

“We’re sure,” Terry says.

“Thanks for coming, Kevin,” I tell him.

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Okay,” says Father Bill, “I’ll continue then. As I was about to say, the bride and groom have decided to read their own vows. Terry, please proceed.”

Terry smiles and then winks at me. “When I was a young girl, I had wished ta’ marry a man someday who was kind, caring, and who would truly love me. Many years later, that wish comes true today. I trust your love for me, and I love your trust in me. May we both support each other’s dreams and aspirations along the way, and may we always have the wind at our backs.

“Many a’ tha’ things I hope to cherish when I’m old are tha’ simple things a’ life. It won’t always be easy. I did toughen ye’ up with a broomstick, though. I promise ta’ continue ta’ love ye’ in good times and bad, in sickness and in health until the end of time. If I should pass to meet my maker before ye’, I will wait for ye’ until ye’ are ready ta’ join me in God’s Kingdom.”

Terry takes a ring from Sharon and reaches out for my left hand. As she slips the ring on my finger, she flashes me the biggest, broadest, sunshine smile I have ever seen.

“Michael, please proceed,” Father Bill says.

“Terry, I had been traveling through the wilderness of life for some time, it seemed. Then, a beam of a light shone down on me. Your light is so bright, it scared me at first ’cause I

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had never stood in the presence of such a light. It hurt when I got too close at first and then it didn't. I was happy to stand in your awesome brilliance. It hurt when your awesome light kept hitting me with a broomstick, and then it didn't. Your light is too strong to resist.

“Your strength, power, and beauty are a force of nature, and I want them in my life. I want you in my life from this day forward. I also promise to love you through the good and the bad, in sickness and in health, till you kill me. You'll have to navigate around my idiosyncrasies, ask Tuchi.”

“I thought you went to the doctor for those?” Tuchi says, and everyone laughs. He looks around in wonderment.

“My quirks, Tuchi, my quirks,” I say.

“Ohhh. . . .” He nods.

“But, I wouldn't have it any other way with anyone else. You had my back last week and you showed real courage. I mean, who rushes in brandishing a Colt 45 like that? A woman protecting the man she loves, that's who. I found my true love and I also found my father, Kevin, here. You were out of my life, I thought, but—you really weren't, were you? I do remember all the times you were there in my life, and I realize now, you did make an effort to be present. I love you, and I love you, Mom and James, and you, Nanna, for always being there for me. Most of all, I love you, Terry, and with this ring I make you my wife.”

As I slip the ring onto her left ring finger, everyone claps, and calls to kiss the bride erupt. We oblige the crowd and give each other the biggest, deepest kiss we can give in public. Throughout my small hospital room, kisses abound, and smiles permeate the air. Someone taps me on the shoulder. It's Kevin. He grabs me and gives me the usual bear hug he always has.

“I love you, Mike,” he says as tears roll down his cheeks.

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“I love you too, Kevin,” I reply. Terry hands Kevin a tissue and they hug. She’s enveloped in his arms. Sergey comes over and hands me the two mason jars of the limestone water.

“What’s that?” Terry asks.

“It’s my gift to Mike,” Sergey says. “It’s what he wanted and what he needed for so long, right, Mike?”

“Right, and thanks again, Sergey.” I limp over to Tuchi and hand him one of the jars.

“What’s this?” he asks.

“It’s some of the spring water. I thought you might need it someday.”

“Thanks,” he says with a smile.

We hug and he gives me a kiss on the cheek. This is how we do it, he and I.

THE END