



EMANUELE
CERQUIGLINI

AN ICE CREAM FOR HENRY

EIGHT MILLION CHILDREN GO MISSING EVERY YEAR.
HENRY IS ONE OF THEM.

Emanuele Cerquiglini

An Ice Cream For Henry

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Cerquiglini E.

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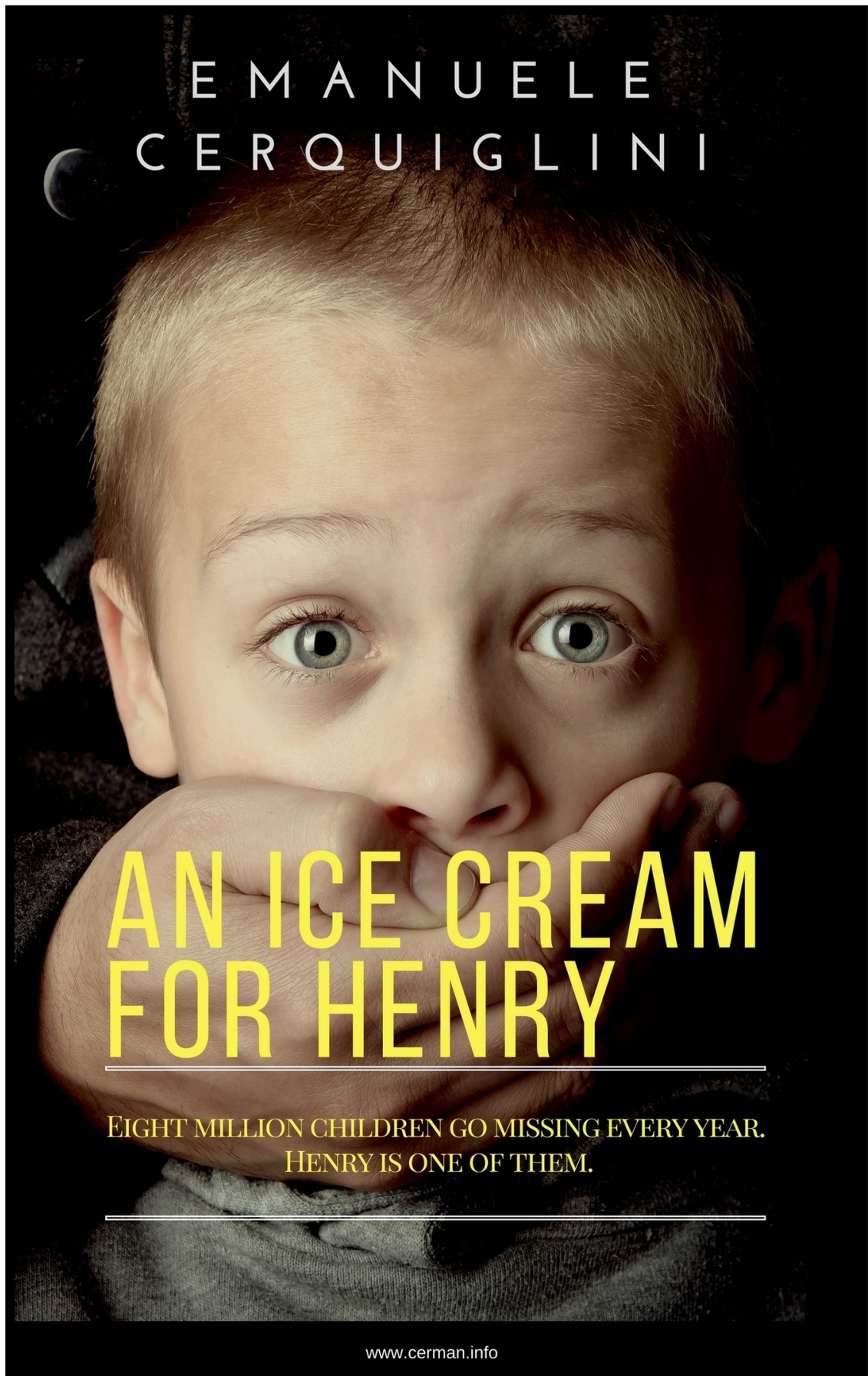
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Cover



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www.cerman.info

photo by Veronica Louro

Author, title and translator

EMANUELE CERQUIGLINI

Finalist, Il Mio Esordio 2015

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Translated by **ANDREW FANKO**

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CERMAN.INFO

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places or people, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Thanks to Roberta Graziosi and Sarah Verdini for helping me to improve the first draft and for their support, patience, and advice.

Thanks to my old friends Luigi and Andrea, who always want the best for me.

Thanks also to Livia Risi for giving me the details of her Pizzo Jersey BuyBy dress, which I chose for Barbara Harrison to wear in one of the chapters.

<http://www.liviarisi.com/#!/about/cjg9>

While conducting some online research into the Second Amendment and the firearms culture in the U.S., I was inspired by a Matti Ferraresi article

entitled *U.S. Army, tutti al poligono*. Published on the Panorama website on February 12, 2013,

<http://www.panorama.it/news/esteri/stati-uniti-armi-poligono/>

the report describes an Italian journalist's visit to the New Jersey Firearms Academy.

Dedicated to...

For my mother and father, who protected me as a child, have always supported me as an adult, and have enabled me to embark on a career in the world of fiction. I am well aware that not everyone is so fortunate. We have had moments in the sun but also dark days, and we will continue to face those dark days as we always have: without fear. After all, the sun is always there at the start of a brand new day.

Thanks, Mom and Dad.

Emanuele

â##The Characters

THE CHARACTERS

CHILDREN

Henry Lewis, nearly 11

Joanna Longowa, nearly 11

Nicholas, nearly 11

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Barbara Harrison (FBI Supervisory Special Agent)

Gordon Murphy (Sheriff of Toms River)

Gonzalez (Medford district cop)

Clive Thompson (member of the Secret Service)

Iron (police dog)

ADULTS

Jim Lewis (Henryâ##s father, a mechanic)

Ted Burton (retired U.S. Marine Corps Major)

Winnipeg â##Winnieâ## Moore (ice cream vendor)

Jasmine Lewis (Jimâ##s sister)

Robert Brown (Barbara Harrisonâ##s partner)

Zibi Longowa (Joannaâ##s brother)

Shelley Logan (Jimâ##s lover)

Miss Anderson (math teacher)

Mr. Johnson (history teacher)

Leland Wright (chief of the Firearms Academy)

Dalton Clark (retired nurse)

Samantha Monroe (Daltonâ##s wife)

Dalisay, known as *Delicious* (Tedâ##s second wife)

Ronald Howard (wealthy gentleman)

Coach Kyrle (gym teacher)

George and Paul (Samanthaâ##s sons)

CHARACTERS FROM THE PAST

Emily Butler, 6

Allison Parker (Emilyâ##s mom)

Luke Butler (Emilyâ##s dad)

Ryan Green (Allisonâ##s second husband)

Richard Harrison, 12 (Barbaraâ##s brother)

Donald Coleman (friend of Barbaraâ##s dad)

Quotation

When a man with a .45 meets a man with a rifle, the man with a pistol will be a dead man.###

Ramón Rojo (Gian Maria Volonté)

A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS (1964)

Directed by Sergio Leone

Prologue

Appearances are not always misleading and monsters do exist. Children need to be made aware of this and shown the world for what it really is for their own good. Wrapping them up in cotton wool can be dangerous. Dualism exists in this world: understanding good without knowing evil is like denying the existence of free will.

Children need to be told that, although all men are born equal, they are defined by infinite differences that make each individual totally unique. These differences are created by various influences, be it family, schooling, society or geography. They combine to determine an individual's cognitive, physical, and spiritual development. Shaped by these influences, the individual develops and, upon becoming an adult, chooses how to act. Being able to distinguish good from evil, and acknowledging the existence of evil but rejecting it in favor of a life of good, shows an ability to understand dualism and go through life with more self-assurance and self-awareness.

Human beings have always discussed evil, with each era approaching the topic from different perspectives. Every era has its own evil, which must be acknowledged and confronted rather than ignored.

But is it really an alternative to good? Is it really a choice we can make?

It may just be that evil comes about through being continually deprived or through yielding to something that preys on human flaws. To truly understand this issue, we need to look beyond material answers and seek a more thoughtful and enlightened path.

Only humans as spiritual beings, having achieved a state of completeness, can discern good from evil. If an individual somehow falls short of this state of completeness, discerning good from evil can be difficult, if not impossible.

Dalton Clark was walking hand in hand with his wife as dawn broke. He loved the fresh air of Medford Lakes - it was a great place to be retired.

"We've waited so long, dear," said Dalton as they reached the quay. "But the day has finally arrived and we need to be ready. A bit of exercise will do us good, both physically and mentally." He let go of his wife's hand so he could untie the clove hitch that was securing the canoe to two wooden fence posts.

Samantha Monroe watched and said nothing. She was used to indulging her husband, a man who years earlier had saved her and brought her back to life. Dalton had listened to her and understood her like no-one else could, not even her sons and her first husband, and for that she would always be devoted to him and trust him implicitly. Dalton was a giant of a man. He wasn't the most agile, but he had plenty of physical strength and character, and although he wasn't particularly warm with Samantha's boys, she knew that behind his gruff and surly exterior beat the heart of a good man who was able to overcome situations that forced most others into submission.

Dalton pushed the canoe more than halfway into the water. Samantha handed him the paddle, and he wheezed as he sat his considerable frame down in the rear of the boat.

"Come on, dear, don't be scared. I've got you."

Samantha rolled up her linen pants below her knees and stepped aboard the canoe with no little difficulty. Her joints were not what they once were and her back often hurt, but she was determined to float out to the middle of the lake with her Dalton on this fateful day, waiting for everything to fall into place just the way they had imagined and prepared for over the years - well, the way Dalton had prepared for and she and her sons had faithfully accepted. Perhaps today would be the day when all her suffering would finally end and she would avenge what her whole, defenceless family had been forced to endure all these years.

Dalton was sure of things that Samantha was not. He knew of things that others could never have imagined, and most importantly he had solutions which, although disconcerting on the surface, were the only possible course of action and had to be seen through.

“There are forces at work beyond our normal understanding of good and evil, and we need to respond to those forces in the only language they understand. You have to accept that, Samantha, if you want to set yourself free, otherwise they will come back stronger than ever and finish the job they started all those years ago: hurting you and your family.” That was what Dalton would say whenever she showed any hint of doubt, even though she never went so far as to criticize the man for his theories and beliefs. Dalton had already saved her once and he would do so again. Samantha was just pathetic and ignorant and she knew she wasn’t able to understand everything, but she also knew she had to trust in him to give herself and, more importantly her sons, another chance.

As Samantha steadily lowered herself into the front of the canoe, Dalton balanced the paddle across his knees, plunged his giant hands into the muddy bank and pushed with all his might, sending the canoe out into the water.

A few minutes later, as the sun rose and its rays began to warm their surroundings, Dalton and Samantha found themselves bobbing up and down in silence in the middle of the lake, listening to the morning song of the birds hidden among the tree branches. The brilliant sunlight glistened on the ripples caused by the motion of the canoe, the only thing disturbing the stillness of the lake

Chapter 1

(day one)

It was too warm that Friday morning to put his old New Jersey Nets hoodie on under his mechanic's overalls, so Jim Lewis pulled a not-too-creased denim shirt out of the closet and put it on over the red cotton tank top with two holes in the right side from a clumsy cigarette burn some years earlier.

Jim loved that tank top, even though it was faded and frayed. Wearing it made him feel like he was still young, and he loved the way it showed off his wiry physique, with the pronounced veins under his skin running down his neck and branching off along his arms.

It was more like a piece of body armor, that undershirt. It was part of him: Jim's red tank top, Lewis.

Having worn it all day, the first thing he would do when he got home was wash it by hand and lay it out to dry so he could wear it again, worst-case scenario, in a couple days.

Once he had buttoned up his denim shirt, Jim slipped on his overalls, fastened the suspenders, and put on his oil-stained sneakers.

It was before seven, and his son Henry was still fast asleep in his room.

Jim went down to the kitchen, opened a can of Red Bull, switched on the TV for the morning news, then set about making his usual breakfast of a burger topped with a thin slice of melted cheese.

NBC was showing images of a gay rights demonstration that had ended in a few scuffles between the colorful, peaceful protesters and a small group of skinheads bearing swastika tattoos. One of the arrested skinheads was shouting about the dangers of same-sex marriage, something about it being a one-way ticket to Hell. From the look of his bulging eyes, complete with heavily dilated pupils, it was more likely that the Hell to which he referred was coursing through his veins in the form of drugs. Also under arrest were a handful of fanatical neo-Nazi conservatives who somehow felt the need to defend the anal virginity of others.

Jim Lewis had no time for far-right extremists, who struck him as nothing more than a bunch of hotheaded imbeciles, but he had a genuine aversion to anything that didn't belong in his own world of heterosexual desires. *Those faggots and dykes, they're asking for it. They're always gonna wind these people up,* thought Jim, totally incapable of thinking deeply enough about the issue to understand the importance of demonstrating for the inalienable rights of these people, just because their sexual preferences were different than his own.

By the time the news bulletin had reached the weather forecast, Jim had already devoured his breakfast. It looked like being more of a summer's day, and that put him in a good mood.

He got up and took his plate over to the sink. Ever since he had been widowed, he had learned that it was better to wash everything up immediately, rather than be left with a pile of dirty, smelly dishes.

The kitchen clock told him it was twenty past seven, and it would soon be time to wake Henry and take him to school.

He grabbed a carton of milk from the fridge and his son's favorite cereal from the sideboard.

He set the table, trying to make it look as nice as Bet, his wife, had always done when she was still around.

It was tough for Jim raising a child on his own, but he hadn't been interested in a long-term relationship since Bet died. He was happy enough with the occasional one-night stand he'd pick up from those long Saturday nights at the *Road to Hell*. Jim always got free drinks there after he'd restored the owner's old Harley-Davidson 883, which had been crushed against a wall by a drunk truck driver reversing blind out of the parking lot.

Most people would have written it off and waited for the insurance money to buy a new one, but for Steve Collins that bike was the only thing he had to remind him of his dad, who had given it to him when it he was still too young to ride it as an incentive to work harder at college.

On Saturdays, Jim would leave Henry at his older sister Jasmine's house. In spite of her ongoing health problems, Jasmine had always tried to be a mother figure to the young boy.

Before going in to wake his son, Jim entered the bathroom and looked in the mirror, stroking the two days' worth of stubble that had made him look older and more grizzled. He unclasped his suspenders, pulled his overalls down over his knees and sat on the toilet. Before offloading, his mind turned to Shelley, the latest twenty-something broad he'd brought home from the *Road to Hell*.

He masturbated furiously. He had become kind of an expert at fitting in all the household chores, but there was one thing he'd always find time for: his morning jerk-off.

"Shelley, Shelley! we really need to hook up again," thought Jim as he pulled some toilet paper off the roll to clean himself up.

"Hey, buddy! Rise and shine!" shouted Jim as he returned to the kitchen.

"Your breakfast's on the table!"

Henry appeared a few minutes later, looking sleepy but, as always, with a smile on his face.

"You'll catch cold going round the house topless!" warned Jim, mixing the cereal into the milk so it got soggy just the way Henry liked it.

"But I'm not cold, Dad, it's warm again today."

"You're right, bud! The forecast says it's gonna be around seventy-five today. If it stays like this, next Sunday we can take a trip to the lake or maybe head straight for the beach. Which would you prefer?"

"Beach!" cried Henry as he took his first spoonful of mushy cereal.

"Did you remember you need to go to Aunt Jasmine's after school?" Jim asked, adopting a more serious tone.

"Sure, Dad, I packed my bag last night. Everything's in there, I'm all set."

"Good. Look, I'm sorry I can't pick you up and I'm leaving you with that heavy backpack to carry round, but the Howards need their car by lunchtime and I need to work on Ted's Jeep first," Jim said, attempting to justify himself to his son.

"I'm grown up enough to look after myself," replied Henry proudly.

"You haven't even taken your elementary school exams yet, there's plenty of time to grow up!"

"The exams are less than a month away, so you can't go on thinking I'm just a kid!"

"OK, Henry, we'll resume this conversation when you've done the exams. Enjoy being ten, because I'm telling you things get a lot tougher..." Jim said, unable to disguise a certain level of bitterness.

"It can't get any tougher than the math test I've got today. I hate Miss Anderson. She looks like a fish!" replied Henry, giggling to himself.

"Kid, math was never my strong suit, but you'd do well to learn....at least until you can afford a calculator! Come on, eat up!" Jim said with a chuckle, before turning back to the TV.

Chapter 2

Punctual as always, Jim dropped his son off outside the school and paused briefly to watch as the hordes of five-to-eleven-year-olds entered the main building, their chatter and squeals of laughter creating a familiar schoolyard buzz. It was a sound he liked. It reminded him of his childhood and brightened his mood. Jim stood trance-like among the other parents, watching the moms chatting to one another and daydreaming that his wife was among them, imagining how great it would feel to be there with Bet alongside him, catching up with the other moms and dads before going to work.

It was just one of the many experiences in life that he had been denied the minute his wife had been snatched away from him by the cruel hands of fate. A fate which, even all after all these years, Jim had still refused to accept.

Chapter 3

It was nine thirty, and the sun filtering through the gaps in the auto repair shop shutters was already a problem for Jim, a guy who could sweat for America.

The Howards' Mercedes was a genuine antique: a 1954 300 SL with gull-wing doors. It had taken Jim weeks to find an original replacement muffler, and on top of that he'd had to make several secondary repairs. The car parked in his repair shop was worth more than four million dollars, and the job was set to earn him a cool ten thousand. The Howards were filthy rich and Jim had been lucky enough to befriend Ronald Howard at college, long before he married Carol Spencer, a woman who somehow managed to be even uglier than she was rich. Carol was probably one of the ugliest women in the entire United States, her looks irredeemable even with the most advanced plastic surgery, but for Ronald it was always about the money: *There ain't no piece of ass can compete with a private jet!* he'd always say when one of his friends asked how on earth he managed to sleep with that woman.

At Ronald's request and expense, Jim had taken his business to *Frankie's Luxury Car Parts*, whose owner could get his hands on anything and charged accordingly. *Frankie* had friends and collectors of all ages as clients, and he counted many of the country's car thieves and junkyard workers among his loyal associates. *Frankie* actually was the nickname of his great-grandfather Franco, the son of Italian immigrants who came to the United States in 1882. Franco built up his business alone, using methods that were effective if not always legal and ensuring that luxury car parts would provide a life of luxury for all his descendants, including Tommy, who now ran the company and was known to everyone as *Frankie*, after his great-grandfather.

I don't know how much you paid for this muffler, Ronald, but it's been a real bitch to fit, thought Jim, dripping with sweat as he lay under the car.

He could really use those ten thousand big ones. Jim couldn't afford to take on any employees because he needed to save to put his son through college and to pay his mortgage, which had becoming crippling after the financial crisis.

His was a small repair shop and most of what business he did get came in the form of repairing old clunkers. Clients like the Howards were as rare as hens' teeth. People with new or luxury cars took their business to authorized repair shops, leaving Jim to deal with his friends or people even worse off than him who would haggle over a twenty-dollar job. Ted Burton's aging Wrangler, which was what kept Jim busy most of the time, was another story. The Jeep spent at least two months every year in Jim's repair shop, not because there was anything wrong with it in particular, but because Ted was an old friend and now that he'd retired, he had nothing better to do than stop by once or twice a week to have the engine serviced and chew the fat with Jim.

Just like its owner, the Wrangler was rough and ready, good for another fifty thousand miles in the toughest conditions, even though it had rumbled in complaint ever since the time Ted forgot to top up the antifreeze and it blew up on Ocean Drive, an incident that resulted in Ted always carrying bottles of antifreeze in the trunk and bringing the car in for regular checks.

It was unbearably hot as Jim wheeled himself out from under the Mercedes where he had been working on the damned muffler. His face and hands were covered in oil. Jim had never managed to break the habit of using the palm of his hands to wipe the sweat from his brow rather than his wrists, which would have been the only way to keep his face clean because he didn't wear gloves.

He got to his feet and went to check his paperwork in the tiny room at the back of the repair shop that doubled up as an office and chill-out zone. It was the only distraction in his place of work, apart from the tiny adjoining john.

â## Bills, bills, bills. For Christâ## s sake!â## Jim said to himself as he put the papers back in order. He picked up the phone from the tiny square desk fixed to the wall and dialed the number of his sister Jasmine.

He informed her Henry would be coming over at lunchtime, asked her how she was and told her that, sooner or later, he wanted to take a trip to Ireland so he could once again take in the emerald-green hills and introduce his son to the clean, fresh air of his homeland. Jim Lewis was no poet, but behind his knitted brow and hardened expression lay a fairly sensitive and melancholy soul.

He had changed a great deal since Bet died, losing some of that sparkle that had enabled him to see things in a very different, positive light. He was very close to Jasmine, even though they were fifteen years apart. Jim was nearly forty-eight and Jasmine over sixty, the other difference being that Jim was in perfect health while his sister had been breathing with just one lung for several years.

Jim came to the United States first, having spent the first ten years of his life in Cork, Ireland. His American dad had married a beautiful Irish girl and gone on to have two children with her, those fifteen years apart. When Jimâ##s mom died when he was ten years old, his father returned to live in the States and brought Jim with him, while Jasmine stayed behind in her job and crossed the Atlantic only as she approached forty, with her own health already suffering and her father coming to the end of his life. Morgan Lewis died a slow death, eventually succumbing to Alzheimerâ##s at sixty-two. He had little to leave his two children, apart from the opportunity to embrace the American dream.

Jim used most of the money he got from selling his fatherâ##s house to pay for his sisterâ##s health care. This made him, in spite of his numerous character flaws that included stubbornness and a lack of education, appear worthy of peopleâ##s respect.

He switched on the radio and tuned in to a country music station. He liked country music, especially since learning to dance to it at the Road to Hell on Saturday nights.

He got to work on the engine of Tedâ##s Wrangler. As usual, he just needed to give it a once over and then top up the oil and antifreeze.

All his focus really was on Ronald Howardâ##s Mercedes-Benz. Now the muffler was done, he had to make sure the driverâ##s door opened smoothly.

After a couple hours work, the gull-wing door once again opened effortlessly as if it had just rolled off the production line back in the days when the world was full of hope after a decade spent recovering from the horrors of the Second World War.

No sooner had he finished the job than Ted Burton entered the repair shop with two bags of fried chicken and a four-pack of beer.

â##Jeez, Jim, that babyâ##s gotta be worth more than your house and mine put together! What happened? Did it have a run-in with a Rockefeller?â## Ted said in his baritone voice.

Jim smiled: â##Itâ##s the jewel in Ronald Howardâ##s collection.â##

â##Is that your pal whoâ##s married to the Loch Ness monster?â##

â##Yep, thatâ##s the one.â##

â##And he leaves this Fort-Knox-on-wheels in your repair shop? If I were you, I might have found a way to make it disappear by now!â## said Ted, laughing heartily.

â##I canâ##t deny Iâ##ve given it some thought, Ted, but here, let me show you something. Look over there, across the street...â## replied Jim, pointing to an armored car with two men inside.

â##Iâ##d spotted that car. Who are those two guys?â## asked Ted curiously.

â##Theyâ##re private security guards hired by the Howards. Theyâ##ve been out there three days and nights. They change shifts with another two guards every eight hours. But thatâ##s not it; come look out the bathroom window. Thereâ##s another armored car keeping watch over the back.â##

â##Jeez! Money talks, huh?â## muttered Ted as he followed Jim into the bathroom.

â##Maybe marrying that brute wasnâ##t such a dumb idea after all, huh Ted?â## Jim said, taking one of the bags of fried chicken from his friend.

â##Youâ##d better believe it, even if itâ##s meant having to get Viagra on prescription refill, the old dog!â##

â##Maybe he likes it...â##

â##Jim, thatâ##s gotta be worse than going with a *guy*. He canâ##t possibly enjoy it. Heâ##s just thinking of the interest in his bank account!â## exclaimed Ted knowingly.

â##Thereâ##s nothing worse than going with a guy. Iâ##d rather fuck a sheep, as long as it was female!â## replied Jim with a look of disgust.

â##Bud, my ex-wife used to say that homophobes were actually repressed homosexuals...â## replied Ted, snickering as he bit into a piece of chicken.

â##Not in my case. Look, Iâ##ve got nothing against them...itâ##s just that Iâ##d rather keep them at armâ##s length. Whatever they get up to in their own time is fine, but I donâ##t wanna know about it and I donâ##t want them anywhere near me. Thanks for the chicken and beer, by the way. Make sure you donâ##t choke on it!â## said Jim, before tucking in to his first piece of meat as he watched Ted spluttering because he had gone down the wrong way.

â##Wash it down, my friend. I donâ##t want a dead body lying in my repair shop!â## he added, as Ted recovered from his episode by downing half his can of beer.

â##Howâ##s my Jeep?â## asked Ted, having finished his beer and thrown the can in the trash.

â##Oh sheâ##s doing great, Ted. Sheâ##s like a tank!â##

â##They donâ##t make â##em like they used to, bud. Theyâ##re just heaps of junk nowadays!â## said Ted, cracking open another beer and taking a big mouthful.

â##Ainâ##t that the truth...â## replied Jim, looking down at his watch. It was nearly twelve.

Ted Burton let out a huge belch of such volume it caught the attention of the two guards hired by Ronald Howard to watch over his Mercedes.

Chapter 4

Henry had spent the first of the two hours he had to complete the math test regularly repeating a four-step movement of his neck: first to the left, looking out the window; second a tiny bit to the right, peeking down at what his classmate Nicholas was writing on his graph paper; third straight ahead, checking that Miss Anderson wasn't looking; and fourth ahead and to the right, trying to catch the eye of Joanna, but she was engrossed in her work, her head bent over her paper as she furiously scribbled down calculations that were way beyond Henry.

I can't do it... Henry whispered to Nicholas.

So copy, replied Nicholas under his breath, not even lifting his head.

He would have copied Henry himself, but Nicholas was already on page three and his neighbor was still stuck on page one.

Ah, *who cares?* thought Henry as he turned the page and began to copy what little he could make out from Nicholas's sheet.

Chapter 5

In New York, Barbara Harrison was running north to south through Central Park. She would do her daily workout come rain or shine, although sometimes she had to put work first, in which case she would make do with the treadmill in her apartment or, when she was out of town, the ones in hotel gyms.

She had a lunch date with Robert at one o'clock. They had made up over the phone the previous evening, and this afternoon they would be heading off together to spend the weekend in Robert's woodland cottage up in Maine, which Barbara considered to be their love nest.

Robert, who was already forty-seven and had an established career, was keen for things with Barbara to move to the next stage. It wasn't that she wasn't keen on Robert or hadn't thought about taking the next step - after all, they'd been seeing each other for years - it was just that he didn't seem to tolerate her working hours anymore. She could be around for the whole week then suddenly take off for days, or sometimes weeks, on end. Robert hated that, but for Barbara work had to come first, even if she had begun to rethink her priorities a little over the last few weeks after Robert started to keep his distance.

Barbara was forty-two now, and if she wanted to become a mom she would have to get a move on. She didn't want people to think she was her own child's grandma on his or her first day at school!

She loved being in the field and getting around, being active rather than stuck behind a desk, but she figured she had already got everything she wanted from her career, and getting it had hindered her private life more than she could ever have imagined. She felt ready for a new chapter because she loved Robert and knew that she'd never find another guy like him and would eventually end up alone. *A horrible, frumpy old maid. That's what would become of me!* Barbara thought to herself as she ran along West Drive before turning at the south end of Central Park and lengthening her stride as she headed toward East Drive. From there, she would exit the Park on 72nd Street and make her way to her apartment, where she would have time for a quick shower before packing her case for the weekend.

Chapter 6

Robert Brown had booked a table at *Erminia*, an Italian restaurant on the Upper East Side that had been in *Eyewitness Travel's* top ten for a while now.

Barbara had Italian roots and Robert knew that she would appreciate his choice of eatery, even though it was only her maternal grandmother who was Italian and Barbara herself had never been to Italy.

Robert was going to ask her to marry him in Maine, and he wanted everything to be perfect. He loved her and wanted her as his wife. He had told his dad as much in a phone call that morning before leaving the office, and his dad had responded by telling him it was the biggest load of crap he'd ever heard come out of his son's mouth: *Son, you've done great so far and now you want to tie yourself down?* Robert chuckled to himself as he recalled his father's words, spending several minutes flossing in front of the bathroom mirror. Robert was obsessed with his teeth. He brushed them at least ten times a day and flossed even after eating a couple olives with an apéritif. He never went anywhere without his faithful white box of floss. As a teenager, he had lost three teeth when he face-planted after coming off his bike having misjudged a bend at the bottom of a crazy descent. He had also broken an arm and his nose and had deep abrasions on both knees. He survived, fortunately, but having to look at himself without those teeth for three months was unbearable. He'd lost one canine and two premolars, and for someone who was one of the three best-looking guys in college, with a smile that was irresistible to the ladies, that represented something of an existential crisis. He could have had them put back in earlier, but his dad wanted to teach him a lesson and make him see that we're all just flesh and bones, nobody is indestructible. It was a lesson that had served him well. The boy who fell off his bike had gotten into several scrapes over the years, but that experience had straightened his head out and now he was Robert Brown, owner of one of New York's premier renovation firms and able to rely on the best carpenter around: his brother, James. The brothers and their team could turn a run-down apartment into a luxury home in a matter of weeks.

Chapter 7

With her voice like nails down a blackboard and eyes like a hawk, Miss Anderson always made Henry break out in a cold sweat; every time she looked at him, she seemed to be saying the same thing: *You'll never pass your exams. No chance.*

Summer was in the air at Northfield Elementary School. The mating ritual of two flies buzzing their way irritatingly round the classroom confirmed as much. Henry flicked the flies away from his face with his right hand, sending them toward the middle of the room. The class was waiting for Miss Anderson to collect the test that had proved beyond Henry. He was more about words than figures.

The buzzer sounding on Miss Anderson's desk was the cue for her to begin her sixty-second countdown, at the end of which the pupils would have to put down their pens.

Sixty, fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven, fifty-six!

That bitch loved counting down to zero. She had that smug look on her face, and it gave her a thrill when she caught the eye of a struggling student who seemed to be begging her for more time.

Henry had already put his pen down by the time she'd reached thirty. He looked down casually at his paper, where aside from a square and a few multiplications, he hadn't managed to finish much - certainly not the divisions, which he found impossible once the numbers got too high.

Joanna complained that she just needed one more minute.

You can't cheat the clock! Eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.....zerooooo!

Miss Anderson got up from her desk and headed straight for Joanna to collect hers first. Joanna threw her arms over her sheet in a desperate but vain attempt to keep it from her teacher's grasp.

I want to see ALL pens on the tables. Is that clear? the teacher said sternly, waving Joanna's test in the air.

Joanna Longowa was of Polish origin. The prettiest girl in class, she had long blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin that highlighted her rosy pink lips. Henry had liked her right from the third grade, when she and her family had moved to New Jersey. She was good at all the subjects, and her only flaw was her perfectionism. Henry was certain she'd finished the test and got all the sums right, but figured she'd just wanted to embellish her standard-issue paper with some doodles.

Henry Lewis, what do you call this?

It's my test, Henry replied timidly. A few of the children couldn't stop themselves from smirking. Everyone knew that Henry was dumb at math, but no-one was brave enough to mock him in front of Miss Anderson, because she'd mark you down or, worse, detain the entire class during recess for a whole week.

Silence! she yelled, reaching up slowly and clenching her fist around the two flies. She walked calmly to the open window and tossed the traumatized insects outside as if she were feeding the ducks.

There was complete silence as Miss Anderson finished collecting in the assignments, and only the bell at the end of the class restored the usual noise and commotion.

Chapter 8

cca

Ted Burton drove his old Wrangler out of Jim's repair shop at midday, and within an hour he had arrived in Jersey City to spend a few hours with his friends from the Firearms Academy. Sat outside the entrance as usual, basking in the sun, was Leland Wright. Leland was well into his seventies, but he had the complexion and look of a man fifteen years younger. He wore a Marines beret over his close-cropped white hair, a blue t-shirt bearing the inscription *My girl is my gun*, gray camouflage pants, and black tactical boots.

I thought you weren't coming round here no more! said Leland as Ted appeared before him.

What do you say we have ourselves a little M4 battle? replied Ted, grinning from ear to ear.

Leland looked at his friend and began to laugh as he stood up from his plastic chair.

You old son of a bitch....wait here while I ask Charlie to come and replace me on the door, replied Leland, pulling a two-way from his left pant pocket to call his friend.

Inside the Firearms Academy, it was far less crowded than on weekends, so the line for the range was fairly short. Next to the automatic-weapons counter was a prominent framed poster of Wayne LaPierre, Executive Vice President of the National Rifle Association.

You want some mozzarella sticks? Leland asked Ted.

No thanks, chief. Maybe later. I only had breakfast an hour ago, Ted replied, desperate to get his hands on the M4 assault rifle.

Suit yourself, I'm gettin' me some, said Leland, making his way toward the huge bar.

Everyone greeted Leland with respect and, as Ted had done seconds earlier, called him chief. Little wonder his favorite t-shirt had the word emblazoned on it in big yellow letters. That was the tee Leland wore on weekends, when hundreds of gun-loving Americans and their families would descend on the Academy. Not everybody came to shoot or take a course on how to use firearms; the Academy was simply one of the favored hangouts of second-amendment fanatics. On Sundays, the Academy would play host to people of all ages, colors, and races, united in their disdain for Obama's proposal to have Congress debate a law banning the use and purchase of automatic weapons.

Come on, pal, come over here and join me for a beer! yelled Leland in the direction of Ted, who was salivating at the prospect of feeling the M4A1 in his hands.

I never say no to a beer! Ted replied, making his way toward the bar.

Leland was chewing on the still piping hot mozzarella sticks, seemingly without burning his tongue or the roof of his mouth.

Go on, have one... he urged Ted, who didn't need a second invitation and bit into one of the sticks, taking care not to burn his own mouth.

Some Italian journalist came by on Sunday. You know, one of those ball-breaking conscientious objectors who think they're smarter than everyone else. I spotted him straight away. He was like a fish out of water!

What did he want? asked Ted.

You know what Europeans are like: damn democrats hoping to speak to us and find out why we would possibly want to bear arms.

And did he interview you?

Sure. But if you'd been here, he'd have interviewed you as well, replied Leland.

What did he ask?

“The usual bullshit about how gun ownership is linked to shootings in schools and stuff like that. I told him: ‘Guns don’t shoot themselves.’ If he’d just thought for a second about how many Americans own a gun, he’d have realized that by his reckoning the entire United States should be populated by the ghosts of people who’ve been shot just for fun. It pisses me off how people draw parallels between folk like us, who are simply defending the second amendment, and a few fucking screwballs. We’ve got more than three hundred million guns in circulation and they try to lecture us on morals! They can go fuck themselves!” Leland shouted, his face red with anger.

“I hope you ripped him a new one, chief. I can just picture that pussy journalist asking his questions, trying to get the moral high ground. Who the fuck *are* these Europeans anyway? Do you think any of them actually swear allegiance to that blue flag with the stars? I don’t know what the Brits are waiting for. They should just leave! They barely tolerate one another, they don’t even speak the same language for Christ’s sake! The only thing uniting them is that stupid currency, and that’s likely to fall below the dollar. Well, I say let them stay unarmed and ready to be fucked by some demented regime! Seems like they’ve already forgotten all their fucking dictators. They just don’t get how important the second amendment is. They see us as cowboys, but when they’re totally screwed by another crazed despot, they’ll be begging for our help...”

“Tell me about it. They squeal and we come running!”

“And I’ll tell you something else: I bet they’re sat there jerking off listening to Obama on TV, and they can’t wait to pin the blame on the United States when some crazy shit happens in the world!”

“You tell ‘em, Ted!” cried Leland, banging his fist on the bar.

“Look, chief, I won’t deny that at my age even I’m starting to think it might be sensible to restrict the sale of guns to civilians. Automatics, I mean. Only people with their heads screwed on and both their oars in the water should be allowed to own an automatic. Even better, why not limit them to people who have served in the military and sworn allegiance to the United States? Loyal people, patriots, people like us, Leland...” Ted said, and took a long sip of his beer.

“Sure, but people should always be ready to do whatever they have to do to protect themselves...”

“A decent pistol is more than good enough for protection. Some weapons should be reserved for war,” replied Ted, still caught up in the emotion of the discussion after Leland’s impassioned rant.

“Depends on who the enemy is, Ted. What’s the name of that spaghetti western where Clint Eastwood says: *When a man with a .45 meets a man with a rifle, the man with a pistol will be a dead man*?”

“I didn’t know the Italians could make movies!” joked Ted, as Leland and the barman who had been listening to their conversation joined him in roaring with laughter.

“You’re a lowlife, Ted Burton, and I’ve always loved you for it, but I’m tellin’ you, that was a great movie!”

Ted and Leland quickly finished their beers and retrieved their assault rifles in readiness for their contest on the range.

“Hey look, Major, seems as though it’s on the house for you today,” Leland said, pointing at a sign that read: “Kids shoot free”.

“Thanks, granddad, but I don’t need a sign. I may be retired, but just looking at you makes me feel young,” replied Ted.

“What do you say we make this a little more interesting? Ten beers says you’ll be bawling like a baby when we compare our M4 scores,” Leland challenged Ted.

“You’re on, granddad. I’ll be beating you just because I don’t want to have to carry you home over my shoulder...” replied Ted, laughing as he followed his friend into the shooting area, his rifle slung over his shoulder and boxes of ammunition firmly in his grasp.

Chapter 9

Henry was relaxing between classes, and had quickly forgotten all about the math test, when suddenly he heard the unmistakable sound of the ice cream truck drifting in through the window. Actually, it wasn't the same tune as normal, but it was close enough. Henry looked out and saw that, indeed, it wasn't the usual truck.

Mr. Smith must have had to get rid of his old truck! the boy thought to himself, speculating that his favorite vendor must have fallen on hard times: in place of his usual huge white and pink truck with a giant plastic ice cream cone on the roof was an smaller old gray campervan with just some small modifications on one side. The vehicle looked like something out of those World War II books that Bet had bought from a flea market when she was pregnant and Henry's dad kept on display in the bookcase in the living room.

Yeah, it must be because of the rain! last summer, it rained for like a whole month, and Mr. Smith mustn't have sold enough ice creams so he's had to sell his truck and replace it with that heap of junk!

What are you thinking about, Henry? asked Nicholas, poking Henry in the ribs.

Oh, nothing. I was just looking out the window and thinking how I'd like an ice cream.

Why? asked Nicholas, looking right at Henry.

Because Mr. Smith drove by in a new truck!

Nicholas shifted his gaze to the window, stepped forward and stuck his head out, looking left and right, before turning back to Henry and jamming both index fingers hard into his rib cage. Henry coughed and spluttered in pain and was left bent double. You thought you could trick me, Henry Lewis, but who's laughing now, eh? chuckled the red-haired boy.

Sit down, please, came the voice of old Mr. Johnson as he shuffled into the classroom wearing his Yankees baseball cap and with a copy of *The New York Times* folded under his arm.

Today, we're going to be talking about President Kennedy, and I think you're going to enjoy it!

As Mr. Johnson put his newspaper and cap down and sat behind his desk, Henry - before sitting down himself and having recovered from Nicholas's brutal attack - turned to look out of the window and check whether Mr. Smith's ice cream truck was still there, but he couldn't see it.

He must have been in a hurry, thought Henry as he sat at his desk and watched Mr. Johnson unfold the newspaper to show it to the class.

Henry knew that the story of President Kennedy would not only banish all memories of Miss Anderson and her math test, but also suppress the strong desire for an ice cream that had come over him when he saw the truck outside.

KENNEDY IS KILLED BY SNIPER

screamed the headline in *The New York Times*. The pupils stared intently at the old newspaper, keen to find out more. Nicholas was so engrossed that he forgot to remove the pinkie he had put up his nostril to do some intense digging around his freckled nose.

Stop picking your nose, Nicholas, chided Mr. Johnson. You must always be respectful when people are talking about a President of the United States, dead or alive! Your boogers are not important! If you can't blow your nose, you'll just have to put up with it.

For the other children, it was no laughing matter. Their teacher had a penetrating gaze and a deep measured tone to his voice that demanded respect.

Chapter 10

Barbara Harrison didn't try to be beautiful, she just was. When she dressed femininely, she was one of those women who men could fall for in an instant. She was well used to being pursued by the opposite sex. At college, she had eventually got bored with the continual advances from her fellow students, and had been sickened by older men shamelessly trying to pick her up despite her still being a minor. One such man was Donald Coleman, a childhood friend of her father who had thought it was a good idea to sneak into Barbara's room on vacation in Florida when she was just fourteen. It happened in the middle of the third night of the vacation, when a liquored-up Donald had taken advantage of his wife and Barbara's parents staying late at a Hawaiian-themed beach party held near the house the two couples had rented together.

Only his longstanding friendship with her father had saved Donald from a charge of attempting to sexually assault a minor, but it had not spared him the wrath of Barbara, who was already something of an expert in taekwondo having practiced it for four years. That was a really bad night for Donald: initially, he had assumed the young girl was up for it when she teased him by getting out of bed in just her underwear after she'd felt his covetous fingers brush against her nostrils, then a few seconds later he found himself flat out on the ground nursing a black eye and a cracked rib. He'd been hoping for a kiss, but instead had been dealt a punch and a kick that he hadn't even seen coming such was the darkness of the room and the sheer speed of Barbara Harrison's moves.

Barbara told him she wouldn't say anything to her parents, but that he'd have to think of an excuse for his injuries and if he ever tried it on again, she'd press charges, but only after killing him first.

Donald told his wife and Barbara's parents that some strangers had tried to steal his wallet and he'd sustained the injuries trying to defend himself. He and his wife cut short their Florida vacation the next day, setting off just a few hours after he had left hospital. Over the years that followed, the Colemans and the Harrisons saw less and less of each other, and when they did get together, Barbara was never present. Donald was ashamed of what he'd done and he would always come up with different excuses to spurn the invitations of his friend Antony Harrison, until eventually Barbara's dad gave up and decided he wouldn't bother calling Donald anymore.

You do right to stop calling him, Dad. I always thought he was a dumb sleaze! And his wife's sooo jealous of Mom's looks, Barbara would say whenever the question of whatever happened to the Colemans surfaced. Eventually, the Harrisons forgot all about their former friends.

Upon returning home after her hour-long run through Central Park, Barbara was stopped by the concierge, who handed her a parcel.

Who's it from? asked Barbara curiously.

It's from an Italian fashion house, Miss Harrison, that's all I know, the concierge replied with a cheery smile.

Barbara went up to the fourth floor of the Upper East Side building, entered her apartment, used one of her feet to close the door behind her, and put the parcel down on the table in the well-lit living room.

She was unsure whether to open it immediately or take a shower first. She had that same sense of excitement and curiosity she had felt as a child, when she would wake before everybody else on Christmas morning, tiptoe downstairs, peer through the frosted-glass sliding doors of the living room to catch a glimpse of the gifts Santa Claus had brought, creep back up to her room, and pretend to sleep before her brother and parents woke. Just like then, Barbara's patience and strength of character won the day as she rationally decided it wouldn't be wise to let the sweat cool on her skin.

Stood under the steaming hot shower, she wondered who might have sent her a gift from Italy and decided it had to be Robert. Her mother had promised to get her something special for her birthday in a couple weeksâ## time, but her intuition proved correct: the parcel was indeed from Robert.

After putting the last of her things in the case she would later take with her for her weekend in Maine with Robert, Barbara set about opening the parcel.

Having opened the outer packaging, she saw a label bearing the words â##For youâ##, signed â##RBâ## for Robert Brown.

Robert wasnâ##t one for the written word; saying things out loud came more naturally to him.

Barbara untied a pink silk ribbon that was wrapped around an elegant white box bearing the inscription â## *Atelier Livia Risi*â##. Inside was a simply stunning dress called â##Pizzo Jersey BuyByâ##, designed and custom-made by Livia Risi herself. It was a bias-cut dress, which made it harder to stitch and required a lot of fabric, but only a bias-cut dress flowed in perfect harmony with a woman as she walked. It was fuchsia with a black v-neck down to the base of the breastbone, and it was possible to wear it without a bra thanks to the embroidered black elastic that followed the shape of the breasts. It was one of the Italian designerâ##s must-have dresses, a timeless classic that featured (updated, of course) in every spring/summer collection. The dress was embroidered with different layers of lace: double on the front, where a bit more coverage was required, and single in areas where the elegance and sensuality of the female form could more readily be admired. Barbara Harrison was going to look a million dollars in this.

â## Wow!â## she exclaimed as she lay the dress out on the bed.

Barbara was a bit of a tomboy at heart, so she tried as much as possible to avoid wearing particularly feminine or revealing outfits. Although it was true that she could make anything look good, she was determined that men and women should recognize her other qualities first, the ones that went beyond appearances. At work, in particular, she had no time for men trying to undress her with their eyes.

â## *If you want to stay on the right side of me, you need to stay focused and quit daydreaming about something thatâ## s never gonna happen. Do I make myself clear?*â## She would say that to anyone who met her for the first time and stared at her too much.

Barbara was forty-two but appeared to have pulled off the trick of stopping nature a decade ago, and even she was taken aback by her refined beauty and innate elegance as she looked at herself in the mirror, wearing her new dress.

Robert accepted that Barbara had this more masculine, and sometimes in private scruffy, side, but he also wanted to see her as beguiling and feminine, an unobtainable goddess whose every slight movement could hypnotize him and make her fall in love with her all over again. He certainly wouldnâ##t be disappointed today. After applying her cat-eye makeup and finding some sandals to go with the dress, she left the apartment and headed for the restaurant where he would be waiting for her.

Barbara was pleased they had cleared the air on the phone the previous day, and she loved how Robert was always able to surprise her. Spending a few weeks apart from him had served only to deepen the void she had felt ever since she was a child, when her older brother Richard had died suddenly and inexplicably from a heart attack in his sleep. Ever since, that sweet and sensitive little girl had changed and taken on the characteristics she most remembered in her brother: strength and courage. It was her way of trying to ease the unbearable pain her parents had carried around since Richard died and fulfill the expectations they had initially had for both children.

Barbara had been in several relationships over the years, but only Robert had brought that sense of familial warmth and security. It would be a mistake to let a man like him go. He loved her like crazy, she knew that, and beneath her protective shell, she loved him too, in her own way. All he wanted from her was to be there, to live for today, and to accompany him on lifeâ##s journey, and all he wanted to do was declare his undying love for her.

Chapter 11

Ronald Howard was in a good mood as he drove out of Jim Lewis's repair shop, escorted by the same two armored cars he had entrusted with protecting the vintage Mercedes over the last few days. Jim was also pretty happy because Ronald had been in a hurry, so he wasn't stuck with him for too long. They might have been long-standing friends, but as grown-ups the billionaire and the mechanic didn't really have much to talk about, save revisiting some hazy and often made-up memories from their college days. Some of Ronald's recollections were so far removed from what actually happened that Jim struggled to humor him. Ronald at least had the good sense to steer clear of politics and the economy, although he would sometimes have a bit of a moan in what could only be described as a clumsy attempt to show solidarity with his friend and the lower social classes. Ronald was a bullshitter but he was no fool, and Jim appreciated that, just like he appreciated the ten thousand dollar check he was now holding firmly in his hand.

Ten thousand bucks for fitting a muffler and oiling a door - that is daylight robbery! God bless you, Ronald, and your bullshit stories! thought Jim, chuckling to himself. It was now unbearably hot in the repair shop. After folding the check and tucking it safely into his wallet, Jim headed into the bathroom to throw some cold water over his face. His day ahead would now consist of pulling down the shutters, going to collect Henry from school, taking him to his Aunt Jasmine's for some lunch together, and then heading to the bank to pay in that big fat check, maybe after a change of clothes.

At least that's how his day would have gone had he not emerged from the bathroom to find himself face to face with Shelley Logan, sat on her scooter in the middle of his repair shop, wearing a pair of flip-flops, some white Daisy Dukes and a pink camisole, which with no bra underneath provided a perfect outline of her shapely breasts and hard nipples.

My engine flooded, Jim. Can you help me? Shelley asked, pouting seductively in a way that only some girls could pull off.

Maybe you need someone to take a closer look, Shelley...

Oh I think I do, Jim. And I think you're the only one who can help me. Do you know, I'm not sure I can stay upright when it's so hot... replied Shelley mischievously, stretching her legs out and pushing herself back on the saddle to activate the kickstand.

I can't believe you've only just turned 20, Shelley. YouPorn has turned your generation into a bunch of whores, and I just take a ticket. Looks like my number's come up again! thought Jim as he approached the girl's scooter.

Would you mind if I pulled down the shutters? The heat in here is just unbearable, you know?

Sure. You got anything to drink? replied Shelley, taking a band from her wrist to tie her hair into a ponytail.

There's a fridge in the office. Take whatever you want and grab something for me too, said Jim, before pulling down the shutters.

Shelley re-emerged with two mini bottles of vodka, like the ones in hotel mini-bars.

Hey, shorty, you feel like downing these in one or would that be too much for you?

Jim, I am so thirsty... replied Shelley, raising the bottle in a toast and proceeding to pour the entire contents straight down her throat.

Oh, you are such a bad little girl, Shelley! thought Jim, walking over to her and grabbing her ponytail, forcing her to turn around, sink to her knees and then get on all fours like the horny little bitch she was.

Is this what you do with your boyfriend, Shelley? asked Jim, still grabbing her ponytail and controlling her like a dog on a leash.

â##Not at all; he loves me...â##

â##And is that why you came to see me?â##

â##Yeah...â##

â##Shelley, you are such a bad girl, you know that?â## Jim didnâ##t wait for her to answer. He took down her shorts and panties together and buried his face in her ass, prompting a strangled cry of pleasure as his tongue licked her up and down like a predator about to devour its prey.

Chapter 12

The speed limit along Bay Avenue in Toms River, New Jersey was thirty-five, but that didn't matter to Joanna's older brother, Zibi. He was the fastest kid on the block, both behind the wheel and at the helm of a boat, at least according to his sister.

As Henry walked back from school along Bay Avenue, he saw Zibi speed by with his sister in the passenger seat of the jet-black 1973 three-liter Ford Capri. Joanna's window was open and her long, golden locks were flowing in the wind.

The car came to an abrupt halt just a few yards ahead of Henry, who was walking along a sidewalk next to an uneven grass verge.

Hey Henry! Want a ride? shouted Joanna, leaning out of the window.

Of course I do, and actually I'd like to drive. I'd do a better job than your brother, thought Henry, before replying timidly:

No, thanks. I'm nearly at my Aunt Jasmine's.

In reality, Henry would have loved to jump in the car, but he was worried Zibi might laugh at him for whatever reason and Henry didn't want to look a fool in front of Joanna; Miss Anderson had already embarrassed him enough for one day, and anyway, Henry was still thinking about the Kennedy assassination.

Yeah, the assassination.

At the end of class, Mr. Johnson had left the story in a shroud of mystery, saying that he could only relay the facts as they had been decreed by history. He told the children that the school curriculum prevented him from going any further, but that when they were adults they would be able to explore some of the interesting alternative theories that were out there.

The truth is not always as it seems, had been Mr. Johnson's last words as he left the classroom.

OK, Henry. See you in class on Monday! yelled Joanna over the roar of the Capri's engine.

Henry had no time to reply or even wave to Joanna. The car was already speeding away. Zibi had revved so hard in neutral that when he engaged first gear, the tires screeched and left a long, stinking trail on the asphalt. In a matter of seconds, the car had disappeared over the horizon.

There was no traffic on Bay Avenue that day, at least not at that time.

Henry's backpack was weighing him down, and he paused for a second to take it off. It wasn't the books that were the problem; it was the new oxygen cylinder for Aunt Jasmine. His aunt had suffered pretty serious respiratory problems ever since she lost a lung to cancer, and the remaining one wasn't exactly that of a champion free-diver.

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