

## Chapter 1

The call came over the radio to the control center at the Federal Medical Center in Rochester, Minnesota. “We have a code black in the medical ward. We need an ambulance and a team to escort to the Mayo.” The world famous Mayo Clinic was located just a few miles away.

“10-4,” squawked the radio in reply, “will dispatch a team, prepare for transport. Ambulance ETA of ten minutes.”

“10-4, prisoner number 110758-029 is the one being transported.”

The officer working the control center punched the number into his computer. He couldn't shake the feeling there was more to the message.

Shit.

“Understood sending another team to your location.”

The information staring back at him, on the monitor, was for a recent transfer from the supermax facility in Colorado. Maxmillian Baxter, AKA Max the Ax, AKA Max the exhibitionist, was serving five life terms for kidnapping young girls from a local mall, torturing them and mutilating their bodies before putting them on display for all to see at the same mall. How he was able to do this undetected was never discovered.

His trial had made national news, but the real story was how he was captured. The police and FBI were baffled, totally lost on the case. They had no clues or leads and were running blind despite the Bureau having poured more money and manpower into this case than any other in recent memory.

Unforeseen, Max had showed up at the federal courthouse in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and turned himself in. Striding in with the swagger of a professional athlete he informed the court security officers, made up of retired police officers, that he needed to speak to United States Marshal, Jake Mathews on an urgent matter. The security officers, being ever vigilant, ordered him to walk through a metal detector for screening. Their diligence was rewarded with a screech from the machine and he was ordered to empty his pockets. Showing no signs of concern, he reached inside and removed a severed

finger with a silver ring on it, the fingernail painted bright pink. After several stunned seconds the security officers threw him to the ground and handcuffed him.

Having been taken into custody, he was brought to the Marshal's holding cells. FBI and assistant U.S. Attorney's swarmed to the scene to build a case and maybe make their careers. But Max would talk to no one but Jake Mathews. As an enticement he offered to tell them where the rest of the body was. But he would only talk to the requested Marshal.

The FBI and U.S. Attorney's threw fits that would shame most preschool children but Max was ultimately in control. And that's how he liked it; he would control everything.

A parade of psychiatrists testified at his trial for the prosecution, diagnosing him as a sociopath that had no capacity for feeling or remorse. He didn't disagree. His defense attorneys wanted to put their own shrinks on the stand to say that he was insane, but he'd have none of it. He'd already confessed and saw no reason to muddy his name with further psychobabble. He'd been tried, convicted and sentenced in record time.

When asked why he'd just not pleaded guilty, saving himself a trial, he told them that the trial and subsequent publicity surrounding it, was his due and left it at that.

With little thought the Bureau of prisons assigned him to the supermax facility in Colorado where he'd resided for four years until this transfer to the medical center in Rochester.

The ambulance arrived with lights flashing but no siren. Max was loaded into the back with a team of two armed officers escorting him. They would never leave his side, even in surgery if that's what he eventually needed. Another team of two followed in a white suburban, clearly marked with the Bureau of Prisons logo on its side; they would be perimeter security for Max's stay.

Max had been transferred to the medical center because of severe renal failure. The doctors had run every test on him but had little luck in determining what was causing his kidneys to fail. Some had suggested rare diseases, others believed he was, somehow, running a scam. The undeniable fact was, no matter how he was doing it, Max was sick, very sick.

Arriving at the emergency room, the follow vehicle established perimeter security as best they could with two people, while the ambulance pulled into a garage. The industrial-size doors slowly rolled shut as the ambulance team removed Max; his groans of pain echoed off the cement walls as they wheeled him into the hospital. He was escorted by the ever present guards in their bulletproof

vests and sidearms. A doctor met them at the door and took charge.

“What've we got?”

“Acute renal failure. He's been on dialysis for the past week and is on his off day. Complained of severe lower back pain. He was observed for a few hours before ambulance was dispatched. Fluid output in those two hours has been zero. Patient states that he has not passed any fluid today even though being on I.V. drip. BP 160 over 110.” The ambulance driver enjoyed his roll. Doctors never listened to him but, because of the armed escort, importance seemed to have attached itself to him today.

“Get him into exam room one.” The doctor looked at the officers. “Only one of you can go in, there isn't enough room for you both.” The officer in charged started to argue but the doctor cut him off. “The one that doesn't go in can be right outside the door. I'm sure that will be safe enough.”

The lead guard nodded his head in agreement and signal with his eyes for his partner to go inside. Pissing matches with the doctors were no new thing. Doctors hated anyone that rivaled them for authority and were constantly protecting their territory. Rules were bent all the time for the sake of expediency.

Dressed in his prison uniform, which looked remarkably like hospital scrubs, Max lay in the fetal position on the gurney that was used to transport him. His knees were drawn up tight to his chest, his chin tucked down; the universal sign of someone in pain.

The doctor asked him if he'd be able to slide over to the examining table and lie on his back. Moaning with pain Max did as requested, sweat dripping from his forehead from the strain.

“Now can you roll onto your right side for me?”

Max tried to roll but was unable. He reached for the guard with his shackled hands. “Can you help me roll on my side, I can't do it myself.” The guard jumped up from his chair eager to assist, he grabbed Max's hand, for leverage, and pulled him to his side. The guard then retreated back to his former resting spot. Bending over him the doctor placed the stethoscope on Max's lower back; first the left side then the right.

“Hmm,” he said, “roll back over and lie flat please I need to listen to your chest and stomach.”

When he did, Max turned his head and gagged. “Doc can you give me something for the pain?”

“In a minute, I have to listen to your chest.” He stopped abruptly and stood straight. “I need the cuffs and waist chain off him.”

The guard stared at him in disbelief. “No way Doc, they stay on.” He was new and wasn't going to lose this federal job and all the perks for a scumbag like Max Baxter.

“I'm *telling* you they have to come off. I can't exam him with them on. Besides he needs an MRI and there can't be any metal on him.”

The guard didn't appreciate the doctor's tone of voice, as though he was talking to a petulant child. His first instinct was to tell the doctor what he thought of him. However, being so new to the job he thought better of it and nodded his head to the side.

“Ask my boss.” The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees from the look the doctor gave the guard.

“Fine!” The doctor pulled the door open so violently it banged against the wall, the outside guard jumped up from his chair reaching for his gun.

“I need the handcuffs off of this man immediately. I can't examine him with them on. He is very sick and time is of the essence.” The doctor stood tall, shoulders squared, fist clenched at his side.

“Hey Doc, how about coming out of the room a little slower next time? You scared the shit out of me.” The guard's hand dropped from the butt of his gun.

The rail thin guard didn't look like he could afford many more frights like that one. Even with the bullet proof vest his chest was slightly concave. On his best day, after a Thanksgiving dinner, he would weigh in under a buck fifty.

He walked inside the room and said to his partner, “watch and learn rookie.”

The thin guard took one handcuff off of Max's right wrist. He closed the cuff as though there was a wrist still in it.

“See how his left wrist is still cuffed?” he continued, “and by closing the one I just took off he can't pull that side of the cuff through the waist-chain loop.” He gave the doctor a quick smile but frowned when he was met with an ice cold stare. “He has plenty of leeway now to move. Leave the leg irons on.” The doctor started to protest but the guard reached for the door and glared at him, daring him to say

anything else, as he slowly closed it. “That's how you open and close a door, Doc. Nice and easy.” The click of the latch ended the conversation.

Pissed at having been talked down to by a peon guard, the doctor mumbled to himself as he took his stethoscope out inserting the ends into his ears. He moved around the gurney and stood between the patient and the guard. The action was intentional. The doctor pulled a sharpened piece of metal, fashioned to look like a prison shank, from his waistband and deftly hid it up the sleeve of Max's thermal underwear that was commonly worn under prison uniforms.

On cue Max, with the theatrics of a veteren thesbian, went into spasms and convulsions. The bed shook and the rails screeched as metal rubbed against metal. Max was quivering like a wind-up toy with a broken spring. A little over the top, the doctor thought, but no one but an experienced eye would notice. He stepped to the other side of the bed and ordered the guard over to help him hold Max down until he could get a sedative into him.

The guard didn't hesitate; he was trained to respond in situations like this. Hell, he wanted to respond to situations like this. He grabbed Max on both shoulders and gently, but firmly, pushed him down onto the bed as he was trained to do. When he glanced over at the doctor, hoping for some praise for his fast action, he noticed that he had moved away from the bed but wasn't getting the promised shot – in that moment he understood he'd made a terrible mistake.

A hand wrapped around the back of the guard's neck and pulled him down towards the bed securing his head against Max's chest. The hidden shank bit deep into his neck severing his jugular. He tried to scream but Max pressed his face harder against his chest. As the guard's life-blood pumped from his body with each beat of his heart, he began to slowly lose his strength and an overwhelming weariness engulfed him. The rookie guard, for he would forever remain that, marveled at the lack of pain; even the severed artery didn't hurt much any longer as his brain flooded his body with hormones and chemicals. As the seconds raced by he stopped struggling, he had no energy left, and finally gave in to the longing to sleep. His last thoughts were of his wife and children and how much he would miss them.

Max held his boney index finger up to his mouth to indicate to the doctor that he should not make a sound. He slid from underneath the body of the dead guard, leaving it lying across the bed. Pools of the guard's blood had soaked the floor and he moved cautiously through the thick red goo; he didn't want to ruin everything by slipping and falling now. Grabbing the handcuff key from the guard's belt he

slowly removed the rest of the chains. It was important to do this quietly, so as not to rattle them, the guards were amazingly attuned to that sound and would bring an inspection.

Max motioned the doctor over to him. He was in his late forties, Max figured, but he looked much older. While he was almost six feet tall he must have weighed near 300 pounds; his hair was as sparse atop his head as women were in a men's prison, his teeth could have used a good whitening and his breath a freshner. And he sweat a lot whether from being fat or being scared Max didn't know or care, either way it was disgusting.

In contrast Max looked like a skeleton the doctor might have used to study as he trained in anatomy. Standing an inch taller than the doc, he was, easily, one hundred and fifty pounds lighter. His trademark thick hair had been damaged from the deprivation he'd put himself through to fake the kidney disease. But he still had much more than the doc and it was still jet black, as it had been the day he was born.

Leaning forward Max put his lips millimeters from the doctor's ear and whispered. "Open the door slightly and tell the other guard that you need help, then step back and I'll take care of the rest." The profusely sweating doctor swiped a hand across his forehead and nodded his understanding.

Standing at the door, hand on the knob, the doctor hesitated for a second to get his thoughts about him. Taking a deep breath he barely opened the door.

"Help me please," was all he said as he rushed back to the bed and stood over the guard as though attending him. The thin guard rushed in surveying the scene.

"What the fuck?" he managed to say before the shank bit deeply into the left side of his throat and sliced its way across to his right ear. He fell to the ground clutching at his throat in a futile attempt to staunch the flow of the warm fluid. Max ignored him.

"Give me your jacket and shoes," Max ordered, as he reached down and retrieved the guard's gun.

The sweat drenched, and now heavily breathing, doctor removed his white coat and kicked off his shoes without argument. He'd seen untold trauma in his time, but it had always been *after* the fact. Watching men die from his own deceit and actions was a whole other matter. He felt sick to his stomach. But not so sick that he forgot to ask about the money.

"The second part of the payment, and the pictures, will be sent to me?" The doctor squeaked out.

He needed the money desperately.

His frequent trips to the casino had gone poorly for him the last six months. He was behind on the mortgage payments, his son's private school tuition, and just about every other bill they had. He'd managed to hide the late bill notices from his wife but now the calls from debt collectors had started and he knew it would only be a matter of time before she found out.

This hadn't been his first brush with gambling and his wife had made it clear to him that any further digressions wouldn't be tolerated. He'd been clean for ten years but, lately, with the pressures of work and meeting his wife's ever increasing demand for money, he'd found himself drawn back to the thrill of the casino again.

His descent back had started slowly; winning a little, enough to relieve the financial strain on the home front. The casino people quickly designated him a VIP and comped him food, drinks and even house cash to use at their stores. He enjoyed the attention and being treated respectfully, although he knew they were paid to treat him like that, and this time he'd been sure he could control his addiction. He was just going to play enough to supplement his income while enjoying the rush of the game. He'd even met a new friend.

Frank, was playing craps on a Thursday night and was on a hot roll. The doctor had ridden that streak and made a lot of money. Afterward he'd invited his new friend to have a celebratory drink, on him of course, for winning him so much money. Frank accepted and they talked for several hours. There was no set "date" time, as women might do, but the next Thursday when the Doc showed up he found himself looking for Frank. He found him at the same craps table they'd played the week before. Their luck hadn't been as good but they had a drink afterwards anyway. When Frank mentioned he was going to be back at the casino that Saturday, they had agreed to meet up and try their luck. After all, he needed to make back the money he'd lost and he was due for a hot streak, he could just feel it.

The doctor had told his wife that he was pulling an extra shift that night at the hospital and drove to the casino, excited, like a young man defying his parents. He deserved this, he told himself as he drove north, sipping a cocktail on the way. Besides, if he could just hit that one big run his financial troubles would be over. He would stop gambling then, he knew he could this time.

He met up with Frank and they went directly to the craps table, ordering a couple of drinks from a long-legged young girl with a short dress. Their luck was running good and the drinks were flowing. The doctor was tipping generously and the short-skirted waitress supplied them new drinks before the

last ones had gone dry.

Those were his last memories. He awoke to find himself naked in a strange bed and Frank standing over him.

“Jesus, wake up will you.” Frank splashed a little more water onto the doctor's face.

“Alright, I'm awake. What the hell?” He sputtered wiping the water drops, with the clubs he call hands, from his face.

“You don't remember? Not surprising, I think I overdid the roofies last night. But hey I'm not a doctor and you're a big guy.”

“Roofies? What the fuck are you talking about? Why would you do that?”

“So I could take these.” Frank threw a pack of photos onto the bed. As he leafed through them the doctor's complexion grew ever whiter until he rushed to the bathroom and vomited. Frank stood in the doorway as the doctor bent over the toilet. The pimpled fat ass that stared back at him made him grimace; he wouldn't be able to un-see that.

“There's more bad news. You lost a lot of money last night. Fifty thousand to be precise.” The doctor vomited again. “The good news is I'm going to need a favor soon and your debt and the pictures will disappear without a trace if you do as I ask.”

“What is it you want me to do?” The doctor wiped his mouth with some toilet paper, sweat dripping into his eyes, stinging.

Frank tossed a stack of cash onto the floor of the bathroom. “There's twenty five thousand to get you over the hump. Another fifty will be coming your way after you do that favor for us.”

“Who is us?” he asked, but Frank ignored him.

“Doc, when I call and ask for your help don't disappoint me. Understand? If you do, the pictures will be sent to your wife and I'll make a personal visit soon after. Now get yourself cleaned up, checkout time is eleven.” Frank turned and walked out the door leaving the Doctor to lay on the floor of the bathroom, covered in vomit, wishing he were dead.

The call came several weeks later. All the doctor had to do was make sure he was working on a specific date at a specific time and to catch the emergency call from the federal prison around that time.

The shank he was to hide in his waist, could be found in the glove compartment of his car, which scared the hell out of him. Firstly, he didn't want anyone to get hurt and secondly, how could they get into his locked car?

And now, here he stood with two dead guards and a crazy man. He handed his coat over to the former prisoner.

“Thanks Doc. The money’s in your car. I wouldn't deposit it in a bank, they'll notice that right away. The pictures I think I'll keep. After all I may need your help again.” His smile left no doubt there would be another time and the doc had better not refuse.

“When they question you, play dumb. That shouldn't be hard. You tell them you were examining me, I overwhelmed the guard and threatened your life. Stick to that story and you will be fine.” Max pulled the white labcoat on; it was way too big for him but no one would notice. He turned to the doctor. “Oh yeah, don't alert anyone until you wake up.”

He smashed the butt of the guard’s gun into the side of the doctor’s head. The doctor fell to the ground groaning, his clothes soaking up the blood of the two guards.

Max peeked out the door into the hallway. Seeing no one he calmly stepped outside and closed the door behind him. His feet swam in the doctor's large shoes so he shuffled down the corridor. Grabbing a chart from outside another door, he pretended to study it as he made his way down the main hallway to the front of the hospital. The white coat allowed him to blend right in; no one gave him a second glance. As he shuffled down the corridor, the fluorescent bulbs gave off a familiar orange light. He winced. He'd had to stare at light like this every night for four years in prison and hated it. He held the clipboard up to block the nauseating orange glow as he walked by.

He glanced through the plate-glass windows that ran the length of the hall to his left, and saw the two guards who were waiting outside. They would be praying to their gods tonight, thanking that deity for giving them the perimeter duty. Still studying the chart, he walked out the front door, over to the brand new Lincoln that was waiting by the curb and slid into the passenger’s seat.

He looked across at the driver. “Good to see you Frank, now let’s get out of here.”

They pulled away from the curb as though they didn't have a care in the world.



## Chapter 2

Early morning calls were never good; for that matter phone calls at any time of the day were rarely a treat. Jake had learned to think of the phone as his enemy these last twenty-seven years as a U.S. Marshal. Ringing at all times of the day and night, one piece of bad news after another. Anymore he would almost recoiled when he heard the phone's ringer like a Pavlovian response, except instead of salivating, he flinched. Glancing at the caller ID he relaxed, it was his son, Brody, who had followed in his footsteps and now worked as a marshal in Minneapolis.

“What? You have a cooking question for your mother this early in the morning?” He said into the receiver by way of greeting, it wasn't unusual for Brody to call his mother with a cooking question. As foreign as it was to Jake, Brody and Lora shared a mutual love of it.

“Dad, it's Brody.” Jake immediately tensed. When the conversation started with 'Dad' and then his son announced himself, it was always bad. The pavlovian response had been the correct after all.

“Yeah, Brod, what's up? Is everything alright?” His stomach suddenly felt like he'd had too much coffee, though he hadn't touched a drop yet.

“Have you seen the news this morning?”

“No. I just got the coffee going? What happened?”

“Turn the news on, it's all over.” Jake clenched his jaw, he didn't like games. He grabbed the remote and hit the button. The local news lady was on.

“The big news today is the escape of Max Baxter from the Federal Medical Center in Rochester, Minnesota. Two correctional officers are known dead. A massive manhunt for Baxter is underway. Baxter was serving five life sentences...” Jake turned the sound down; he knew the rest of the story.

“Okay, I saw it. Are you working the case?”

Though technically Marshals have jurisdiction across the United States and its territories, Brody and Jake's other son, Zach, were assigned to the Minnesota district for day to day work. Meaning anything the Marshals had jurisdiction over in Minnesota would involve his sons.

“I am, so is Zach. But as you can imagine the FBI's all over this too. They're saying they have jurisdiction.”

Whenever there was a camera nearby the Bureau seemed to find a way to get involved.

“Keep your head down and do your job. Let the higher pay grades fight that battle,” he advised. “What do they have you doing?”

“Red October just arrived and we're getting it set up.”

Red October was the nick name for the mobile command center the Marshals used in emergencies. The name came from the Tom Clancy book about a rogue submarine. Jake thought the name was appropriate because once you entered the command center you were just as shut off from the outside world, just like in a sub.

“I just wanted to call and give you a heads up, especially since the escape is hitting so close to home.”

“I appreciate that, Brod. I'll keep an eye out. If you need anything let me know, ASAP.” Jake's mind wandered back to that time when he first dealt with Max.

“I gotta run, I'll keep in touch.” Brody hung up but Jake stood with the phone in his hand, lost in thought.

When Max chose to turn himself in to the Northern District of Iowa and then demanded to speak only with Jake it had caused a shit-storm that he hated to think about to this day. The memories of how upset the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's offices had been were still vivid in his mind; The hatred and frustration directed at him for something that he'd had zero control over; how they'd accused him of knowing Max, of setting his surrender up as a way to get publicity. They threatened to investigate him, hoping to find the connection and put him away for life.

Finally he'd had enough and told them to investigate to their little pricks content, but warned that when they found nothing they'd better beware of him from that day forward.

Both the FBI and U.S. Attorney's office had backed down quickly after that. Apologies were mumbled explaining they'd meant nothing by it... they were just doing their jobs... blah, blah, blah. Jake didn't want to hear any of it, the damage had been done. To see how fast the people he thought were friends could turn on him sickened him to the present day.

Once the other agencies had accepted the fact that there was nothing they could do about Max's request, they changed tactics from threats and harassment, to trying to establish control. Each agency now wanted to make Jake a mouthpiece for their respective offices; trying to feed him questions, writing them out for him as if he were a child, asking him to wear a small earpiece so they could feed him questions as the interview went along. A puppet.

Truth be told he wouldn't have minded the help so much, if they hadn't been so condescending about it. Marshals find people. Rarely do they have to build long, complicated cases for prosecution. There was an art to that type of work and the FBI were the best at it. Jake prided himself on knowing what he didn't know and asking the experts when in doubt. Hell, he would have asked them for help.

The easiest thing in the world would have been to pout and tell them all to pound sand. Thinking back on it he was glad his professionalism won out.

He smoothed things over with his boss, the chief deputy of the district, who'd threatened to shoot the next FBI or U.S. Attorney who talked down to or ordered them to do one more thing; a threat that Jake half believed.

The room where the interview was to take place was a small 8X6 box that was usually reserved for defense attorneys to talk to their clients. The walls were covered with ceramic tiles on the prisoner side and a very fine, but strong, metal mesh screen divided the room in two. Stainless steel metal desks protruded from each side of the screen but allowed the attorney and prisoner to make face to face contact. The prisoner side had a circular stainless steel seat with no back, bolted into a cement floor, to sit on. The attorney side was given a standard government issued straight-backed wooden chair.

The chief had allowed the room to be wired for sound and video for this occasion; another perk of having the FBI involved: almost unlimited funds.

The questions had been written down for him in a specific order; another thing that had caused hard feelings, but this time between the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's office. Each wanted to write the questions and have them asked in a certain order. Jake knew it for what it was: a pissing match, and nothing more. He let them fight it out.

In the end Jake agreed to an earpiece as he was playing the part of the POD, Plain Old Deputy, and just wanted to get the circus over with.

When the time came for the interview it felt very odd to Jake to be sitting on the attorney/agent side

of the table when his partners brought Max into the room. Usually he was the one delivering the prisoners to agents for interviews, not vice versa. He caught his partners smirking as they brought Max into the room and locked the door behind them. It was no secret that Jake was nervous about the interview, his younger partners had teased him unmercifully, each saying out loud that they'd take the career making assignment from him if they could. Jake knew that secretly they were thanking their lucky stars that they didn't have to do it.

Max was seated across from him in full restraints. The prisoner could stand but couldn't move anywhere. Standard stuff.

Once they were seated Jake looked down at the sheet of questions to ask and started with the first one.

“Mr. Baxter would you state your full name?”

“Maxwell Thaddeus Baxter.”

Jake wrote the information down on his yellow legal notepad. He wasn't sure why, the whole thing was being taped from several different angles, habit he guessed. Before asking the next question Jake took a second to take in the man who was causing all of the problems.

Max was tallish and thin, but not unhealthily. He had a full head of black hair and looked to be in his late forty's. He was dressed in a flannel shirt that was now un-tucked. The tan khaki pants made him look more like a yuppie than a person who would carry a finger around in his pocket. The bad guys never seemed to look the way he thought they should. No identifying marks to spot them as psychos.

“Date of birth?”

“November seventeenth, nineteen sixty.”

“Social security number?”

“Jake, you have all of this information from my booking sheet. Let's not waste our time together.”

Jake looked at the cameras and shrugged. “First, for the record, let me read you your Miranda rights.”

“I understand, please do.” The camera footage would show Jake reading Max his Miranda rights from a piece of paper. He could have recited it from memory but he wanted to do everything by the

book. There was going to be no slip-up on something as fundamental as that.

“Do you understand these rights as I have read them to you?” Jake asked.

“Perfectly, you did a wonderful job.” Max smirked.

“Alright, let’s get to it. Where did the finger come from?”

Jake knew there was swearing going on in the other room that would make a sailor blush. He was off script from the first question onward.

“From my latest victim, a young girl from Minneapolis I believe.”

“Where is she now?” Jake's voice raised involuntarily.

“I believe you have her in the morgue. Or more precisely the state of Minnesota has her in their morgue.” Max's eyes widened just a touch but Jake thought he could see a hint of a smile in them. “You see, the finger comes from my latest victim. I am the one that the FBI has been chasing these last three years. I am the one that has killed five girls and displayed their bodies in the malls.”

He sat back in his chair and smiled a smug smile. He was enjoying this immensely. The bomb had been dropped and the damage was greater than he could have hoped. The look on Jake's face was priceless. A semi-routine murder case had just turned into the case of the century. Rumbling sounds from the other side of the ceramic wall, that Max was sure held agents and attorneys, told him that everyone was acting appropriately. This was his time to shine.

“You're the one they call the Exhibitionist?” Jake managed to choke out.

Max's face flushed crimson, spittle escaped. “Don't use that idiotic name!” He was straining against his chains, his muscle's flexing. “How could they come up with such an unimaginative title for me? The dullards in the FBI and press sicken me.”

Jake stored away the reaction he'd elicited for future use. The significance of the situation had taken on a tenfold meaning. No longer was he dealing with a local nut. He had before him the man that had dominated the National news for the past three years. The man that had taken five teenage girls from five different malls in five different Midwest cities. The man who caused every parent in the Midwest to keep their children from the malls for fear of them being kidnapped, causing untold economic harm to those cities.

“Why?” was all Jake could think to ask.

“Why what, Marshal? Why did I kidnap them? Why did I kill them? Why did I display their bodies at the malls I'd taken them from? You will have to be more precise with your questions.” Max was enjoying himself greatly, toying with this so-called star who was clearly out of his depth. Max had chosen Jake based on an article in the USA Today, declaring him the nation's top Man Hunter. The story chronicled Jake's accomplishments over his career and had dared to suggest that if the FBI would only let Jake have a shot at finding the man they'd nicknamed “The exhibitionist” he would have him in custody within months, if not weeks.

“Okay, why kill those girls? Why turn yourself in? Why the Marshals?” Jake removed the earpiece, the agents and attorneys were shouting questions and instructions so loud and fast it was distracting him.

“I'll answer your questions in order. First, why kill those girls. The answer is, I was bored. I was bored with life and all aspects of it. And because I am bored I like to play games to try to alleviate my boredom. I decided to play the 'catch me if you can' game. But, as I have said, the FBI failed miserably at it and I, once again, became bored.” He spoke as a teacher would to a pupil.

“Your second question is why turn myself in. The answer is I took no great pleasure in killing those girls, it was just part of the game. When the FBI flailed around so horribly I decided to end it. Besides, I thought it might be fun to rub the FBI's noses in their failure. I also thought it was time for my due, for some notoriety. I'd stumped the world's best. It was time I was given credit for it. The trial and coverage will fulfill that.” He looked directly into the camera and raised his middle finger.

“Lastly, why did I decide to talk only to a Marshal, you specifically? For that reason you will have to wait. But I will give you a hint. Have you ever heard or read this Hemingway quote?” Max leaned back in his chair, a far off look on his face. He started reciting.

*“Certainly there is no hunting like the hunting of man and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never really care for anything else thereafter. You will meet them doing various things with resolve, but their interest rarely holds because after the other thing ordinary life is as flat as the taste of wine when the taste buds have been burned off your tongue’.”*

Jake nodded. Every Marshal had heard that quote, in some fashion or other. Marshals were known as Man-hunters, hunting fugitives every day of their professional lives. Many thought Hemingway was

speaking about them when he wrote those words.

“I heard that you excel at hunting men, Jake. Now that is all I will say on that matter.” The smile on Max’s face told Jake how much he was enjoying this game. He had them all dancing like puppets on a string. Jake stood and turned to the door.

“Marshal, where are you going?”

“I’m bored and I don’t like games.” He walked out and never spoke another word to Max Baxter.

And now Baxter had escaped and was on the run. He was still pulling the strings, Jake thought, as the phone rang again. He wondered what Brody had forgotten to tell him.

“Hello?”

“Marshal Mathews, Jake, do you know who this is?” Jake knew instantly but would not give him the satisfaction.

“No, who?”

He could hear the laughing on the other end of the phone. “Very good, Marshal. I see that you haven’t lost your wit in the many years we’ve been apart.”

“Don’t tell me, you’re bored so you killed those poor guards and wanted to tell me about it.”

“You are correct Marshal. I am bored and I did kill those guards. But I am going to give you your chance at stopping me. I have chosen you to play the next game and I know how much you like games.”

“What if I don’t want to play?”

“Well, that is your prerogative, Marshal. Of course the death of three women will be on your conscience if you don’t.”

Jake’s stomach fell through the floor. “What three women?”

“That will be part of the game. I’ll call you at your office in, say, two hours at 9:00 sharp? Does that give you enough time to have your coffee and breakfast and get down there?” Jake heard Max laughing as he hung up the phone. He walked over to the sink and splashed water on his face. It was going to be a long day.

### Chapter 3

Frank slowed so as not to miss the long private gravel driveway. Clouds smothered the moon's luminescence so his ability to see was limited to the end of his headlights. Max started awake as the vehicle slowed.

"We there?" He asked rubbing his hands over his still pasty face. Reaching for the bottle of Gatorade, he took a long swallow and sighed. The effects of having dehydrated himself for the past weeks were still with him. It hadn't been easy faking kidney failure without access to chemicals or drugs. The doctors had suspected he might be doing something of the sort when he first showed signs of his kidneys failing. They pumped him full of fluids and put him in the infirmary to watch over him. Lucky for him the charge nurse was on the downside of her mandatory twenty for retirement with the state and kept less than an eagle eye on her patients. Still it'd taken all his cunning and ingenuity to rid his body of the fluids without notice. Urinating into bottles when no one was looking and hiding them until he could dump them, often adding his to another patient's when Nurse Retirement wasn't watching.

The vomiting had been a little harder. Doing it quiet enough so no one could hear had taken a lot of practice. In his cell, at night, he would teach himself to regurgitate without waking his cellmate. His life had been hard and full of deprivation for the last six months and he was ready to relax, nurture himself back to health and have some fun playing the game with the marshal.

"Just got here. How you feeling?"

“Better, but I still haven't peed yet. I hope I didn't do any major damage to my kidneys.” He took another long drink from the bottle. “But if I did I know where I can get another one, right Frank?” Max smiled as though it was a joke, they both knew it wasn't.

“Sure, mom wouldn't have it any other way.” Frank's grip on the steering wheel grew a little tighter, his knuckles a little whiter. He'd felt a great sense of relief when Max had fallen asleep minutes into the trip. Brothers or not they had little in common and found it hard to talk to each other except about the family business.

“Yes, that is what mother would want, but what about you? Wouldn't you want to give me a kidney of your own accord? You know, helping out your little brother and all? Your little brother who pays all the bills?”

“Of course, anything you need. You know that. Whatever you need is what I get.” Max laughed and slapped him on the back. Frank was glad that was over. Max's need for constant reinforcement could wear on a person, even Frank.

“You know I can't help it. I'm a genius. That's just the way it happened. I'm the one that keeps us afloat financially, so my needs have to be looked after. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know Max, I know. But, hey, let's get you in the house and fixed up.” Frank didn't have the energy to go through the whole build up your ego thing with Max again.

He'd been driving for the last five hours and was exhausted himself. It had been a long day, waiting outside the prison waiting for an ambulance to be summoned. Following it to the hospital and then waiting for Max to escape. Then the long drive home. But now he only had to go a hundred yards, down the driveway and the coming home party could start; the prodigal son returning.

Pine trees lined either side of the long drive, gravel crunched under the tires' weight as they made their way to the house. Frank shivered although he wasn't sure why.

Frank and their mother had bought the remote lake shore property, just north of Bayfield, Wisconsin shortly after Max had turned himself in and upon Max's instructions. The surrender had taken them both by surprise and their mother had been beside herself with grief and disbelief, until she discovered the money Max supplied would continue to come in. She mourned the loss of her son to the penal system with lavish and outlandish shopping sprees, once a week spa treatments and a bottle of alcohol every night.

Doing the unexpected was the norm for Max. Ever since he'd been a child he'd done what he wanted, with little regard for others. Before Max's gift was discovered, his disregard for the rules and their consequences brought him nothing but trouble from their parents, his mother specifically. Her rule over the house, and all things to do with the family, had never been questioned or in doubt from the first day of her marriage. Their father was an afterthought; a shadow that sat in the corner, who brought home a pay check and joined them for dinner.

Their mother had done everything in her power to bring Max under her control, just as she'd done with Frank and their father. But no amount of beatings or punishment could seem to tame Max. He had an inhuman ability to tolerate pain. Some of the beatings had been so severe that Frank had stepped in on occasion to stop her from killing him. Not that Max cared or appreciated it. Later Frank stepped in more so he wouldn't have to witness them, than out of a sense of concern.

As Frank thought back on those incidents he suddenly realized that Max never cried, at least not from physical pain. Max had cried out of frustration on occasion, but never from pain.

A memory of one particularly intense fight flooded Frank's mind. Max had had an idea for something, Frank couldn't remember what exactly, and was told by their mother that he couldn't do it. Max had become livid; livid at the thought that someone, who he considered his intellectual inferior – everyone in other words – was trying to tell him what to do. Frank had found him in the garage pouring gasoline out of a can. When Frank asked what he planned on doing Max had simply stated he was going to burn the house down with their parents in it. He announced that he couldn't live with someone who didn't recognize his right to make decisions for himself, no matter his age. Their mother had caught the two of them cleaning the mess up after Frank had spent hours calming him down. Frank wasn't sure but to this day he believed that incident was the turning point in his mother's relationship with Max. He remembered seeing what he thought was fear in her eyes. A person who had always been fearless.

The war of wills between the two of them continued for a few more years but Max won more and more battles. When the school councilors declared Max a genius that ended the battles. Their mother had become subservient from that point on, deferring to Max's superior intellect, as she called it. On one occasion Frank remembered their father making an attempt at exerting his authority. He tried to reason with their mother that just because Max was smart didn't mean he knew all the answers. Experience counted for something. Their mother had laughed and chastised their father as being slow witted and dull, incapable of understanding Max's true gift. With a sigh, their father had taken his seat

back in the rocking chair in the corner and never interfered again.

The front door to the house flew opened as the car came to a stop. Their mother, a slender woman with a cigarette drooping from her fingers, stood in the entrance. Her platinum hair teased to heights that would make a billy-goat dizzy. She wore leopard print pants so tight the struggle to pull them on would have been worthy of a purple heart in most war zones. The low cut v-neck shirt exposed tanned, wrinkled skin that screamed melanoma as the two surgically enhanced breasts it covered battled for room.

“Maxie, finally!” She held her arms open as he shuffled over to her.

She engulfed him in a hug which he did not return, while never spilling a drop of her drink or letting the ash of her cigarette fall.

“Why are you dressed like *that*?” Max made no attempt to disguise the disgust in his voice.

She looked herself over quickly, “Like what?” She pouted.

“Like a Peg Bundy lookalike,” he mumbled as he walked into the living room, examining the house his money had bought but that he'd never seen.

“Who's Peg Bundy?” she asked flicking ashes into her hand and turning her head from Max to Frank and back again. They both ignored her.

“So this is how you've been spending my money?”

“It's what you asked for. Secluded and on the shores of Lake Superior. We have ten acres with the nearest neighbor over a thousand yards away through thick forest. There's a boat dock and a 30 foot boat as you requested.”

For all her appearances his mother was as sharp as ever. It was, indeed, exactly as he had asked.

“I want to see them.”

“Max you just got home, don't you want to rest a little first They'll be plenty of time for that later.”

His face grew red as she stuttered the words out. She took a great gulp from her drink.

“Nothing changes does it? You're still trying to have everything your way, trying to control me. Well I won't have it! Do you understand, I won't have it!” Max screamed, taking a few steps towards

their mother.

“Now settle down Maxie, no one is trying to control you. I'm your mother, I was just trying to do what's best for you. You know that.” She turned to Frank. “He knows that doesn't he?”

Frank shrugged his shoulders; he was tired of everything.

“Take your brother down stairs to show him the girls.” Their mother ordered Frank.

“I'm tired, I've just driven five hours and been awake for twenty-four. I need to sleep.” Frank protested. “He can find the basement himself.”

She turned to Max searching his face to determine his preference. Seeing nothing but a blank stare she took the safest route.

“Frank'll take you down there, I don't like to go. It, kinda, creeps me out.” Within two minutes of returning home she had managed to turn both of them into young boys again. “I just don't understand your need for that sort of thing. With your brains you could do anything you want to. I'll never understand what I did to make you like this.” She flicked more ash into her hand, looking out the kitchen sliding glass door to the lake below them.

The three of them stood saying nothing, each with their own thoughts.

“The basement door is over here,” Frank said, finally breaking the silence. Max stood for several more seconds, everyone held their breath. They let it out silently when he made a slight forward motion with his chin, Frank started down the stairs.

The basement was unfinished. The walls were solid concrete with the faux brick imprints from the forms. The floor was unadorned concrete except for a few old rugs that had been thrown down as an afterthought. Max stopped to listen and smiled when he couldn't hear anything from upstairs; he didn't want the girls to listen in on their conversations.

Frank unlocked a gray metal door built into another solid concrete wall. Max had insisted on the concrete even though it was an interior wall. Stepping through the door Max looked to his left and right. Exactly as he had ordered. The concrete walls had been furred out with twelve inch thick wooden walls. These had then been insulated with a spray on foam that expanded to the thickness of the studs. The same had been done for all of the walls and ceiling. Plywood had then been used to cover the insulation, instead of drywall. Not a sound could escape.

Frank had had to think fast on his feet when the carpenters he'd hired wondered what the room could be used for. He'd told them it was a sound room for his music. They were used to working with the rich and eccentric and shrugged it off as another foolish way the rich had found to waste money.

The floors were covered with a black rubber material, the kind found in gymnasiums to absorb the sound of the weights dropping. In the corner sat a stainless steel, one piece toilet and sink. Max had refused to look at the three girls huddled in the corner, backs resting on the walls of the room.

"Nice work, Frank. Not exactly how I would have done it, but not bad. Now if you wouldn't mind, please introduce me to our guests." Hands locked behind his back he turned ever so slightly and acknowledged the girls for the first time.

"The one on the left is Deb, she was the first."

Deb Lorrigan was resting her head on her drawn up knees. At hearing her name she leaped to her feet stomping towards the men.

"What the fuck!" she screamed, pointing a finger, "I want the fuck out of this fuckin' place now!" She took another step closer, to within inches of the men. "Do you understand me?"

Neither Frank nor Max moved a muscle. Then Max, with his hands still locked behind his back, closed the small gap between him and her. He was so close that Deb could feel the fine hairs on his nose touching hers. She stood her ground with shaking legs.

"Do you know what courage is, Deb?" He didn't wait for a response. "It's doing something brave, even when you're scared silly inside. You, Deb, are brave. You are bravely standing up to me even though it is obvious you are scared. I applaud you for that. You'll need that quality again, soon." He turned his back to her and walked over to Frank. "Nicely done."

Frank smiled to himself, his younger brother's praise was still a valuable commodity that he coveted. He watched as Deb walked back to the small group of girls.

When Max first ordered him to abduct three women for his game, odd as it may sound to the casual observer, the request didn't even warrant a raised eyebrow from Frank. He was no longer surprised by anything Max did, said or ordered. From their earlier exploits of kidnapping girls from shopping malls, it went without saying that the new batch of girls would also come from these modern daycare centers. Frank asked Max once if there was some meaning behind taking the girls from the malls. Max had

stood silent for several minutes, then said, “No significance, just plenty of potential victims and a large audience.” Frank had left it at that.

The mall of America had been Frank’s first choice of hunting ground, and where he had found Deb. On his hunting trips to the malls he didn't have a specific type he was looking for, no particular model of the perfect women. There were guidelines, some self imposed and others mandated by Max, that he followed.

First, the victim had to be at least sixteen years of age, preferably eighteen. Frank had never understood this rule, not that he would have gone any younger even if he could, but it almost smacked of caring. A concept foreign to Max. He'd asked once why the rule was in place but never received a satisfactory answer. He hadn't cared enough to pursue the matter.

Secondly, the victim had to be female. Max was not interested in males. Frank was sure it had something to do with the oedipal nonsense between their mother and Max. He didn't care, it was easier for him. Young men, testosterone coursing through their bodies, clouding their judgment were just plain trouble. They didn't know enough yet to fear death and wanted nothing more than to prove themselves as men. In other words they were powder kegs waiting for a match. Frank had no problem with this rule.

Third, no parents. If the parents were around then the child was off limits. This was more Frank’s rule than Max's. Parents noticed missing children too fast if they were with them. A high school girl, at the mall with friends, may not be missed for hours. But if she was there with her mother, half hour tops. That wasn't enough time to get clear of the place. Too risky.

For Frank's part he preferred young college girls. They were usually away from their families for the first time in their lives, enjoying their new freedom. Full of energy and optimism, brimming with confidence that nothing or no one could hurt them, they were such easy victims.

Lastly, only one victim from each mall. This rule stemmed from their kidnapping and killing days. Once a mall had been victimized by Max it would stay too hot for too long to be used again. It just wasn't practical to wait for it to cool down, so they moved on. Frank assumed this rule didn't apply to the situation at hand as enough time had passed.

When Frank had surveilled the mall of America this last time for prey, Deb had immediately jumped out at him. Her short, jet black hair contrasted with her alabaster skin giving her a statue like

quality. She had a small nose ring, that was barely visible, and a large tattoo of Tweety Bird on her left breast that was *very* visible. Jeans and a V-neck t-shirt with retro purple Converse tennis shoes rounded out her attire. Everything about her and the small group of friends she was hanging out with, screamed rebel. At this age, Frank was guessing eighteen and well within the rules, the rebel type was full of the spunk and determination he was looking for. She would put up the type of fight that Max wanted.

Kidnapping Deb had not been particularly hard. He'd followed her and her friends as they left the mall. An element of luck helped as Deb veered off from the group and got into a car by herself. If she'd been with a friend it would have complicated – yes that was probably the best word – things, but it wouldn't have been a deal breaker. Her friend would have simply become a victim. He was glad for the reprieve, he didn't enjoy killing like Max did, he just did what he had to do to help Max.

Making sure her friends had left the parking lot Frank had followed Deb at a safe distance as he scanned the immediate vicinity for a secluded place to make his move. It wasn't long before a nice open stretch of road with industrial businesses lining it gave him the opening he needed.

As both cars slowed for a stop sign Frank bumped into Deb fairly aggressively. This wasn't the first time Frank had done this and was practiced at it. If he bumped her car too softly then she might be inclined to just waive the damage off and leave. If too hard he risked injuring her. It had to be just right.

Frank wasn't disappointed by Deb's reaction. Leaping from the car, slamming her door behind her she stomped to the back of her car cursing a blue streak.

“What the fuck, man?” she screamed. “How the hell didn't you notice me stopping?”

“I'm so sorry, it's all my fault.”

Frank took on a mild-mannered persona. He found that people responded to the wounded animal quality and most wanted to help.

“Goddamn right it was your fault. Fuck, this is the last thing I need.” Deb slammed her fist against the trunk of the car.

“I'd really like to take care of this without involving our insurance companies if we could,” Frank said, “I have cash and can settle it right now.”

Greed, the great motivator, was at work; he could see her eyes light up at the mention of cash.

“I don't know,” she said, taking a slightly more conciliatory tone, “I really love this car and want to make sure it's fixed right.”

“Of course, of course,” Frank agreed averting his eyes, looking at the ground. “Can we both drive up to that parking lot ahead and work this out?” He looked around quickly. “I don't want anyone to call the police because then we'd have to file a claim.”

Deb looked at him for a moment. “You're not going to try and take off on me, are you?”

“Oh no, I promise I won't go anywhere without you.” He smiled inwardly at his own joke.

“All right, but I'll be watching you,” she said as she walked back to the driver's door.

The parking lot was attached to a factory and was only a quarter full. It must have been designed to hold all the workers before industrial jobs were sent overseas. Deb slowed to pull into a slot but Frank honked and waived at her to go further on. He saw her shrug her shoulders in irritation but she did it anyway. After fifty yards she looked in the rearview mirror and held up her hands. Frank nodded his agreement and they pulled in side by side. He rolled down his window and she did the same.

“Sorry about that, I just don't want security coming out and bothering us,” Frank mumbled, “Come over to my car and we can work out a price.”

“Jesus, you make me feel like a prostitute when you say it like that.”

She laughed loudly at her own joke, Frank joined in. Deb walked over to his driver's side window.

“Why don't you hop in the passenger side,” he said nonchalantly as he reached for his wallet.

“Nah, I'm fine right here. Now what were you thinking as far as money?” They haggled for several minutes over a number, one Frank was never going to pay anyway, until he reached into his wallet and pulled out a wad of notes, counting out the agreed upon amount.

“Jesus, do you always carry that much cash?” She looked around quickly as though someone might be hiding, ready to jump out to rob the feeble old man.

“I hate credit. Now, is that the amount we settled on?” He held the money in his hand which he rested on his lap.

“Yeah that looks right,” she said, reaching in to grab the money before he changed his mind. The

amount was more than her whole car was worth.

With shocking speed Frank had grabbed her wrist and jabbed a needle into it. She started to pull back and protest but within seconds her head was swimming and she could barely stand.

“What the hell...” she mumbled, before she slumped forward.

Frank was still holding her wrist firmly and he also had a grip on her upper arm now. As she slumped forward he pulled the top half of her body into the car through the open window. Once he was sure that she wouldn't be able to put up a fight he opened the door, with her pinned tightly to it, and in one fluid motion he let go of her wrist, grabbed it again from the outside of the car and swung it over his shoulder. Glancing around to see if anyone was watching he slowly walked her over to the passenger side of the car, opened the door and helped her in. The lorazepam he'd given her was the perfect drug for Franks work.

The rest is history, as they say and Deb became captive number one.

“Our next guest comes to us from the Milwaukee area. Her name is Lexy and she has a penchant for the shopping malls. Lexy has been with us for nine or ten days now. Lexy, which is it?”

Lexy Meyer sat with her back against the wall. She pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her head on top of her knees. Wearing an oversized flannel shirt with dirty jeans and black, untied army boots, she was still very pretty. Frank had removed the gothic rings she usually wore on every finger. No sense getting hit with a fistful of metal if you didn't have to. While Frank found the piercings on her nose, ears, and – yes he'd checked – on her nipples off-putting, he still found her strangely appealing.

“I would appreciate an answer when a question has been asked.” Max said, keeping his distance for the moment.

“I won't play your games.” She sobbed into the top of her knees.

“I'm so happy you have made the connection, Lexy. We *are* playing a game and you are part of it. I like that you reasoned that out for yourself.” Pausing for effect he continued, “However, I believe you have resigned yourself to the fact that you are going to die, and I don't like that. You seem defeated.” Another sob escaped from her throat before she could catch it. “I want someone who will fight to the end. So, to give you some hope, Lexy, I will let you know that there is a chance you will live. A very small one, but one all the same. Does that make you feel better?”

After a pause she gave an almost imperceptible nod of her head.

“Excellent.” Max gave Frank a sharp look. There was no misinterpreting the message, he'd failed with Lexy. “And our final person?”

“Lastly we have Emily. As you can tell she is our only African American contestant. Emily is our newest addition. She's been here just under a week now. Emily and I met in the Madison, Wisconsin area.”

“Please, please let me go. My father is a doctor and has a lot of money. He'll pay whatever you ask.” She was sobbing and had fallen to her knees in front of them.

“Emily, do I look like I need money?” He waived his hand through the air as if to display all his wealth. He laughed. “How stupid of me, all you've seen is this little room. You don't know how wealthy I am.” He glanced at Frank and shrugged his shoulders in a theatrical way as if to say, oops. “Well, you'll just have to take my word for it. So, you see Emily, I don't want your father's money.”

Turning to Frank he said, “Why did you pick Emily? She doesn't seem to have any of the qualities that I asked for?”

Frank shrugged his shoulders, returning the oops. “I was running out of time. She is very smart and athletic, she's at the university on a track scholarship. All athletes have the determination that you're looking for, especially ones that receive scholarships to division one level schools.”

“Emily, you have been holding out on me.” Max looked at her, tilting his head in a quizzical way. “We'll have to get you some new clothes for where you're going.”

She looked down at the short, skin tight pink dress. She felt so silly having worn it now. Her friends had harassed her until she'd bought it, saying she needed to move out of her comfort zone. It wasn't her taste or style but she'd relented. Now she wished so much she hadn't. She felt absolutely naked in it. Pulling on the bottom of the dress she noticed her bare feet. She'd had a pair of black high heels on when she was taken but she hadn't seen those since.

“Emily, you will need all of your athletic ability, both mental and physical, over the next few days. I hope you will not disappoint me.” Clapping his hands together he turned to Frank. “All in all, acceptable. Now it's time I get some sleep in preparation for tomorrow. I suggest you all do the same.”

He turned to leave but Lexy jumped up.

“Stop, please,” She said, “what are you going to do to us?”

Max looked at Frank then back to the girls. What harm can it do to tell them he thought?

“Tomorrow you will all be shuttled over to a deserted island. Before we leave I will fit each of you with a collar, similar to a dog’s shock collar, which will have an explosive charge in it. I have given a United States Marshal two days in which to rescue all of you and kill me. All the while I will be hunting the Marshal. If, after two days, he has not killed me then I will kill all of you with the push of a button.” Staring at the stunned girls he felt an arousal that he hadn't felt in some time. “Now, like I said, try and get some sleep.”

He laughed at his own joke, there would be no sleeping after that speech. Max walked up the stairs with Frank.

The girls huddled together. No one said anything. They held each other tighter.

“You've done well, Frank. I'm somewhat pleased with all of your choices. Is everything ready for tomorrow?”

“Of course. I have all the collars, the clothing, the boat, everything’s ready.” Stopping in the hallway at the top of the stairs Frank couldn't think of anything else to say. He'd done his job to the best of his ability. “I'm going to get some sleep.” Frank said, walking down the hallway.

Max didn't bother to try and talk to his brother any longer. When he was in one of his moods it was best to leave him alone. He walked into the kitchen and found his mother.

“You must be one of the last people on earth to still smoke.” His mother was absently flicking ashes into her hand.

“Maxie, why is it that you do what you do?”

The question was so unexpected that even Max was stunned into silence for a moment. They, as a family, had never talked it.

“Jesus, must we?”

“What did I do wrong? Why are you like this?” His mother sobbed into her glass as she took

another drink.

“Why do fish swim? Why do you breathe air? It's just the way it is.” He filled a glass with water and took a long drink, more to give himself time to think than from thirst.

“But even though you have these urges why do you act on them? Isn't that what separates us from the animals? Self-control? An ability to know right from wrong?” The ashes dropped on the kitchen floor and she grabbed for the corner of the countertop to steady herself.

“You have to care about social conventions in order to be ruled by them. I am an animal, as are all of us. The fact that most of you have decided to live by a set of rules is your problem. I've decided not to live by those rules. I do as I want, as I desire, as animals do. I dare say I am much happier than most people.”

“But if everyone did as they wish, what would the world be like? Wouldn't it be chaos?”

“As opposed to what? How it is now?” Max rarely let a chance to lecture on the plight of mankind go by but he didn't have it in him this time. He'd never been able to argue with his mother.

“How are our finances?” He changed the subject. His mother continued to stare out the window for several more seconds before taking a deep breath.

“That program thing you wrote is still working. The money is coming in steady as ever.”

“It's a trading algorithm. Something no one else has ever been able to do, successfully, for this amount of time.”

He'd written a program that exploited a flaw in the stock markets. No one had figured it out yet and the funny thing was it wasn't even illegal. Granted when, or if, it was ever discovered changes would be made; the program would stop working and laws would be changed to make sure it never happened again. But until then he would continue to make tens of millions a year and would never need money again – freeing up his time for other activities.

Frank lay in his bed staring at the ceiling. He should have been exhausted, hell he was exhausted, but he couldn't sleep. He wanted to see her, the one named Lexy. He'd grown to like her during the little time they'd had together. She seemed different than the other girls. She was pretty, there was no doubt of that, but there was something more. She had a vulnerability about her that made Frank want to help her, protect her, despite the tough girl act she put on. He'd known it from the first time he saw her

in the mall.

She'd been with a girlfriend. Frank had considered the other girl for a moment but dismissed her, it was Lexy who interested him. The two girls had come out of a store, laughing; something Lexy did a lot, Frank had come to discover. Following behind them were two boys panting like dogs in heat. Dressed in their silly baseball hats, turned sideways, they'd followed the girls down the corridor into the next shop. The tall one, the leader, talked loudly so the girls could hear, joking with them and making a general ass out of himself to draw attention. The girls hadn't seemed to mind at first. But as his antics became louder and more obnoxious, Frank sensed that the girls were uncomfortable. He watched the scene play out over the course of half an hour and almost intervened. He was glad he hadn't.

Finally, Lexy had turned on the two panting dogs so quickly they both stopped in their tracks. Frank couldn't make out what she said with a smile never leaving her face, but after ten seconds the boys both turned and walked off, neutered. Her friend had grabbed Lexy's arm then and they both giggled all the way down the corridor to the next store. With that, Frank's mind was made up.

The trouble then was to get her away from her friend. He hoped that they hadn't driven their together, though the odds were they had. He had to take Lexy without her friend reporting it. It wasn't enough to just grab her; no one could know she was missing for hours, if not days. An opportunity would present itself; it always did if one was patient enough. At least he hoped it would.

Their next stop was the food court, an array of fast food franchises and mom and pop stores. The girls each grabbed a coffee from a local vendor and took a seat in the dining area. This was what Frank loved about malls. Someone, like himself, could spend the day doing nothing but watching, or stalking, and no one took the slightest notice. Security was busy with the group of young kids causing havoc in the stores. They never paid attention to a middle-aged white male who was behaving himself. The girls stood and hugged, Frank felt his heart start beating faster. Lexy waived as she headed for the exit. Frank had pushed his chair back and followed at a safe distance. As she'd crossed to the parking lot he'd picked up his pace, but when Lexy raised her hand and lights on a nearby car flash in response, he'd had to make his move. He'd glanced to either side; there were a few people in the distance but no one close by. When he believed he was as close as he could get without raising suspicion he'd fallen to the ground and let out a yell grabbing at his ankle. He'd grown up in the mid-west and counted on Lexy's next reaction.

“Are you all right?” she asked, as she made her way back to him.

“I don't know, I think I twisted my ankle pretty good.” He reached down and grabbed it. “I feel like an idiot. I must have stepped in a pothole or something.”

“This parking lot is horrible, let me help you up.” She'd reached down and taken hold under his arm.

He put a little more weight on her the more he rose. She grunted with the effort, though she was strong for a woman. As he stood tall he'd put weight on his ankle and folded over at the waist pulling her down with him. She gave a gasp of surprise at being pulled down, but nothing could have been as surprising as the gun in her stomach.

“Be quiet and don't say a word and everything will be okay.”

He always marveled at how those lying words could calm a person down. People readily believed what they wanted to hear. Later, upon reflection, they understood how foolish that was, but, at the time, it made them feel safe again. And was there anything people craved more than the feeling safety? Maybe love, but he didn't think so.

“We are going to walk over to your car and get in the driver's side.” He tightened his grip around her shoulders and they walked the short distance to her car. He glanced out of his peripheral vision to see if he'd caught anyone's attention; it didn't appear so. He wasn't worried about being identified later by security cameras; this was an open air parking lot and the cameras would never be able to get a good shot this far from the mall. This was a law enforcement nightmare: someone like himself, who picked a random location and a random victim. Unless they were incredibly lucky they would have nothing to go on.

Lexy quietly sobbed as she opened the driver door to her car and scooted across the seat to the passenger side.

“Buckle in now. What's your name?”

“Lexy.” she'd whispered.

“Buckle in now Lexy. I don't want anyone stopping us for a minor traffic infraction.”

“What are you going to do to me?” Another sob escaped her throat.

“I’m going to hold you for ransom, Lexy. I understand your parents are very rich.” He’d had no idea if this was true but had wanted to give her hope.

“No, no you have the wrong person, my parents aren't rich at all. They're poor as a matter of fact.”

He thought he noticed her slump forward a bit, relaxing. She was telling herself that this was all a mistake and everything would be fine.

“Lexy, I believe you’re lying to me. I know they’re wealthy and no amount of denying it will make a difference. I’ll call them shortly and demand the ransom.”

“I’m telling you, this is all a mistake. They're not wealthy. You have the wrong person.” Her voice was stronger now, tinged with anger.

He’d shoved the gun into her ribs again.

“If that's true then this little mistake will be over in no time. Until then sit back and relax, I won't harm you.” He drove around the mall parking lot to the corner where he'd parked his car. He'd driven the lot earlier that morning picking out the best spot. The one he'd chosen was far from the main mall and was hidden from the cameras by trees they'd used to landscape the parking lot.

When he was confident they were alone, he’d pulled in next to his car. They’d exited her car the way they'd gotten in and he opened the back door to his car and told Lexy to get in. As she’d slid into the seat she tried again to explain the mistake he'd made. She’d managed to get a few words out before the needle poked her in the leg. She let out a scream but would remember nothing after that. He’d arranged her in the back seat to look as though she were taking a nap. After all, technically that's what she was doing. If a trucker or someone was able to look into his back seat it wouldn't raise any red flags. He’d figured by the time Lexy was missed he’d be half way home. As an added precaution he’d driven out of the lot heading in the wrong direction before correcting course a few miles later.

Frank heard the door to Max's room close. He waited ten minutes longer then walked to his door and slowly opened it. The hallway was clear and most of the lights were off in the house. He kept the knob turned as he shut the door then slowly and silently released it. The hallway had cherry flooring with a nice light red tone to it; not the dark stuff, Max didn't like dark. Frank peeked around the corner of the hallway and saw his mother passed out on the sofa in the living room. She would wake, maybe throw up, then head to her room later.

The door to the basement was closed and he opened it but did not turn on the stair lights. He'd made the trip often enough to not need them and he didn't want Max to happen out of his room and see the lights from under the door.

The girls would be asleep by now; they usually were around this time. They each had their own sleeping quarters, a small 8×8 room that held a bed, pillow and blanket. There was a worry that they might use the blanket to commit suicide, but Max had insisted that the girls be in peak physical shape. He didn't want any of them to be sleep deprived. It had worked out perfectly for Frank.

The room was dark when he opened the door. Again, this wasn't a problem, he was used to the trip and could navigate the dark. The girls had access to their rooms or the common area 24/7.

The third door on the left was slightly ajar. Slipping his fingers through the opening he widened the gap and let himself in, pulling the door closed behind him. There was no sound and he wondered if maybe Lexy was asleep.

“Come on in Frank, I can't sleep.”

Several hours later Lexy had dozed off and Frank snuck back up stairs, just in time. As he closed the basement door and stood in the hallway reflecting on the night, he heard Max opening his bedroom door. Frank rushed down the hall into the kitchen and started banging pots and pans around as though he was fixing breakfast. Their mother, who hadn't made it to her bed, was still sleeping on the sofa but didn't move a muscle at the sounds. Frank's stomach turned sour at the thought of how much alcohol she must have drunk to not wake up.

“You're up bright and early,” Max said.

“I have a lot of things to do today.” Frank replied as he cracked several eggs into a bowl and started whipping them.

“Not so awful much, is it?” Max mocked him.

“It's plenty. I have to get the girls fed, ready to go, load the boat and then drop each of them off at their appointed stations.”

“Yes, poor Frank.” Max took a big bite out of an apple Danish. He loved carbs, and Danish in particular.

“You could help, you know.”

“But I'm extremely busy myself, Frank. I have to make the call to my prey, er, I mean hunter, this morning to get everything started. Do you think that's easy?”

“Whatever,” Frank mumbled as he poured the eggs into the hot pan. They popped and cracked as they hit the hot surface.

“Yes, whatever.” Max took another huge bit of the Danish.

He finished it off and then downed another, swigging coffee in between bites. Frank could feel his gaze on his back but tried to ignore it. Neither man said anything but they both felt the tension in the room.

“I'm going to feed the girls.” Frank carried a tray loaded with eggs, milk, juice and sausages down the stairs. It was impossible, but he still had that feeling of Max watching him. No, that wasn't it, not exactly. It was more a feeling that Max knew about last night and was just waiting to spring it on him at the right time. When he was at his most vulnerable. He hunched his shoulders when a chill ran through his body.

He decided he'd wait for the girls to finish eating before he told them what was going to happen today. They'd need all the food and strength they could muster in the next few days and he didn't want them losing their appetite yet.

He unlocked the door and stepped inside with the tray out in front of him. Before he could take two steps he felt a pain just behind his right ear and bright lights exploded inside his head. The tray of food fell to the ground spilling the mixture of food and juice. Frank fell to one knee.

“Hit him again!” He heard one of the girls say, it was hard to make out through the fog that had engulfed his mind.

Another blow to the head brought about darkness. He didn't feel his face hit the floor.

“We have to move fast!” said Deb leading them out of the room. Lexy and Emily moved with her as though her shadows. The cement was cool on their feet as they were all barefooted so they could move as quietly as possible. Emily pulled her short pink dress down.

They made their way up the wooden stairs as a unit pausing at the top to listen. The urge to run was

almost overwhelming. They all knew that Frank would wake soon and when he did it would be too late.

Deb peered through the small gap where the door hadn't closed tight. She could see the front door, it was a short distance just through the living room.

Deb turned and whispered to the girls huddling below her. "The front door is straight ahead. When we're out the door we go three different directions. That way one of us has a better chance of making it. Agreed?" They both nodded.

Deb opened the door as quietly as she could then sprinted across the carpeted living room for the front door. Grabbing the knob she turned it and pulled on the door but nothing happened. Frantically she turned the knob again and pulled again but the door wouldn't budge. It was locked.

The dead bolt just above the knob was vertical. Reaching up she twisted it to horizontal and pulled on the door. It started to open but stopped abruptly, out of the corner of her eye Deb could see a hairy arm holding the door shut. The girls screamed in unison as Max turned the dead bolt back to vertical, locking the door.

Max, dressed in a flannel bathrobe you might have seen a young boy wearing in the '50's, turned and smiled at the girls.

"Bravo, girls! Bravo. You made it further than I thought you ever would. I assume Frank is in the basement?"

The girls huddled together, Deb standing in front of them as a shield. Lexy was hugging Emily, crying into her shoulder.

Max pulled a funny looking plastic gun from his robe pocket and pointed it at them. Deb stood her ground, her legs shaking so bad she wasn't sure they would hold her. Lexy's high pitched scream hurt his ears as he pulled the trigger. The two prongs of the stun gun flew through the air, dragging thin wires behind them. Hitting Deb in the chest the prongs penetrated her skin and delivered forty thousand volts of electricity through her body. Every muscle contracted as she went rigid and fell to the ground convulsing as though she was having an epileptic fit. The other two girls crab walked backwards away from her body screaming. Max laughed enjoying the show.

"Well we've had our fun for the morning. Pick her up and carry her down to the basement."

Emily and Lexy had backed against the wall and were clutching each other screaming. Max pulled

another yellow plastic gun from his other pocket and pointed it at them.

“You have to the count of three to pick her up and return to the basement. One, two...”

The girls slid on the floor scrambling to get traction in their haste to help Deb. They each grabbed her under an arm and lifted her to her feet. The electrical shock was wearing off and Deb's muscles were relaxing. They wrapped her arms around their shoulders and half dragged her to the basement.

Frank was lying on the floor just inside the door. He was awake, staring up at the ceiling. He could hear the commotion upstairs but he didn't make a move to go and help. He'd let his guard down, just for a second, and they had taken advantage of him. And to think that just moments earlier he was thinking of helping them. He knew he should be used to betrayal by now, but he wasn't.

Frank thought back to high school where as a senior he'd been on the varsity football team. He didn't start, hell he hardly played, but it made him feel good to belong to a group, to share the camaraderie of drills, to belong with people who looked out for you, cared about you because of your shared experiences. To be part of a unit, a team. It felt good.

Max had been a sophomore that year. He was already showing signs of his future behavior, harming animals that wandered into the yard. Cats especially; he hated cats and would torture them. His teachers noticed his sadistic behavior and tried to bring it to their mother's attention, but she would hear none of it. No criticism of her Max was allowed. The school intervened and had Max tested, several times, but he was much too smart to reveal anything. Everyone knew the path he was taking, but no one could do anything about it.

At the end of the season the football team always threw a party, it was a tradition. After months of chatting in class and the hallway Frank finally got the nerve to asked out Alana Lusum, the captain of the cheerleading squad, and miles out of his league. She'd said yes.

The day of the party Frank had gone straight home from school and started getting ready, washing the car, vacuuming out the inside, and hanging a new freshener from the rear view mirror. He'd showered, twice, tried on different clothes and worked on his hair until his scalp was raw. Most surprising of all was that Max had helped him all along the way. Frank had never seen him think of someone besides himself. It was as close as they had ever been.

The party was the first major, unofficial, event of the school year. Everyone was invited; theirs was a small school and class year was overlooked, freshmen to seniors were welcomed. Frank had picked

Alana up at her house, having parked down the block for almost half an hour because he was early.

When he pulled into the driveway Alana ran out of the house and met him before he'd even put the car in park. She opened the door and jumped in, all smiles and laughter. He could still remember what she was wearing – a blue skirt, that showed off her cheerleader legs, with flat black shoes, bare legs and a white sweater over v-neck top. He thought she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

The party was only a few miles out of town, but the bonfire could be seen from quite a distance. Alana grabbed his arm as they'd walked up to the group of kids that had already gathered. The other cheerleaders ran over and greeted her, hauling her off before Frank knew what had happened. The captain of the football team handed Frank a beer and he felt as though he'd finally found some peace and contentment in his life. He'd never been happier.

The beer was cold, the fire was hot and his new girlfriend was glancing over at him when he first saw Max walking up to the party. Alone and walking straight at him, Frank felt his stomach churn. He hadn't planned on sharing the night with Max and was not pleased to do so. His brother was developing a reputation as a weirdo and Frank couldn't blame people for thinking so. But he remembered earlier in the day, how close he'd felt to him and so Frank greeted him as though he was happy to see him.

“I didn't know you were coming,” Frank said, “You never come to any school stuff.”

“Well this is not really school stuff, is it?” Max was already picking up the habit of speaking without using contractions, like a robot.

“No, I guess you're right.”

Frank could tell Max was in a mood, the feeling of kinship he'd felt earlier in the day was disappearing quickly. He decided to give it another try.

“Do you want a beer?” Max ignored the question.

Max ignored the question. “Where is your date?”

“She's with the other cheerleaders.” Frank pointed to the group of girls sequestered off on their own.

“Call her over I want to meet her.”

Frank hesitated a moment, then called her over.

“Alana, this is my brother, Max.” He said, as she walked over and took his arm.

“Hi!” she said in her best cheerleader voice, “nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet Frank's new girlfriend.” Max said.

Frank immediately turned bright red. Was Max going to fuck this up for him? He'd started to protest when Alana broke in.

“Girlfriend, huh?” She'd squeezed his arm a little tighter and giggled.

After that Max had been a perfect gentleman; funny, witty, friendly. Frank relaxed and enjoyed the night, drinking some beer, even though he really didn't like it, goofing around with his friends, talking with his new girlfriend.

Sometime around midnight Frank noticed that he hadn't seen Alana for while and went looking for her. He'd asked around and no one had seen her for a half hour or so. He started to get a little worried when he heard a noise off near the woods. The night was overcast so it was hard picking his way along the uneven ground and downed logs. It had not yet snowed but it was cool and the ground was getting hard. The clumps of grass acted as hidden traps that would jump up and trip you. The noise was getting louder but it was hard to make out. It was a mix between someone breathing hard, as if they were exercising, and someone moaning as if having a nightmare. Frank jumped over a log and reached the edge of the woods. He took out his lighter and turned the round striker. The flame illuminated just enough to make Frank drop it and fall to his knees retching.

Alana was lying on the ground, her skirt pulled up above her waist, her panties lying off to the side, carelessly discarded. In between her legs was Max, his pants and underwear down to his knees. He grunted, was as though doing the last of too many push ups, and collapsed on top of her.

Max laid on top of Alana panting, sweat trickled down his forehead despite the cool night, his head turned to the flame from the lighter.

“Whoops, sorry Frank you were not suppose to see this.” Smiling, Max rose to his knees pulling his pants up.

“Why? Why would you do this?” he screamed at them.

“Well, she won't be able to answer you because I gave her some roofies, she's zonked out of her

brain.” Max stood now and put his coat on. “Why did I do it? I don't know for sure. It sounded fun and so few things sound fun to me, so I did it.”

From his kneeling position Frank rushed at Max and tackled him, burying his shoulder in his stomach, the perfect tackle. He could hear the air rushing from Max's lungs as he landed onto the dirt. Frank drew back and punched him in the face with his right, then left, then right, over and over again. His rage was endless, but finally he looked down and saw the bloody pulp that was now Max's face. He'd knocked out Max's two front teeth, his lips were split and bleeding, the pulpy flesh around his eyes was already starting to swell.

Frank's stomach started to roil again, he walked off a couple of steps and vomited. He wiped his mouth with the back of his coat sleeve and set to work. He put Alana's panties back on and lifted her to a standing position. Putting his arm around her waist and her arm around his neck, he walked her to his car and placed her in the front seat. She was whimpering, as though having a nightmare but didn't seem to be hurt. Frank walked back and repeated the process with Max putting him in the back seat of the car so he could lie down.

Frank's mind was numb as he drove to Alana's house. The night had started out as the best of his short life. He'd been happy as he'd seldom been before. But Max couldn't stand to see him like that and took it all from him in a matter of moments. This night had summed up his life.

As they pulled up to Alana's house Frank walked over to the passenger side and got her out. He brushed off her dress, but there were still grass and dirt stains. He helped her to the front door and rang the bell. He could hear footsteps pounding down the stairs moments later. The front door tore open and her father stood before him. Through much yelling and screaming Frank explained that Alana had drunk too much and had wandered off. Her father berated him for not taking care of his daughter; Frank simply stood and took the verbal onslaught then walked back to the car and drove home.

Laying Max's body on the sofa in the living room Frank went and woke their mother. She was drunk, as usual, and it took several minutes for her to understand what was going on. When he walked her out and showed her Max she screamed and fell to her knees next to the sofa that held him. When she demanded to know what happened, it was Max who managed to say that he had been jumped by some kids at a party. Their mother had wanted to call the police but Max, as is always the case, got his way and the police were not called.

Max opened the door to the basement so the girls could help Deb wobble down the stairs. The

stun gun's effect was wearing off but her legs still seemed to have a mind of their own.

Frank was still lying on the ground as they walked in, he glared at Lexy as they entered the room. "Why?" he mouthed to her.

"Fuck you." She mouthed back.

"Frank, are you all right?" Max asked.

"Fine."

"Then let's get them ready. Apparently they aren't hungry, if they want to eat they can pick up the food off the floor."