

## ONE

Sitting in his beat-up old pickup, Bobby absorbed the silence. Mist swirled lazily over the green, mirrored surface of Scratch Lake, the low-hanging clouds perched on the mountaintops like the sky had gotten sick of holding itself up.

Pete, the border collie/golden retriever mutt, panted beside him on the front seat, tail slapping gently against the shredded vinyl, white-tipped ears erect. Bobby had named him after Pete Townsend of The Who, a nod to his nearly irrational love for the big rock bands of the sixties.

Smiling, Bobby visualized the plump, unsuspecting creatures that would soon meet his hook. Last Sunday, he'd caught and released three wide-mouth bass. Wouldn't be right if Bobby Pendell snatched up all the best fish in the lake. The eight perch he'd hooked were small, but fried up with some potatoes they'd made a good Sunday-night meal for the three of them.

When you're seventeen and the main breadwinner for the family, fishing is serious business. And fishing was sacred for Bobby—the few hours each week that belonged to him and Pete alone.

Bobby unloaded his gear from the back of the pickup and lugged the outboard motor down to the skiff, Pete scampering ahead to the dock. In better days, Dad, who hadn't been in a boat for nine years, had built the small motor himself, but like pretty much everything else that belonged to the Pendells, it was one step away from a sad and rusty end.

Bobby fastened the outboard motor to the clamps and the balky old thing sputtered, then roared to life with a steady growl. He tugged Dad's army cap over his long black hair for extra luck and glanced up at the sky. The cloud cover was thick and ominous, but the rain would hold off. Just the kind of day fish loved. Pete waited on the dock. Bobby could never coax him into the boat.

It took a while to chug to the center of the large lake. Bobby cut the motor, his tight muscles releasing their tension with each bird squawk and fish splash.

Scratch Lake was the only place where he ever felt completely at home.

“I went down to the St. James Infirmary, I saw my baby there...” he sang at the top of his lungs, letting his raw, throaty voice boil up from deep in his chest. “Stretched out on a cold white table, so sweet, so cold, so fair.”

“Saint James Infirmary” was one of those depressing songs Dad played once a month with his so-called band of fellow vets, The Hurt Rockers. But like most old music, Bobby loved it.

And here, in the lake’s calm green center, he could sing as loud as he wanted. For some reason, the fish didn’t scare. On sunny days he even brought his guitar along. Yeah, he supposed it was crazy, but no one had to know that Bobby Pendell liked to sing old blues songs to the fish.

Bobby waved to Pete, now a speck on the dock. He chuckled to himself, peered over the side of the boat, and threw out a few minnows to see who’d stop by. Dad swore some wide-mouthed bass in Scratch Lake were as long as his leg and older than Bobby himself. He hadn’t seen one that big, but then again, Dad liked to talk. What else was he going to do with his time, besides complain and pluck away on his battered old guitar?

Bobby stared at the evergreens reflected in the silvery water. He’d offered to bring Dad down here and carry him into the boat. He was certainly big enough to carry him now.

“Nope,” Dad had said flatly. “My fishing days are over. My ass is never getting in a boat again.”

With his work schedule, Bobby had never found time to teach his eleven-year old brother Aaron to swim, so that left him out.

Whatever. Dad drowned his troubles in beer and guitars. Bobby could never tell if people came to the Woods Café to see the wheelchair-bound vet strum his heart out because they enjoyed the music or to honor his sacrifice. Didn’t matter. At least it got Dad out of the house, and drummed up some business for Dad’s best friend, Jerry Woods.

Dealing with Dad wasn't easy, but self-pity was a luxury Bobby couldn't afford. Someone had to work, and bussing tables at the newly reopened Graxton Grill six nights a week left Bobby little time for anything else.

A loud splash from beside the boat jarred him from his drifting thoughts. He peered into the green depths, hoping to spot Mongo, Dad's name for the legendary bass he had been trying to catch ever since he could hook a worm.

The dark waters stirred, pulling the boat slightly backward. Bobby dipped the oars into the water to paddle away from the disturbance, but the gently insistent pull kept him from making progress. The boat was being slowly dragged into some kind of current and had begun to pick up speed.

In his whole life, Bobby had never seen more than windblown ripples on Scratch Lake. Mongo was rumored to be huge, but he doubted striped bass grew large enough to churn up the waters like that.

Bobby thrust the oars into the water, paddling harder. The back of his head hurt. And the harder he rowed, the more his head throbbed like a dull drumbeat. A whirlpool was forming. No fish could ever disturb Scratch Lake like that.

Unnerved, Bobby yanked at the engine cord, but the motor only coughed, sputtered, and went quiet. The boat was captive to the steadily spinning water and Bobby could only squint helplessly into the depths as the headache hammered behind his eyes.

The lake's center was rumored to be fifty feet deep. No one really knew, but as the boat sped in dizzying circles, Bobby could see clear down to the lake bottom inside the whirlpool's tapered funnel. He gasped. Spread-eagled on the slimy rocks, on a bed of pond weeds, lay a pile of bones, a split, unmistakably human skull resting on the top.

Bobby swallowed hard, breathing fast and shallow.

It can't be real. I'm not seeing this.

He'd been so eager to get on the lake that morning he'd forgotten to eat. And he should have. The headache was creeping to his eyes, and now he was seeing things. Feeling and experiencing things that couldn't be happening.

The pile of bones at the bottom of the lake was as sharp and clear as a photo.

Nausea clutched his insides. His head felt like it was about to split open. Bobby clamped his eyes shut. Sucking in deep breaths, he tried to slow the rising panic and listened to his heart slam against his chest wall. He had to get a grip and get away before the water dragged him and his boat to the bottom of the lake.

This can't be happening.

Was it a migraine? His mother had suffered from those. But did migraines make people hallucinate? In the distance, Pete's barking bounced off the opposite

shore. The ache at the back of his head now a white-hot knife point, Bobby paddled wildly to break free from the water's pull, but he made no headway.

The boat continued to spin slowly at the edge of the vortex. Bobby tried to peer down into the whirlpool to make sure the horrible thing was gone, but his sight was filmed with a deep red overlay, a black smudge at its center, obliterating details and reducing the world to a featureless bloodstain.

No matter how many times he blinked, he couldn't see the water that smacked against the metal flank of the boat. He could barely make out the dim outline of the hand he held up in front of his face.

What the—?

Shit.

The pain was too much. Again, he groped for the throttle and tugged at it three times, but still the damned engine wouldn't catch.

The pain bore down on him, the red film thickening to a dark mass.

He couldn't see at all. He could only feel the boat slowly spinning, stuck in the water's strange rotation.

"Pete!" Bobby called out at the top of his lungs, "Pete!"

And then, as abruptly as it had started churning, he felt the water go still.

Pete's nervous bark reverberated across the lake. Unable to see, Bobby dipped the oars into the water and began to paddle slowly toward the distant sound, praying he was headed in the right direction.

There'd be no fish for dinner this week.

## TWO

The first thing Bobby felt was the wet tip of Pete's nose nuzzling his face. He reached for the furry head but was unable to make out more than a vague, dog-shaped outline against a bright red background. The pain was gone, but his eyes still weren't working right.

Bobby pushed himself up to a sitting position. Cold drops splattered on his head and plunked on the wood of the dock.

Had he moored the boat? Rain would rust out the motor. He didn't even remember climbing out.

Feeling along the side of the dock where the boat should have been, Bobby's searching hands found nothing but the cold shock of water and a swarm of fish mouths nibbling at his fingers.

Damn. He hadn't secured the boat and now it was adrift somewhere in the lake. He could take someone's rowboat out to get it. There were oars in the old metal shed where weekenders kept their kayaks and life jackets.

But everything still looked like someone had splattered thick red paint across a windshield. He'd be lucky if he could find his way back to the truck. Even when he did, how was he supposed to drive it?

Bobby got unsteadily to his feet, the red-washed world swaying around him. He lurched after the patter of Pete's paws across the dock, tripping from the wood onto damp sand, his bearings lost. The rain came down harder as he crunched across the beach, following Pete's happy bark.

Once he finally made it to the truck, he buried his nose in Pete's scruffy head, the smell of wet fur soothing his frayed nerves.

"You saved my ass, boy. Two treats for you."

Light streaks had begun to pierce through the red haze, but there was still no way he could drive. Clambering inside the truck, Bobby located the dog treats in the glove

compartment. He gave two of them to Pete, sat back, and listened to the contented chomp of the dog's teeth as they gnashed the treats to bits.

He considered calling his best friend, Coco, on the pre-paid phone he kept in the glove compartment. But he couldn't see the numbers to dial. And what would he tell him? He was seeing things and going blind? Coco would just think he was nuts. He'd just wait it out. The spell would pass.

He couldn't let himself think about the skiff floating aimlessly to the other side of the lake—or how he would never scrape together enough money to replace the motor. Or how even a mechanical genius like Coco couldn't bring a rusted-out hulk of metal back to life. Or that they'd never eat fish again.

But it was safer to focus on that instead of on what was wrong with his eyes and what would happen if they never worked right again.

By the time Bobby trudged into the living room of their little modular house, it was well past noon and his vision had returned to normal. Light streamed through the gritty windows, but Dad had wheeled himself to the darkest corner. He was just struggling into the easy chair in front of the TV, beer can already perched in the plastic cup holder.

"Took you long enough," Dad grunted as he settled his long torso onto the chair, arranged his wasted legs on the footrest, and snapped his fingers. "Pete! Remote!"

Wagging his tail eagerly, Pete bounded to where the remote lay on the floor in front of the TV and clamped it between his teeth. Dad patted him absently on the head and took it from the dog's mouth. "Pete's the only one of you around here who's good for anything. I keep telling that damn kid to leave the remote where I can get at it."

The small flat screen had been a gift from Jerry last Christmas. Bobby cringed whenever he looked at it. It didn't belong in the crummy room. It looked like charity. Which was exactly what it was.

The house was small, too small to get lost in. Too small to hide in, with just two tiny bedrooms, a miniscule bathroom and a single kitchen/living room combo. Behind their flimsy quarters was a larger, more substantial house that had long since fallen to ruin—

the old Pendell homestead. The plan had been for them to live in the modular while Dad fixed the roof. But Dad had been redeployed to Iraq; when he came back, his spine shattered by an insurgent sniper, he was in no shape to fix anything. The old house, their possessions and memories covered with sheets of plastic, had been left to slowly rot away, though friends had offered to help. Bobby blamed his dad's stubborn pride.

"Where's the A-man?"

"Back yard. That damn beatnik piano teacher is coming to give him a lesson."

Bobby bristled. A few minutes alone with his dad was all it took to wear his patience thin. "Kenny Cooper is doing this for no pay. You can at least pretend to be polite."

Because Bobby had once confided that, without his mom around, Aaron wouldn't get to develop his musical talent, Mr. Cooper, the school music teacher whom the whole school knew as Kenny, had started coming around to give Aaron lessons.

"Which is another reason I don't trust him. Nobody does anything for nothing."

"Mr. Cooper's just that way. He's a good guy."

"Good guy, my ass. He's a thirty-five-year-old name-dropping asshole who never grew up. If I had his money, I could be a good guy, too."

Dad flicked the TV to a baseball game, sucked down a long swig of the beer Jerry kept him supplied with then lit a cigarette and stuck it between his teeth. Bobby suspected that, on some level, Dad was just plain jealous of Kenny Cooper.

Sam Pendell used to be the dad all the other kids looked up to. He'd coached Little League, football, even run the local Boy Scout troop. The town might still remember the Sam Pendell that was, but they weren't the ones who had to live with the Sam Pendell he'd become.

Bobby picked up strewn clothes on his way to the kitchen, his mind already tallying the contents of their pantry. Three jars of spaghetti sauce and two boxes of linguini. Five cans of beans. Dried lentils and rice. He'd have to make the food last. Payday wasn't until this Thursday. And between the beer and the cigarettes and the pay-per-view porn his Dad threw his VA benefits away on, there wasn't much cash lying around—but it was worth it to keep him quiet.

"What kept you so long, Bobby-o? Don't look like you caught much of nothing."

“Wasn’t a good day.”

Bobby threw the dirty clothes into a heap near the laundry basket in the hall by the bathroom. Tonight was laundry night. He surveyed the encrusted dishes in the sink. Letting the water run hot over his hands, he tried to push away the memory of the skeleton at the bottom of the lake, along with the terrifying red blindness. The body might not have been real, but the blindness sure was. What if it came back?

“When the fuck is it ever a good day, Bobby? But you always catch something. Did you even go? Got a girl or something?” Dad wheezed a dry laugh, then coughed. “Water. Bring me some water.”

Bobby filled a glass and brought it to Dad, resisting the urge to toss it in his gaunt face. Once, Dad had been handsome. His voice still had that rich, deep tenor. Like melting chocolate, Mom used to say. With that voice he’d won over Patty Sparrow, the daughter of Graxton’s only doctor, and married her. Bobby was Dad’s spitting image, everyone said. But except for the music, the similarity ended there. Bobby wasn’t a talker like his dad, but music was a language he couldn’t even remember learning. He’d just picked it up, like walking or chewing his food.

Three years ago, Mom had up and left. Bobby wanted to tell Dad that it was his poisoned words, not his shriveled manhood, that drove her away. She’d loved them all, but after a while, how much can a person take? It was rumored she’d run away with a man from California and gone to Florida. Or a man from Florida, to California. Bobby’s grandparents were long dead, so she hadn’t gone to them; no one in Graxton had ever heard from her again.

If he could have, Bobby would’ve left, too, and never looked back. But every night, Aaron still cried for Mom. How could he let his little brother be abandoned twice?

10

Vision

The rumble of a car caught his attention. He peered out the window just as the red Jeep Grand Cherokee came barreling up their dirt driveway in a cloud of dust.

Bobby wished for once Mr. Cooper would be late for Aaron’s lessons, but today he was ten minutes early.

“Kenny’s here!” Aaron sang, racing in the back door, then right back out the front. Bobby watched from the window as Aaron leapt into the teacher’s open arms.

Dad was already asleep in the same ratty chair, snoring loudly with his mouth hanging open, the gray and black stubble peppering his sunken cheeks.

“Dad,” Bobby said softly beside him, “Mr. Cooper’s here.”

Dad startled awake. “Huh? Fuck if I care. Why’d you wake me?”

Bobby ignored him and scrambled around the living room, scooping up the clothes, dirty plates, empty potato chip bags and beer cans that had accumulated around the room.

“It’s not like you’re going to impress him, kiddo. He knows damn well what a rat hole this is.”

Bobby gritted his teeth and gathered the items in silence. Dropping the clothes in the hamper, he dumped the dishes in the sink, grabbed the axe from the utility kit under the sink, and headed out back, letting the flimsy screen door slam behind him. A dwindling pile of wood for winter heating waited for him—both his gym and a convenient way to blow off steam.

A moment later, Pete pushed through the door and, tail wagging, watched as Bobby stripped off his T-shirt, hefted the axe above his head, and whacked the logs, one after the other in a savage downward arc until his muscles screamed with exhaustion. After most of the logs were split, his initial burst of energy spent, Bobby sank onto a tree stump and listened to the lilting strains of Aaron’s piano scales.

Kenny was putting Aaron through his paces, patiently preparing him for the day when he would audition for the prestigious Morton Conservatory of Music in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Aaron was making progress, struggling through a difficult piece by Franz Liszt, and Bobby had to smile. Aaron’s brains and musical genius would eventually get him out of Graxton.

But the panic from earlier still wouldn’t leave him. He had to calm down, somehow. He plodded quietly into the house, careful not to disturb Aaron at his lesson, and fetched his guitar, a beat-up old twin of his dad’s. Bobby’s fingers found their places on the

strings. Guitar picking was his next best form of therapy, and quite possibly the only thing keeping him sane, other than Pete, Aaron, and the fish in Scratch Lake.

He plucked the strings, unspoken fears riding on the notes that flowed from his guitar, and began to hum a wordless tune. From the confusion of his mind, a song was forming. Time passed. Lost in the music, Bobby didn't notice Aaron standing at the back door, dressed in his Little League uniform. Bobby stopped, the guitar still vibrating.

"You done with the lesson already?" "That's pretty good, Bobby." "It's just a few chords." "But you make it sound so good. And your voice is

great." Bobby smiled, stood and tousled Aaron's still-sweaty

hair. "Thanks, champ. How was practice?" "Terrible. I suck." "Mr. Cooper is just challenging you with some really

hard stuff. Stuff I could never play in a million years. Never say you suck. You don't and you know it."

Aaron fixed him with a hard stare. "Why not? You never admit how good you are. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you Joey's mom is giving me a ride to the Little League game."

"But I thought you wanted me to take you, A-man?"

Aaron lowered his head. "I did, but Dad says he's got some chores for you to do around here instead."

Bobby rested a hand on Aaron's shoulder, the anger boiling up. "Guess I'll come pick you up and catch the tail end."

"Cool," Aaron said, disappearing into the house. Bobby sat, guitar in lap, waiting for the anger to subside. He couldn't lose his cool. Ever.

Keeping Dad's poison from destroying his little brother was Bobby's single-minded purpose in life—and so far, he was on track to succeed.

### THREE

After helping Dad with his daily physical therapy, watering the pathetic plants in the vegetable garden, and scrubbing down the bathroom, Bobby finally escaped.

Pete followed him jauntily to the truck, and Bobby paused at the driver's side door for just a minute. Sunlight poured over the rolling hills, the spine of the blue Catskills visible over the treetops.

Graxton didn't have much to offer in the way of opportunity, but its beauty always took his breath away. Memories of how Mom had taken them on hikes in the woods and taught them about the herbs she used for medicines and cooking flashed in his mind. Graxton was a place where cows grazed on green and gold rolling fields, where deep, clear lakes met thick evergreen forests, and Mom had never failed to point out the glory of nature around them. But with the beauty came the sadness.

Bobby wondered how much Aaron actually remembered about her. He also worried about what the hole she'd left in their lives, filled only with their father's drunken ranting, was doing to his little brother.

Sunlight slanted across the sloping field in their front yard. Bobby forced the thoughts of loss from his mind. Instead, worry about the red blindness crept in and took their place. He shivered despite the heat and climbed into the truck, maneuvering down the steep dirt driveway to the wider gravel road below. He'd have to try and go back to fetch the boat tomorrow.

Corn grew in gentle waves on either side of their road. Three miles out of town, a few houses dotted the landscape, but mostly there were just cows. Bobby shoved one of Dad's old Rolling Stones cassette tapes into the player and blasted it. Coco liked to tease him that he had an old soul. That somehow his psyche had gotten misplaced and stashed away, only to be born in the wrong time. Bobby smiled, the music and the rolling scenery lulling him into a semblance of peace. He might have kept driving if not for Pete's loud barking. Pulling to a stop, Bobby looked in the rear-view mirror.

“What is it, boy? Don’t want to miss the end of Aaron’s game.”

Whimpering, Pete kept his gaze fixed on the side of the road. Bobby got out of the truck and Pete followed, sniffing along where the corn stalks met the roadside weeds. Bobby had almost gotten back in the truck when a girl in shorts, a tank top, and sneakers staggered out of the stalks.

She limped toward him, waving frantically. “Hey! Wait! Over here!”

“What the heck were you doing in there?” The annoyed words tumbled out and Bobby regretted them instantly. As she hobbled closer, he could see her white teeth and red-gold hair that gleamed like a coin in the sun.

“I was running. I wrenched my ankle.” The girl extended a hand. “I’m Gabe.”

Bobby took the girl’s hand and shook. “Gabe?” he stammered, his face gone hot.

“It’s short for Gabriella.”

Bobby dared a longer look at the girl. She was tall, only a few inches shorter than him, leanly muscled, with freckled- all-over milky skin that looked like it couldn’t withstand very much sun. Just the same, the fragile skin was stretched over sinewy muscle, an athlete sculpted from a bar of Ivory soap. This girl, Bobby decided, was durable. She didn’t look like she’d break too easily. His heart picked up speed of its own accord and he had to struggle to keep the tremor out of his voice. “You shouldn’t be talking to strangers.”

The girl laughed and shielded her light eyes against the sun. “You don’t look all that strange.”

Bobby shrugged. “You can’t always tell.”

“Well, tell me your name and then you won’t be just a tall, handsome stranger who picked me up on the side of the road.”

Bobby felt himself blush. She had called him handsome. But words came easily to this girl, words she probably didn’t mean, while for him finding the right words was like panning for gold. “Bobby. Bobby Pendell.”

“Short for Robert?”

“Uh, yeah. But no one calls me that. Except my dad when he gets pissed off.”

“Well, Bobby Robert Pendell, right now I have no choice but to rely on the kindness of tall, handsome strangers. My cell gets no reception out here and if I’m not back at the restaurant for dinner my dad’s going to kill me.”

Bobby peered at the girl from under his trucker’s cap. Definitely a weekender. She was too buffed and polished to be anything else. “Which restaurant? There’re three in town.”

Gabe snickered. “That many, huh?”

Bobby stuck his hands in his pockets and looked down at his scuffed work boots. It was a waste of time worrying what this girl thought of him. She was clearly way out of his league. And he had more important things to think about. “Look, I, uh—I got to get somewhere. I’ll give you a ride, if you want. But I got to hurry.”

“Where are you going?”

“My brother’s Little League game. Which is probably over by now.”

“Isn’t that the ball park right up the road?”

Bobby nodded. “Yep. That’s why we got to hurry if you want me to drop you at your restaurant. Would help if you just told me which one.”

“Why don’t I come with you?”

The girl was beginning to irk him. Maybe, like the cat that toyed with its injured prey before it pounced for the kill, she sensed her power. Like the girls at school. His high school was located in the bigger town of Waterbury, and the girls there all looked down on the so-called “hicks” from the more rural towns like Graxton and Fernville.

“To the game? Thought you were in a big hurry. I don’t mind driving you to the restaurant, though, if you’d just tell me which one.”

“I love baseball.” “It’s just a Little League game.” “I love kids.” She leaned down to pet Pete, who’d been circling her, wagging his tail. “I love dogs, too. I have plenty of time, if you’re giving me a ride.”

“Insistent, aren’t you?”

“I just got up here for the summer and I don’t know a soul. Basically, I’m lonely and bored. Besides, I throw a mean curve ball.”

The girl's face broke into a wide smile and Bobby's knees buckled a little. She was pretty. Really pretty. And she seemed a little desperate for company. He supposed it couldn't hurt to let her join him.

"It's not even summer yet. Don't you have school?"

For a flash of a second, Gabe looked fidgety. Then she straightened and tossed her hair behind her shoulders. "My school's out for the summer."

"What kind of school gets done in May?"

Gabe looked him square in the eye. "The kind of school I go to."

"What kind of sch—?"

She brushed past and, interrupting him, said, "C'mon, then. Get in the truck."

He watched Gabe through the smeared glass of the truck windows. As she opened the door, Pete leapt past her and took his place on the seat next to Bobby.

She laughed and climbed in. "Looks like someone is used to having you all to himself."

"Guess so." Bobby started the truck, wishing he weren't so damned tongue-tied all the time. He cleared his throat and forced out words, hating how gruff his voice sounded. He wished Coco were here. He would know how to talk to a girl like this. Coco could talk to anyone. "What restaurant were you going to?"

The girl smiled and patted Pete on the head. "The Graxton Grill, of course."

"The Catskill House is where all the weekenders go." "Are you implying I'm a weekender?" "You're not from here. So that means you're a weekender." The girl rubbed her ankle, then turned back to Bobby.

"I'm here for the whole summer. So that makes me more than a weekender."

"Why the Graxton Grill?" "What are you, the local food columnist?" Bobby's mouth quirked up in a half-smile. "I think I have

the right to know, since I saved you from the corn stalks." "My dad owns it." The air rushed out of Bobby's lungs. "Your dad? Your dad is Max Friend?"

"That's me. Gabe Friend. Sadly, also known as Gabby Friend. Welcome to my nightmare."

"Gabby Friend?" Bobby stifled a snort. "That's harsh."

Gabe fixed him with a wry smile. "Imagine my life in middle school. Especially since I was too shy to utter a peep." Bobby didn't talk much at school, either, but he couldn't imagine this girl ever being bashful and shy. "I work at the Graxton Grill," he said finally. "Your dad is my boss."

"Is that so?"

Bobby stole a glance at her, but she just stared out the window, suddenly disinterested. Had he offended her? He really had no idea how to talk to this girl. And, though he was pretty sure it was a bad idea, he really wanted to. Max Friend had a policy against employee dating—knives, fire, and romance are a bad combo, he had told them all the day the restaurant reopened. His daughter would be off-limits for sure. "Um, how's your ankle?"

"Better. It was just a twist."

It only took a minute to get to the ball field where Aaron's Little League game was at the end of the sixth inning. Aaron was pitching a shutout, and in minutes the game ended. His team erupted in a roar, ran to the mound and mobbed the triumphant pitcher, but Aaron had already spotted Bobby watching from the sidelines and broke away from the tangle of bodies. Picking up speed, he barreled into Bobby's arms, a bundle of sweaty hair, grime, and sparkling blue eyes.

"Dude! We won! We won! We made it to the playoffs!" "I know. I saw!" Aaron pulled away, noticing the stranger in their midst.

"Who are you?" "She's," Bobby stammered, "...a friend." Gabe smiled, all freckles and sunshine, and extended a hand. Bobby's heart revved up inside his chest, but he kept his expression placid and flat, like the waters of Scratch Lake— before the weird turbulence earlier that morning.

"Literally. I'm Gabe Friend," she said.

Frowning, Aaron looked from her hand to her face. "I never saw you before."

"No, you haven't," Gabe said. "But I'll bet I can hit any kind of pitch you can throw at me."

Pete had picked up a stray ball and hunkered down, gnawing contentedly at it on the grass. Barely limping, Gabe strolled over to a bat that had been flung aside in the chaos.

“We could go up on that hill and have a practice.” She gestured toward a sloping tract of mown grass that flattened at the top.

“Thought you were in a big hurry,” Bobby said.

“There’s always time for baseball.” Gabe glanced at her watch. “Besides, I still have time, if you’re giving me a ride. It’s only two-thirty and I don’t actually have to be at the restaurant until four for the dinner rush.”

Bobby glanced at Aaron. “It’s laundry night, but I guess it’s okay.”

Pensive, Aaron’s upper lip quivered into a sneer. Bobby laughed under his breath. Aaron never could walk away from a challenge or a fight. Which was why Bobby needed to show up from time to time at Aaron’s school playground at recess.

“Bet you can’t.” Aaron wrestled the slimy ball from Pete’s jaws. “Give me that, Pete.”

Gabe gathered her hair into a hasty ponytail, revealing the sloping curve of her pale neck. Bobby tried to ignore the corresponding shiver that rushed from his thighs to his throat.

“We shall see, won’t we, Little Pendell?” she said, hefting the bat over her shoulder.

“My name is Aaron,” his brother said emphatically.

Bobby chuckled as they trudged up to the hill, Aaron and Gabe in the lead. Aaron had no problem dealing with Gabe. Sometimes Bobby wished he were eleven again. In his memories, with Mom still around, those were golden times. But, then again, Aaron was much tougher than him, struggling with things eleven-year-old Bobby had never dreamed of.

Pete straggled behind, investigating the tall grass and weeds that marked the boundary between the neatly mown grass and the woods. The clearing at the top of the hill was bordered on three sides by state land, woods that stretched for endless miles to the east, and ended at the reservoir to the west.

“Go easy on her, A-man,” Bobby said when they’d reached the top of the hill.

“No need.” Gabe was already crouched in a batter’s stance, tapping the ground with the tip of the bat.

“You asked for it,” Aaron said, and let loose a fast, low-riding pitch. Gabe stepped quickly out of the way as it whizzed past.

“What are you, scared?” Aaron called out, laughing.

“That would have been a ball,” Gabe said, back in position, bat slung over her shoulder. “A little higher next time. I’m seventeen, not eleven.”

“Nice and easy, Aaron,” Bobby cautioned. All he needed was for the boss’ daughter to get hurt.

Gabe laughed and blew a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. “Oh, c’mon. I’m not made of glass and fluffy stuff. I play softball.”

Focusing, Aaron drew his pitching arm back and hurled the ball hard. It sailed cleanly toward Gabe at waist level and Bobby cringed, imagining it slamming into her stomach. But Gabe took a fierce swing. The bat connected with a loud crack and soared above Aaron’s head, clear into the woods.

“Hey! That was our only ball!”

“Pete’ll find it,” Bobby said. “He’s a hunting dog. Get it, boy! Go get the ball!”

The dog tore through the weeds into the woods, the three of them bounding after him. Gabe, apparently recovered from her strained ankle, was right on Aaron’s heels as they crunched between the towering oaks through the underbrush after Pete.

Pete had already stopped, sniffing at the ball, which had come to rest at the base of a large tree, when a strange tightness in his skull tugged Bobby in the opposite direction. His gaze fell on a faded strip of material snagged in the bark of a dead tree trunk. Drawn inexplicably toward it, he crunched through the ferns and dried leaves, the sounds of laughter and Pete’s barking muted, drowned out by the thump of his heart in his ears.

Standing at the base of the tree, his boots rooted to the forest floor, the back of Bobby’s head had begun to throb.

Not this again.

He reached for the strip of cloth as if sticking his hand into fire, and...saw the vague form of someone running wildly, breathing hard...

Crashing through the woods. Heart speeding, each beat like the swing of an axe. Can’t do it. Can’t run anymore. Have to stop. To stop. Bobby yanked back his hand from the bit of cloth as though it had burned him. The vision still fluttered in front of his eyes like the final images from a broken movie projector. It was as if he were that person,

hearing fragments of their frantic thoughts, yet he could see them as though he were watching from a distance.

It was like a memory. A vividly terrifying memory. But it wasn't his memory. He had to get out of the woods, but his knees giving way, the pain from that morning returned, an exploding red agony in back of his head. The woods went crimson, tilting and spinning around him. He lurched away from the dead tree and the bit of cloth, reeling.

No. Not here. Not now.

Dazed and sickened, Bobby could still see through the red blotches and stumbled toward the brightness where the woods met the open field. He could hear Aaron, Gabe, and Pete race out of the woods, back to the clearing, thinking he was right behind them.

The ground shifted and he fell to his hands and knees. He'd have to ride it out, wait until the spell cleared and the terrifying sense of being chased like a hunter's prey left him in peace.

Twice in one day. What in blazes is going on with me?

The voices grew louder. And closer. Through the red haze, he could just barely make out their figures approaching.

"Bobby! You okay?"

The pain wrapped around his head like a band and squeezed tighter, stealing his breath. Twice in one day. Not good. Not good. What the hell was wrong with him?

Bobby rubbed his head and looked away so they couldn't tell he could barely see what was right in front of him. "I tripped. Hit my head, I guess. I'm okay. Just a little dizzy. Can you help me, A-man?" He held out his arm.

Pete licked at him and whimpered. Even the dog was worried now. He felt himself hauled to his feet and tried to blink away the pain, dizziness, and thick red fog. No go.

"We got you," said Gabe.

They led him out of the woods into the sun's glare, where he could make out the shapes of Aaron, Gabe, and Pete silhouetted against a bright red sky, and little more. He groaned and sank to the grass, the back of his head throbbing like it was about to crack open.

“What’s the matter, Bobby? Do you need to go to a doctor?” He heard the panic in Aaron’s voice.

“No. No. I’m fine. I’m just a little dizzy. It’ll go away in a minute.”

“Have some water,” Gabe said and pressed the rim of a bottle to his lips. “Maybe I should call my dad,” she added.

“No! Please. I’ll be okay in a minute.”

“Head injuries can be dangerous. You need to get an X-ray. You can’t mess around with this stuff.”

They sat on the grass for what seemed like forever, the ground shifting and spinning beneath him. When he finally opened his eyes, the red had begun to recede like a storm rolling out to sea. The pain had peeled away to reveal the world in all its color and vivid detail. Bobby sighed, got shakily to his feet, and brushed off his jeans. “There. See? I’m all good now.”

Gabe was looking at him oddly. “You know, for a while there your eyes were all weird and unfocused, like you couldn’t see. That’s not a good sign after a head injury.”

“Thanks for the medical advice, but I think it’s time for me and Aaron to take you to the restaurant, or your dad is gonna kill me.”

Bobby kept silent on the short drive from the ball field to the Graxton Grill. Gabe didn’t seem to notice. Absently petting Pete, who sat between them, she stared out the car window, seemingly as lost in her thoughts as Bobby was in his.

He steered the truck into the restaurant parking lot, trying to work out the best way to leave off without seeming like a jerk. Bobby could tell already that even a little bit of Gabe was going to be too much for him. If being with her made a lump in his throat so tight he could barely force words out, let alone breathe, how was he going to work with her without giving himself away? There was no pointing in liking her. Max Friend was pretty clear about his no-employee-dating rule. Messing around with the boss’ daughter would get him canned for sure. But telling himself this didn’t still the wild currents she stirred up inside of him. With both of them working at the restaurant, it wasn’t going to be easy avoiding Gabe, but damned if he wasn’t going to try. He had no choice. He couldn’t risk losing his job over a girl



Bobby turned off the ignition and kept his hands glued to the steering wheel, dreading the moment when he'd have to speak. In the back seat, grimy and exhausted, Aaron had fallen asleep. Bobby could feel Gabe's gaze on him, expectant, waiting for him to say something. He dared a peek and wished he hadn't. In the slanting light, her eyes were silver-gold. Smiling, she'd pushed the hair from her face, revealing a constellation of freckles strewn across her pale nose. Suppressing the shiver that skittered up his back, Bobby gripped the wheel even tighter.

"Thanks, Bobby," she said. "For the ride and all."

The sound of his name on her lips was like a strange, new chord strummed on his guitar.

What was wrong with him today? The headaches and hallucinations—and now it was as if he was possessed by this girl; the urge to reach across the seat and push the errant strand from her face was nearly irresistible. But his voice came out as its usual noncommittal grunt and he hated the sound of it. "No problem. See you around, then."

Gabe nodded repeatedly. "Yep, see you around, Bobby Pendell. And say goodbye to Slugger for me, okay?" She hesitated for a fraction of a second, as if she was about to add something, but instead ruffled Pete's head, climbed out of the truck, closed the door, and walked away without looking back.

Bobby watched her figure blur into the blaze of sunlight until she was completely swallowed up by it. He rested his head against the wheel and wished he could empty his mind like a jug of water, his memories and wants flowing out of him like a river into the sea.

## FOUR

By the time they got home, blue afternoon shadows crawled across the overgrown field that surrounded the house. Aaron was fast asleep as they rumbled up the driveway. Bobby let his mind drift to the memory of his fingers cradled on the frets of his guitar. The melody from earlier had come floating back into his head, as if the rough edges of it had been polished smooth and clean as marble.

From the chaos of his mind, a new song was forming. Bobby knew immediately. The song was for Gabe.

“Crap,” he said out loud. He was in some deep, deep shit.

“Huh?” Aaron yawned in the back seat. “Your head okay now, Bobby?”

“My head’s just fine, A-man.”

Bobby’s stomach flip-flopped at the memory from earlier that day. The red blindness and strange visions had taken him down twice. By sheer force of his stubborn nature, he couldn’t let it happen again—wouldn’t let it happen again.

“Do me a favor, bro,” he said, swiveling around in his seat. “Don’t tell none of it to Dad? About the girl, the head thing and all? I don’t want him to get his panties in an uproar, you know?”

Aaron nodded stiffly. “Panties in an uproar” was their code for drunken temper tantrums. Whatever objects could be reached from a sitting position went flying. Once, Dad had grabbed a saucepan of boiling water off the stove and thrown it at Bobby’s head, narrowly missing scalding him with it. After he’d sobered up, he’d apologized for days.

Bobby and Aaron kept a lot of things quiet between them. It was best that way.

Aaron loped into the house. Bobby lingered, tossing a stick with Pete. He just needed a few more minutes to think before he let the four walls close in on him. He took Pete around back and slumped onto his guitar-playing stump beside the logs he’d split earlier.

Gabriella Friend. The name floated through his head like a string of notes, merging with the song he’d already half-written.

One wrong move and he could lose his job. Hands off. Keep out. Private property. Violators will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. He'd have to travel too far to find a new job, and then his earnings would be eaten up by the gas-guzzling truck. Bobby stood to go in the house, Pete trotting behind him. No Gabe, he vowed.

While Aaron played a noisy video game, Bobby threw together a quick dinner of spaghetti and red sauce. Dad eyed him blearily from his chair. He'd already polished off his fourth can of beer and was clearly feeling little pain.

"A-man tells me his team is going to the playoffs, thanks to his fearsome pitching. Something for the Pendells to celebrate tonight, eh, Bobby?"

Bobby shared a grin with Aaron. "You should have seen that last inning, Dad," he said, careful to keep his tone even.

It took only the slightest spark to set him off when he was like this.

"Wish I could have, but the wheelchair don't run too good over grass." Dad went silent for a beat, then added, his voice hoarse. "Too bad there's no fish tonight to mark the occasion. Too bad alls we got is spaghetti. Why's that so, Bobby? Why's there no fish on the night of such an auspicious day?"

Aaron flashed Bobby a look and quietly slipped into their room, closing the door softly behind him.

"I told you, Dad. Fish weren't biting today."

"That so?" Sam Pendell paused, his gaze pinned on Bobby. "Heard the Bartley boys caught their fill on the far side of Scratch Lake. Hank called to offer me the extras, but I said you'd bring us our own. Then Jerry said Joe Wilkins saw you at the ball field with your boss' kid. Hot-looking blonde. That true, Bobby?"

Bobby nearly dropped the jar of sauce. He should have known. Dad's spy network had the means to track his every move. There were no secrets in Graxton.

"Jeez, Dad. She hurt her foot and I gave her a ride. And that was this afternoon. I was at the lake this morning. You know that." Bobby stirred the pasta as it came to a boil, his anger simmering along with the water in the pot.

"Do I? Is that right—puttin' your own needs over the family's?"

Bobby clutched the edge of the Formica countertop. Breathe and count. Breathe and count. It will pass. The man was a cripple. An angry drunk cripple. Suck it in. Suck it deep in.

“Have you ever seen her, Dad?” he blurted. “Can’t say I have. Don’t get out much, you know.” “Well, if you had, you’d know,” he heard his voice begin

to rise, “that there’s no way in hell a girl like that would want a lump of shit like me!” Bobby’s voice bounced around the small living room, surprising him.

But it worked. He’d managed to shock Dad into silence.

After a pause, Dad raised an eyebrow. “Touched a nerve, didn’t I? The lady doth protest too much, eh?”

Bobby hurled the wooden spoon from the kitchen alcove clear across the living room. It landed with a soft thud on the carpet in front of the TV in a blotch of red sauce.

“Fuck you. Make your own damn dinner tonight. I’m done here. I’m gonna go do the laundry.”

Bobby whistled for Pete, swooped up the hamper, grabbed a jar of peanut butter and the last of the loaf of bread, and called for Aaron, his heart thumping. He’d never mouthed off to Dad like that. Out in the truck, he pounded the steering wheel with both fists. He was unraveling faster than an old sweater. How long until he came completely undone?

On the way into town, Aaron sat in the front seat, silent, Pete between them.

The Woods Café was at the other end of Main Street, far enough away from the Spic and Span Laundromat, which was a little too close to the Graxton Grill for comfort. The last thing he needed was to run into Gabe. But he would have to do the laundry at some point.

Coco’s fluorescent-yellow VW bug was parked helter-skelter in front of the café, and Bobby sighed with relief. Though they never talked much about most of the stuff on his mind, just sharing a small bit released some of the pressure. And Coco usually had some lame jokes and gossip to crack him up.

Woods Café was a bizarre cross between a hunting lodge, a fifties diner, and an opium den. Cluttering the dark purple walls, moose heads mingled with neon soft-drink

signs and war memorabilia. You could never predict the music. Jerry either had old blues, disco, psychedelic sixties rock, or Celtic folk music, depending on his mood or if Coco had commandeered the CD player.

Pete sauntered in, and Aaron made his way to the pinball machine Jerry had rigged to work without quarters. Sunday nights were slow, and right now Bobby, Aaron, Coco, Jerry, and Pete were alone.

“Dude!” Coco occupied his usual table at the front window, his laptop, papers and books spread over the aluminum surface.

“Hey,” Bobby said, and slumped in a chair across from him. “Sup?”

“Nothing much, man. Trying to power my way through this paper on Teddy Roosevelt.”

“AP American history, huh?”

“Got the test in three weeks, dude. You got the American history Regents, don’t you?”

Bobby groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

Coco flipped the shaggy bangs from his eyes and peered at him over the tops of his horn-rimmed glasses. Bobby didn’t want to think about life after Coco left for college in a year or so. Coco had a future and it wasn’t in Graxton.

“Yeah, man, well, if you ever need help, you know where to find me.”

Jerry Woods was a bear of a man who’d always reminded Bobby of his namesake, Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead, one of Jerry’s favorites. He placed a tall glass of lemonade and a heaping sandwich nestled in a mountain of chips in front of Bobby. Bobby’s mouth watered, but he pushed the plate away.

“Jerry, I—”

Jerry smiled, his dark eyes crinkling. “Don’t say it. Sam called. Said he pissed you off and that you stormed out with no dinner.”

“Jeez,” Bobby glanced at Aaron, who was too busy shaking and pounding at the pinball machine to notice much of anything. “I just got—I don’t know what got into me.”

“Guess he realized he pushed you too far this time.” Jerry patted him on the shoulder. “Sam’s in a lot of pain, Bobby. Above from where he can’t feel anything, his back hurts him 24/7. He don’t mean nothing by his nasty temper. You know that.”

Bobby stared at the table. Since Jerry was a vet himself, he seemed to understand Dad better than anyone. But he hated taking any more from the Woods than he absolutely had to. “I guess.”

Jerry pushed the plate toward him. “Eat hearty now, buddy boy!”

He brought a sandwich over to Aaron, then returned to his place behind the counter.

Bobby’s stomach gurgled. He really hadn’t eaten anything today and he certainly didn’t need to trigger another episode of the red weirdness. But was it really hunger that brought on the strange spells? Something about the whole thing bugged him, like an itch he couldn’t reach to scratch.

“So,” Coco said casually, “summer is really heating up around here. Did you hear about the hot new babe in town?”

” Bobby rolled his eyes, his mouth stuffed with turkey and hard-crust bread. Coco was famously girl crazy. “You mean my boss’ daughter?”

“Hell, yeah. You meet her?” “Yeah.” “She’s scorching.” “I guess.” Bobby took another bite of sandwich. “Dude, you a priest? The babe is volcanic. And you work with her!”

“Like, I know that, Coco. Forget her. She’s a city bitch and she’s off-limits by my boss’ directive. Besides, she wouldn’t go in for guys like us.”

Coco wagged an eyebrow. “Speak for yourself. Max Friend isn’t my employer. Plus, I know how to talk to girls like her.”

Bobby’s insides squeezed with an involuntary pang. The green devil. Jealousy. Courtesy of his tiny Thai mother, Coco had high cheekbones, olive skin, and dark almond- shaped eyes, crowned with light and sandy brown hair. Slim and agile, he’d inherited his father’s height. Coco might be a bit eccentric, but he was great-looking. And girls knew it. “You wouldn’t.”

Coco narrowed his eyes. “Dude, was that a flicker of resentment on your face? You turned red for a second.”

“Doesn’t matter. She’s out of our league.”

A grin spread over Coco's face. "Don't worry. I already have a girl." Coco had been seeing Dana, Sheriff Barclay's ultra-quiet daughter. Bobby couldn't imagine what Coco saw in her. Rail thin, plain, with dull brown hair, Dishwater Dana talked even less than he did.

Bobby shook his head. "Give it up. I can't risk losing my job for a girl."

Coco stared at him, his smile fading. Bobby flinched. There it was. Pity. They avoided talking about the differences in their circumstances, but sometimes it hung between them like a foul odor. Coco was going places. Bobby was going nowhere.

"Whatever, dude," Coco said softly. Pete had settled beside Coco, who fed him a scrap of bacon from the remains of his sandwich. The Woods's kindness toward them never failed to grind Bobby's insides to chopped meat. He was desperate to change the subject. Searching the tabletop Coco had strewn with papers, his eyes fell on the Sunday Kingston Daily Freeman. Under a stiff yearbook photo of a smiling girl, a bold headline screamed, "GIRL VANISHED ON PROM NIGHT STILL MISSING"

Bobby pulled the newspaper closer. The missing girl was only from a few towns away, but he didn't know her at all. "First I heard of this. Wonder what happened to her?"

"Dead, most likely," Coco said.

Bobby scratched his head. He couldn't tear his gaze from the girl's eyes. Under the forced photo smile, was that a hint of desperation? "Why would you think that?"

"Isn't that how it always turns out on TV?"

Bobby shifted in his seat, inexplicably unsettled. "That's pretty cold of you. What if it was Dana?"

As if on cue, the door to the café jangled open. Dishwater Dana slinked toward Coco, eyes shining as if he was the light of heaven made flesh.

"Hi, guys," she murmured. Without even a glance in Bobby's direction, she flopped into the chair next to Coco's. Bobby groaned inwardly. Whenever Dana was around, sounds seemed to go quiet, as if her silence had the power to suck in all his words.

"Hey, Babycakes." Coco dragged Dana's chair closer and greeted her with a long, slow kiss on the mouth. She threw her arms around his neck, her skinny body twined

with him like a kudzu vine. Transfixed, Bobby thought how nice it would be to have Gabe pressed against him like that. And then that alarm went off in his head.

Wrong. Don't go there. You can't have that.

Suddenly, the café had become suffocating and Bobby felt the urge to run. Anywhere. But he wasn't ready to go hanging around the laundromat and increase his odds of running into Gabe. Instead, he took a huge bite of sandwich to keep himself from blurting something rude.

Dana pulled the newspaper toward her, a cascade of stringy hair hanging in her face. Between the strands, Bobby could see her pouty lips move as she read. "My cousin Rosemarie knows this girl," she said finally, her gaze still trained on the article. "And now the State Police have pulled Daddy into the case...whoops!" Dana clamped a hand to her mouth. "I shouldn't have said that. Daddy told me never to talk about official police business."

Bobby leaned forward, angling the paper so he could look at it again. "Why? Is it a murder investigation now?"

"Let it go, Sherlock." Coco said. "She said she can't talk about it."

Bobby rolled his eyes. "Figures. The one time Dana Barclay has something to say, she's under a gag order."

Dana's eyes flashed to his, something cold and sharp behind the softness, like a needle tucked inside a cotton ball. "Why are you so interested, Bobby?"

"Why not? Nothing ever happens in Graxton."

"You think a girl disappearing is cool?" Dana stared at him, the corners of her mouth tugged downward. It was a known fact that her father, Sheriff Barclay, hated Bobby's dad. Chuck Barclay and Sam Pendell had been bitter rivals in high school, a feud that continued into their adult years. Somehow, Dad had always managed to keep a step ahead—until he landed in a wheelchair. Hate like that, Bobby thought, doesn't just go away. It goes underground and festers, eventually seeping into everything.

Dana stood abruptly. "I have to go. Daddy's picking me up in five. Movie night in Kingston."

“Have fun,” Bobby said under his breath. Dana glared at him, face flushed, nostrils flared.

After Dana had left, Coco drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “What the hell was that? I know you two aren’t best friends, but can you at least try to be civil?”

“Sorry. I don’t know what’s got into me today.”

Coco frowned. “You sure you’re feeling okay? You look pale, like the skin on your ugly mug is pulled too tight around your skull.”

Bobby cleared his throat and wondered if the day’s strains showed that clearly on his face. “I’m fine. I was just curious, is all. It’s weird, isn’t it, that they’re keeping it all hush-hush? I wonder what’s really going on.”

Coco slanted his head, still gazing at Bobby with his piercing stare. Bobby knew the prospect of a riddle would be too tempting for his friend to pass up. But just why he was so curious, Bobby couldn’t begin to explain.

“I can ask him for you, if you like,” Coco said. “Barclay’s always tripping over himself to be nice to me. I’ll just kind of mention that Dana is upset by the whole thing. See if he bites and throws me some inside info.”

“No! I mean, never mind. I just thought, if you’d heard chatter...”

“So now I’m Homeland Security.” The glint in Coco’s eye was back and Bobby knew he was forgiven. Coco never stayed mad long.

Bobby threw a piece of lettuce at Coco’s head. A crust of bread sailed back at him. Pete started barking and then Aaron rushed over, picked up a napkin and put it over Coco’s eyes, yelling, “Pirate attack!”

Bobby laughed hard as the memory of their years of zaniness washed over him in a warm wave. He joined Aaron in the attack, and helped pull Coco from the chair to the floor. Pete got busy licking everyone, the three of them wrestling and laughing on the floor like puppies.

Jerry’s voice cut through the mayhem. “Excuse me, boys. We seem to have another customer.”

From the tangle of bodies, Bobby looked up. Arms folded, Gabe stood smirking from the doorway. In the confusion, he hadn't heard the jangle of the door opening. "Looks like fun. Mind if I join in?"

Coco was on his feet in an instant and, smoothing his rumpled clothes, lunged toward her in a few long-legged strides.

"Welcome! Can I get you anything, madam?" He pulled out a chair at the nearest table and gestured toward it. "Please, have a seat! I'm Coco, otherwise known as James Woods, no relation to the actor of the same name."

Gabe giggled. "Nice to meet you. I'm Gabriella. But call me Gabe." Bobby sighed. It was no contest. He could never outshine Coco when it came to charm. In this case, maybe that was a good thing.

"Sorry, but I'm not staying, actually. Dad just sent me over to ask for some extra cream." Her gaze strayed toward Bobby. Feeling like the king of idiots, he picked himself up from the floor.

"Oh, hey, Bobby Robert." "Um, uh, hi." "Yo! Gabby Friend!" Aaron skipped over to greet her.

Bobby just wanted to hide under the table, curl into a tight little ball, and die.

"It's dead as hell over at the Grill, but we ran out of cream. And our only customers want coffee. Embarrassing, huh? The Foodmart is closed. Dad said to pay you double if you can spare some."

Jerry had already retrieved a container of half and half from the refrigerator. "No need. Local businesses have to hang together. He'll cover me another time."

Gabe flashed a bright smile and Bobby looked away. It was like staring into the sun. His eyeballs were melting. Could everyone see what this girl did to him?

"Okay, cool. And thanks!" she said. Again, Bobby felt her eyes graze past him, and risked a glance. Lips pursed, she was looking straight at him, mildly amused, like she was an anthropologist studying the natives in their natural habitat. He felt scrutinized. "Nice to meet you, Coco-slash- James. See you around, Little Pendell and," she paused, "you, too, Bobby Robert." She whirled around and left, the door closing with a jingle of bells. If only he'd heard them when she'd entered.

Coco squinted at him a good long time before he spoke. “Unbelievable.”

“What?” Bobby tucked his T-shirt back into his jeans. “The chick likes you.” “What? You’re insane.” “I’m not. I have chick radar. She turned pink when she looked at you.” “Shut up.”

“It’s all over your face. You are toast, my man. Because you’re hot as hell over that babe. And I can’t blame you.”

Bobby headed for the exit. “Look, think what you want. I got me some laundry to do.”

Lisa Amowitz/SpencerHillPress