

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a snowy forest. The trees are bare and heavily laden with snow. In the center-right, a rifle is leaning against a tree trunk. The overall mood is cold and mysterious. The title 'THE EXCURSION' is overlaid in a large, pink, sans-serif font. The subtitle 'A THRILLER' is in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. The author's name 'T. O. PAINE' is at the bottom in a large, red, sans-serif font.

THE
EXCURSION

A THRILLER

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DARK
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“It’s not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.”

- Charles Darwin -

CHAPTER ONE

CHARLY

Before the summer sun set over the cabin, before my cousins disappeared into the woods, and before Amanda found the raccoon tail, I never wanted anyone to die.

No.

That's not true.

I wanted Amanda to die, but we were just children, kids running through the forest, playing my dad's game. Saying crazy things like *I wish you were dead*, and, *When I grow up, I'm going to be a millionaire*. You can't blame me for the things I said to my cousin. For wishing she would die. Like so many, I was thrust into this world, into the arms of two random people I assumed would take care of me forever, but who failed. They left me to survive on my own, dragging my neurodivergent brother with me everywhere I went. I had no choice. As it turns out, I was the only sane one.

If only I could go back to that summer. Back to before everything fell apart. We were little animals back then, taking everything to the extreme. Fight or flight and everything in between. We said crazy things. We did crazy things. We played

my dad's game, but I never *really* wanted Amanda to die. I just wanted to win. And, by the way, she didn't die. In fact, she became a millionaire.

And why am I thinking about her while driving across town in the dead of winter?

Because of my mother. She's beckoned me for what I hope will be the last time.

I'm on my way to her assisted living center.

My tires jostle over a seam in the pavement, and my cell phone bounces on the passenger seat. Snow slides off my Ford hatchback. I took a shortcut through suburbia to avoid the traffic on Interstate-25, but I shouldn't have. Orange and black signs block the road up ahead. They're doing construction the day after a major snowstorm.

Only in Colorado.

My mother left a voice message yesterday. She said if I visited her, she would give me the cabin. It's her fault I can't get Amanda out of my head. I hadn't thought about that place in years, and now everything's swept over me like a tidal wave. I turned eleven that year. My brother, Jacob, my cousins, Amanda and Cam, and I . . . we played my dad's game.

And there it is—my real worry. My dad got the cabin in the divorce. If my mom is offering me the cabin, maybe she's talked to him. Maybe he's come back.

And, what will I do if he has?

A pothole opens up before me and I jerk the wheel to dodge it, narrowly missing the curb. I straighten the car out just in time to lurch to a stop at a light.

What *will* I do if Johnathan's come back?

I've been practicing my speech for eighteen years, telling myself I would never speak to him again, never call him "Dad" out loud again, plotting ways to get even with him for

abandoning us. The thought he might have returned has me twisted in knots. As much as I hate to admit it, a part of me wants to hug him. The insecure little girl who watched him drive away at the end of that summer, never to see him again . . . she wants to hug him.

Then, the thought of him embracing me makes my stomach turn.

He promised he would come back, and he never did. Eighteen years is too long.

No one in this world keeps their promises.

Everyone lies.

Especially my mom.

The light changes, I round a corner, and a construction worker flips his flag to STOP. My tires slide on the black ice, and I stop a few feet before him. He looks down the road as if I'm not here. I wait, my hands on the steering wheel, looking directly at him. He's bundled in multiple layers, a red scarf hiding his face. Tan leather gloves. Black leather hiking boots. It's freezing out there.

I close my eyes.

It will be cold in the assisted living center.

It will be colder still in my mom's room.

She's in hospice.

I open my eyes and stare at the worker.

He has his entire life ahead of him, and he's spending it in the cold, holding a sign.

My life is ahead of me, too. And what am I doing with it? I'm unmarried, living with my younger brother in a two-bedroom apartment, waitressing at the closest place that would hire me. I've come far since I turned sixteen.

Since my mom left me no choice but to live on my own.

I've actually done very well for myself. In many ways, life's

been easier for me than my mother. After the divorce, Dad left her forever, and the drugs and alcohol took over. It began with Bloody Marys on Sunday mornings and ended with needles in her arms, or worse. I'm not sure. After I turned sixteen, she stopped paying the rent, and Jacob and I had to find our own places to live. I remember finding brochures for her, begging her to go to meetings—begging her to stop.

And now, it's come to this.

But I've made my peace with her death.

I swear. I have made my peace. She played with fire for too many years, and now she's facing the final burn. Stricken with every cancer and disease known to man, she has endured enough. We've all endured enough. Jacob won't see it, but it's best we let nature take its course. It breaks my heart, but I did everything I could do for her. And, I've made my peace.

The worker flips his sign to SLOW, I hit the gas, and my decrepit Ford Focus moans. The front wheels spin on the ice before catching a patch of pavement, launching me forward. The roads are mostly clear, and I make good time after exiting suburbia. The sun has arrived in a blazing fury this afternoon after yesterday's snowy onslaught. Such is life in the Mile High City. We're closer to the sun than most places, but that doesn't always make it warm.

The assisted living center resembles a run-down bowling alley. Maybe it used to be one. The single-story building creeps across the parking lot, its asphalt shingles glistening where the snow has melted, sparkling in the sunlight. There are no windows in front, only a single set of double doors.

Those doors split the world in two.

For those checking in, they separate the before and the after.

People come here to die. It gives me chills.

I buzz in and convince the staff my name is indeed Charly Highsmith. Joan Highsmith's daughter. A half-awake nurse directs me down the hall to her room.

After today, I swear, I'm never coming back. And, after today, I'm going to take charge of my life.

Through the doorway, I see her sitting upright in her bed, her eyes closed, her body buried in one of those rough hospital blankets. Baby puke beige. As I enter, she opens her eyes and gestures toward a chair by the window. "Have a seat, Charly. I'm glad you're here."

Handprints and other smudges catch the afternoon sun attempting to shine through the paned glass. A pale green curtain ends halfway down the wall where an old radiator begins. I don't think the radiator has worked in years.

I hate the cold.

"I can't stay long," I say. "Jacob's waiting for me. What's this about the cabin? Did you talk to Johnathan?"

She averts her eyes. Smooths out a wrinkle in her blanket. "No. I haven't seen him."

"Your message said I could have the cabin, but it's not yours to give. What's going on?"

"The keys are in that box by the window."

A jewelry box sits on the windowsill next to pictures of her when she was young. An ornately framed picture shows Jacob and me holding hands when we were little. He must have been about eight. It was taken before our last summer as a family.

"Bring me the box, and I'll find them for you. You don't have to stay, even though I *am* dying."

The box contains cheap gold earrings, necklaces, plastic buttons, a couple of old pictures from a photo booth, and a bent syringe the nursing staff must have mistaken for a sewing needle. A few keys are buried at the bottom.

“Give it here,” she says. “And sit. Please. We need to talk.”

I’m about to explain again that I can’t stay when her eyes well up. She holds her hands out for the box, but when I hand it over she doesn’t have the strength to hold it aloft, so she lowers it onto her lap.

I sit. “What do you want to talk about?”

She rummages around, pulling out keys as she finds them, not looking at me. “I want to tell you about your father. Oh, I shouldn’t feel this way. I haven’t talked to him since the divorce.” She holds up a keyring with three keys attached. “Here. These are the ones.”

She’s lost her mind. “Mom, what’s going on? You can’t just give me the keys to *his* cabin.”

“Yes, I can. I think—yes. It’s part of his estate. You might as well have it now.”

“What? His estate?”

“Because of the trust fund.” She shifts her gaze to the window. “The papers came yesterday. Here, take these.” She hands me the keys. “The papers are on the floor over there.”

It’s unbelievable.

Something from my dad, after all this time. I mean, something from Johnathan.

I snatch up the legal-sized envelope and take it to the window. The return address references a law firm I’ve never heard of before. It came from St. Louis. I pull the papers out, and halfway down the first page, there’s an amount typed in bold. It’s more than one and a half million dollars.

My heart drops.

I gape at the amount.

“Is this a joke?”

“No. There’s nothing funny about this.” She clears her throat. Coughs.

I teeter on the verge of a nervous laugh. The paper says I will receive the money when I turn thirty. That's only a couple of years away. Jacob and I will be set. I won't need to waitress anymore. Could I quit sooner than that? Probably not. My savings aren't what they should be. I've slowly depleted that windfall I had a few years ago.

There's so much to think about now. It's so much money, but—these papers came from Johnathan. He's still alive. The money is one thing, but the fact he is still alive, and the fact that he thought of me . . .

I don't care about the money.

I want to know where my dad is.

"I'm so happy for you," she says. "I wish I could be there when you get the money. I'm so sorry for all the things I—"

"Don't start that again, Mom. I told you last time, you don't have to apologize anymore. I made my peace with"—she's going to die in that bed—"with you, last time."

"Please sit back down. There's more you need to know."

My hand brushes the radiator when I pull the chair closer to her bed, and it burns. The heater works after all. "Where's Johnathan?" I sit and rub the back of my hand, but it only worsens the pain.

"The reason they sent the papers is . . ." She covers her eyes.

"What? What is it?"

"Right after the papers came, a lawyer called. Your father had a heart attack last week, and—"

"And?"

"And he passed away. I'm sorry."

CHAPTER TWO

RANDALL

Randall Thorne doesn't spread his *experience-of-a-lifetime* brochures across the table. He doesn't hang posters of hunters clad in camouflage suits sneaking through the Congo Basin. He doesn't polish the barrel of a Remington 7600 hunting rifle—to make it shine, to use it as a prop, to pass it around the room hoping someone will fall in love with its power.

He doesn't do any of these things because he doesn't have to.

Randall knows how to sell an excursion with words alone. He knows what to say and how to say it. He practices his pitch in the bathroom mirror, shouting. Prepping his voice. When he strides into the vacant bingo hall, he pulls lint off his stormy gray suit, and he tells himself, *I am the greatest.*

I am in control.

I will win.

The stage invites him up the steps to the lectern, but he stays below, standing between the long tables, gracing the thick red carpet with his presence. Only around ten tycoons are expected today. This hall is too large. Overkill. He moves the tables at the

front closer together. He needs to make his pitch close and personal.

He closes his eyes.

I am in control.

“Is this the place?” a man shouts across the venue, a Southern drawl pulling on his words.

Another man walks into the hall behind the Southerner. Then another. These two are plainly dressed in rugged button-down cotton shirts, slacks, and cowboy boots. Rural millionaires. They stay close to the Southerner, flanking him on each side.

“Yes,” Randall says. “Please come up front and take a seat.”

“Why we in this bingo place?” the Southerner asks.

“For discretion. This is an exclusive opportunity. Please, please, take a seat.”

Others enter through the doorway, passing by the bingo hall proprietor. He stands off to the side. This is not the greatest venue in Denver, but it will do. Long tables sprawl across the floor. Bright lime and aquamarine chairs blend with the clown-red carpet, giving the place an old Las Vegas feel. Hotel conference rooms work better, but they’re expensive, and too many hotels keep records. The proprietor took the cash wad with a smile earlier this morning, no questions asked.

It will be as if Randall was never here.

Two women with designer handbags and steep stilettos head toward the stage, followed by a man with curly hair in a blue silk shirt and black leather vest. His vest does little to mask his well-defined chest, and his curls shine beneath the fluorescent light. Too much product. He glances from side to side, then settles his eyes on the women’s rear ends as they walk. He looks like a croupier, except his watch is worth tens of thousands of dollars. Randall could smell the man’s money

before he entered. He's the perfect client. Young, rich, and dumb.

A round-bodied gentleman shuffles in next. Time has taken his hair, and he has the pasty complexion of old money. Overweight and soft, he pauses to take a breath, places his hand on a table, and wipes his forehead. He'd never survive the hunt.

"Everyone." Randall waves. "Welcome. Please, take a seat. We have one hour until the hall opens for bingo, so let's get started."

The Southerner sits at the front, joined by his two compadres.

"What brings you to Denver?" Randall asks him.

"You. I missed it when you came through Dallas last month. Had an emergency with my daughter."

"Oh, well, thank you for making the trip up here. Are you staying through the holidays?"

"Yep."

"Excellent."

The two women take a seat on Randall's right, and the curly-haired man slips in behind them. A straggler rushes into the hall and sits by the round man. She wears a hemp rope adorned with a rough-hewn rock hanging around her neck. Her sandals look like Birkenstock knock-offs, and she carries a notebook. Hippie. She should not be here.

Randall walks up to the curly-haired man and extends his hand. "I'm Randall Thorne."

"Barry Rockwell." The man stands. They shake hands.

"Barry Rockwell? Is that Bartholomew Rockwell?"

"I prefer Barry."

"Yes, of course, you do. I know your family. Well, I don't *know* your family, but—let's say I'm aware of your lineage."

"Isn't everybody." Barry gazes at the floor as he retakes his

seat.

“You’re in the right place, Barry. What I’ve got to offer—it’s exactly for someone like you.” Randall flashes his knowing smile and steps before the group.

All eyes go to him.

They’re his.

He raises his hands. “Greetings. My name is Randall Thorne. Welcome. Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life.” He cocks his head and looks at everyone from the corner of his eye. “That is, if, after my presentation, you think your life is still worth living.”

END OF SAMPLE

Greetings Fearless Reader!

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Yours truly,

-T.O. Paine

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



T.O. Paine holds a master’s degree in information systems, and when he is not writing, you can find him running or cycling through the mountains of Colorado, USA. He has run over thirty marathons, ridden over twenty 100-mile cycling events, and completed an IRONMAN.

T.O. resides with his wife, two children, and a Boston terrier who stares at himself in the mirror, questioning his existence.