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THE CONFESSION
BY
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Part One

Introduction

I never wanted to change my life until I was down on my knees praying for it to stay the same.

Funny how things turn out that way. You want one thing and some uncontrollable cataclysm shakes the opposites into power. You want to be friends but you end up at his throat. You want to love someone and you end up the end of her. You try daily to gain control only to finally understand the implausibility of that pursuit.

For the majority of my young life I traveled a common road. Raised right, the good values instilled in me chipped like those of any teenager. I took solace in compatriots who influenced sin, who played on the group mentality of indulgence. Lest I seem a rebel, these transgressions were of the most minor, youthful offense. Had I not just mentioned them, no one, not even those I shared them with, would even remember. But of those typical, youthful trysts, one person went unchecked; he became a catalyst I could not rein under control. What I could control was my ability to not follow his lead, and from that spawned antagonism, competition, jealousy and fury.

As I grew accustomed to that relationship and its enmity, I lost a grip on how it influenced those I cared for. I committed sins on behalf of this rivalry. I destroyed lives.

I learned the pain of love and the pain of loss. Because of the loss, things I used to love I began to hate. Everything reminded me of that which I no longer had. I could not understand the kindness my friends showed; I did not appreciate or accept it. And still I did not see the need for change. My actions were for the sole purpose of maintaining the life I thought I controlled.

Ultimately the forces that be, be they God or guilt, grew strong enough to spark epiphany. I wrestled with the decision to pen my indiscretions and their ramifications. A confession is easy to think about: much harder to bring into existence. I even practiced on my most trusted friend.

I was trying to save my life. But I was wrong. I had to be saved and for that to happen, my life had to change. A confession is the vehicle to bring me there.

I accept the consequences, moral and legal, associated with what I outline hereafter. However, I primarily want to confess to those I hurt. I look forward to their justice and punishment far less than that of any court.

Notice I have not offered apology. Very rarely have I said, "I'm sorry," and meant it. I've said a sincere "I love you" more often. And then, I am not sorry for much of what I did. At a time past, I was. The guilt was overwhelming but it has since been washed away.

Two deaths stain my hands and I will pay for them with my old life; change it for the better. In what tangible way, I am not sure yet. Perhaps I'll find God and become religious, or take on a new career path, or re-educate myself in a new field. That is the next step and I am eager to set afoot.

This is my confession. My name is Augustine Shaw and I killed my best friend.

Ch. 1

I was lost and running on empty.

The little dashboard gas light told me so. It blinked silently, desperately, saturating the black cabin of my car in a red-orange hue. Voiceless, it screamed for help, a last-ditch effort for my attention.

What the little light didn't know was that I was already responding to its begging cry for help.

I turned my Ford Explorer from the highway onto the next available exit ramp, prompted by a large blue fluorescent road sign promising 24-hour fuel somewhere down the road. I obliged, proud of my attentiveness to my surroundings and the mechanical effectiveness of my aging sport utility vehicle.

But as the interstate fell away into the darkness of the rearview mirror, so did any further direction as to where this mysterious gas station was hidden. So disappeared my confidence.

The smooth, state-maintained highway quickly crumbled into a cracked and rocky backcountry road. The asphalt – I was surprised there even was asphalt – rose and split under my fog lights, wreaking havoc on my car's aging shocks.

There were no street signs or streetlights along the road. It was darker than the highway was and much narrower, wide enough for one vehicle. Imposing southern pines soared along both sides of the pavement, like sentinels guarding a secret. I tried to see just how tall they were through the moon roof but all that could be seen was a hurried onrush of colorless clouds. No moon. No stars, either. The treetops peaked somewhere in the infinite darkness above.

Nature was being very difficult. Granted I was attempting to refuel a manmade gas-guzzling nature-killer. I couldn't blame her for refusing to lend a hand. Nevertheless, I could have benefited from some moonlight, a few stars or hell, even a swath of fireflies.

But no such luck. I was on my own.

The three other people in the car were sound asleep and useless. Even if I were to wake them, this was only their second trip through the American South. The first being a week ago when we drove right past this very exit in the opposite direction, southbound. At that time none of them were paying attention, I was sure of that. They were too occupied by anticipation for the Florida sun and our last spring break vacation as college students.

Besides, the two girls in the car had terrible senses of direction and my best friend Marcus (we called him Shoddy) was most likely hung-over, if not still drunk. He was still sleeping off the booze and mistakes of the night before. I'd be surprised if any of the three even knew we were heading north for home.

Compounding the situation, I had a pounding headache.

I turned my attention back to the unforgiving darkness stretched out ahead. The station had to be up around a bend. If only I could see farther than the 10 yards of pavement illuminated by my headlights. Maybe then I'd notice if there were any bends.

There weren't any. Not even a slight bow since we left the exit ramp. I drove a straight and steady path deeper into the unknown, what seemed like ages away from the relative comfort of the interstate.

I'm usually a very reserved young man. Which to many is odd for a college senior. One would expect craziness, frat boy intensity or at least intermittent jubilation at the upcoming death to homework.

Not me. I kept it all inside, which isn't to say it did not exist. It did. But long ago I had erected a wall in front of my emotions intended to keep all that in. And everyone else out. For the most part, it worked. Very few people ever got past that wall. I locked away a lot of things back there.

Recently, for various reasons, the wall was weakening. The very real danger of running out of gas on a backcountry road at midnight threatened to add to those recent chinks. Running out of gas was more than just a logistical threat. There would be very real consequences. I'd have to wake up my friends. My mistake and failure would be evident. I'd be vulnerable and scrutinized. The wall would be unguarded.

The headache still lurked behind my eyes. Rubbing my temples didn't help.

Again, I tried to focus back on the road and the task at hand. My mind was being easily distracted. I set my gaze through the windshield and thought only about practical solutions. I'd probably have to leave the car and find the station on foot. Marcus should stay in the car with the girls. I'd have to change into sneakers instead of the flip-flops I had on. I should probably carry some sort of weapon, just in case. Did I still have that heavy metal flashlight in the spare tire well?

I could not help but get nervous after another ten minutes went by with no gas station. The emergence of a soft but urgent *ding ding ding* that began emanating from the dashboard did not help. That little orange light wasn't kidding around anymore.

My practical questions quickly diverged toward paranoia. Did I have my AAA card? Would a tow truck find us? Would a service station be open this late at night this far away from real civilization? What if the tow truck driver was suspect? Would I call 911 or was that too extreme? If not, did I even know what number to call for assistance?

I instinctively pulled my cell phone from the center console and checked the service bars. Full. Thank God. Apparently whatever Southern municipality we trekked across was in tune enough with the 21st century to have erected a cell tower. That was good in case the tow truck driver happened to be a serial killer.

I had to chuckle at myself. Nothing had even happened yet and already I thought of the worst possible scenario, something straight out of a low budget horror movie. This sort of thinking spoke to the doubts I held about my own ability to handle a potential crisis situation. Which was actually not that foolish, considering the crises I had dealt with in the past and their horrifying outcomes.

Regardless of my failing confidence, the only choice I had was to continue on the current path and hope the blue highway sign was no liar; hope the fumes we coasted on lasted just a few minutes more. Turning around wasn't feasible. I doubted I had enough fuel to make it back to the interstate. Besides, I had no idea how far away the next exit was or whether or not I'd face the same problem there.

I had to hope the gas station promised me would rise out of the darkness like the Emerald City, ready to fulfill my needs. But I didn't need a brain, a heart or some courage. I needed gas. Gas to help me get home.

Five more minutes went by, the dinging grew more frequent. My body tensed.

Then suddenly the road was smoother. A few yards later it curved.

I must have understood a change in road condition to mean a change in luck. Here was the bend I was looking for.

At the same time the dinging from the dashboard got faster and louder. It was telling me this was it, the last push. We weren't even riding on fumes anymore, just lingering particles. Some people might have stopped then. I usually would have stopped then. But for some reason adrenaline stopped me from stopping. Subconsciously I increased the speed of the Explorer. The dinging hurried and I sped up more, trying to keep up with its urgent pace and maybe beat it to the gas station I was now sure existed. It had to, right up around the bend. I instinctively psyched myself up. My body reacted naturally. My pulse quickened. My body arched forward in the driver's seat, knuckles white gripped around the steering wheel. I came alive. The hours of driving in virtual silence and darkness slipped away like the blurred pines lining the road.

The words of someone I once loved flashed behind my eyes. "Before this is over, I'm going to lighten you up. I'm going to make you come alive," she said to me. Amen to that. Screw my cracking wall. Screw my sleeping friends in the car. Screw the serial killer tow truck driver. If I were going to break down on a backcountry road, I'd at least get a thrill doing it. If I were going to open myself up to failure, I'd do it speeding around a hairpin turn.

One gradual curve right followed by a wide arc to the left then a twenty-yard uphill straightaway. At the top I sped through another curve left around an especially looming group of dark pines at fifty miles per hour. A quick S bend, my pulse quickened and another wide sweeping turn to the right. Was that perspiration on my forehead? A

hard right, sharp left, the speedometer fluttering excitedly. We spit out onto another straightaway and ten yards ahead the road dropped down over the horizon like a cliff.

Without hesitation I took the Explorer over the top, hitting 65 miles per hour. As the car breeched the hill and came into its descent a sliver of silver moonlight split the clouds above; the high beams from heaven. All at once the full expanse of the road and the decline ahead was visible. The black curtain parted and I saw down below, nestled at the bottom of the hill, a dimly lit gas station. The moonlight mixed with its orange fluorescent bulbs gave it an eerie green, almost emerald glow.

Ch. 2

I barely took the keys from the ignition before I jumped from the driver's seat. The excitement of finding the station kept my blood pumping fast. The adrenaline kept rising while I popped the tank latch open and removed the gas cap. It only subsided when I reached for my wallet and pulled out my Visa student credit card. My headache had disappeared.

I went to swipe my credit card. There was no place to swipe a credit card.

"Dammit," I said to nobody.

It was then that I became aware of my surroundings.

All around was darkness. In the time it took to descend the hill, the clouds had recovered the moon and that initial shimmering emerald glow around the station had evaporated. The same southern pines that led the way here now formed a three-sided barricade around the lot's border. Even though the station's existence was our salvation, the trees' effect was more fortress than oasis.

Without the moonlight or my headlights we were bathed solely in the orange fluorescent light from four large street lamps situated at the square lot's corners. Two double-sided gas pumps sat in the middle of the square, just barely illuminated by the perimeter lighting.

The Explorer was parked at one of these gas pumps. Old gas pumps. The retro, non-digital kind that had rotating numbers and a flip up handle. The orange light accentuated their rusty front panels.

The station wasn't a franchise and there was no canopy or giant neon sign adorned with a Pegasus or tiger. The only identification was a painted wooden sandwich board sign in between the pumps that read, "Welcome to Mo's."

At the rear of the lot was a rectangular clapboard building that housed a one-bay garage and a small store. The garage door was up but no lights were on. Inside I could make out the shadowy outline of a tow truck. The store was three windows long and unlike the garage bay, was lit. A paper OPEN sign hung on the inside of the glass door.

Other than a few trash barrels and a picnic table under the lamp in the back right corner, the station's lot was vacant. Ours was the only vehicle besides the sleeping tow truck. We were the only visible signs of life besides the OPEN sign and lit up store.

It was exactly what I would have expected a gas station to be down a back road in Northern Florida. I should've expected a station like this to be cash only. It fit with the décor.

I double-checked the ancient gas pump before sliding my card back into my wallet. Definitely no place to swipe a credit card but there was a small sticker that said cash only. I missed that the first time around.

Fortunately the lack of credit card payment wasn't much of a problem. We had planned for this to happen at some point. Last Saturday morning before we pulled out of Providence College's student lot, the four of us each threw fifty bucks into an envelope and stowed it away at the bottom of the center console. It was Emily's idea. She argued – correctly – that at some point on our thirty-two hour drive down to Key West or on the thirty-two hour drive back, we'd need cash for gas.

If she wasn't still fast asleep in the backseat, I would've kissed her in thanks. Well, probably not. That would have been a very bad idea. But I would've thanked her regardless. I went back to the driver's door and retrieved the envelope full of money from the center console. Two hundred dollars should have felt heavier. I opened it to find one Benjamin Franklin staring back at me. Someone had pilfered our gas stash over the past week.

The memory of last Wednesday night flickered into focus in my mind's theater. We had walked by an ATM on our way down Duval Street. Everyone partook, except Shoddy, which was odd since I knew he tapped out his cash the night before at Irish Kevin's bar. That night, when we reached the Lazy Gecko bar, Shoddy started buying rounds. And he had taken the car by himself that afternoon to find a package store.

Looked like I had prime suspect number one. I reminded myself to address that with him when he woke up. I never did.

I was surprised Shoddy and the two girls were still sound asleep in the Explorer. Lindsey wasn't a very heavy sleeper, I knew from experience. But neither she, Shoddy or Emily had even flinched since we left the highway. I was amazed the sharp turns, racecar antics or the sudden stop at the gas station didn't rouse them.

I checked on them all before walking to the store.

Still sleeping. Emily and Shoddy were out cold in the backseat; Lindsey snoring with her face pressed against the front passenger window. They'd never know how close we were to breaking down. I'd never tell them. I'd just add it to the list of other things, much darker, much more significant things, that I wasn't planning on ever telling them. Compared to those, Shoddy's thievery from the gas stash seemed trivial. Perhaps I wouldn't mention it to anyone.

I left my three best friends in dreamland and made my way to the storefront.

Inside was smaller than I expected. To the left, two racks of automotive necessities and snack foods. One drink cooler covered the back wall. Immediately to my right was the checkout counter. A tall promotional display urging customers to change their oil sat on top. A large relic cash register, continuing the retro gas pump theme, waited proudly, to the left of center. A screwdriver and some mechanic's tools were placed next to it.

The register was unmanned and upon further investigation, it appeared nobody else was in the store.

I took a lap around the candy racks and only on the way back around did I notice the small door behind the checkout counter. The oil change display must have blocked my view of it. I briefly debated whether or not someone positioned it deliberately.

When I looked inside the door I saw what was probably used as an office. Right on the wall in plain view of the doorway was a small black safe. There was a folding chair and a metal desk upon which were propped the feet of a young man. He had on a red trucker's hat with the number of some NASCAR driver I didn't know. He wore a

blue, oil-smearred mechanic jumpsuit, the zipper pulled down to his bellybutton.

Underneath was a similarly oil-smearred white t-shirt. On the jumpsuit was a patch with the name, “Bobbo” stitched on. I had walked into a stereotype and had to suppress laughter.

I knocked on the counter outside the door. Bobbo didn’t move. I knocked again. Nothing.

“Hey Bobbo!” I finally yelled, pronouncing it Bo-Bo, like a clown’s name.

The man jolted upright, his hat falling over his eyes in the process. He jumped up and immediately zipped up his jumpsuit and brushed it off, as if he could clean the oil stains that way.

“Hey there, sorry to wake you but I just want to fill up out there,” I said.

Bobbo recognized the situation immediately. He must have done this before.

He rubbed his eyes and pushed past me, making his way behind the counter. I followed but took the customer’s customary place on the other side.

“It’s Bob-O,” he said with a yawn.

“Huh?”

“My name. It’s not Bo-Bo, like a clown. It’s Bob then O.”

“Oh. My bad. Sorry about that,” I feigned apology. “Well I just wanted to fill up. Probably take fifty.”

I handed him the one hundred dollar bill from the envelope. His face screwed up in annoyance.

“Not from around here, eh friend?”

“How’d you guess?”

“We don’t get many of these around here,” he waved the hundred like it was on fire. “Actually we don’t get many people in here that I don’t know personally. So that tells ya something.”

“Yeah, I can see that. But thank God you’re open. I coasted in here on fumes from the highway. If you were a few more minutes down the road you would’ve been coming to get me in that tow truck you got out there.”

Bobbo huffed.

“That’s if I answered the phone, friend. Pretty deep sleeper, I am.”

He punched a few buttons on the relic cash register and started flipping through bills. After a minute it became obvious Bobbo was having trouble making change.

“You wanted fifty, right? I don’t have a fifty to give back, friend.”

“That’s fine, I’ll take whatever bills you got.”

“That’s the problem, I don’t have enough in here to make fifty. I gotta go out back and open the safe. Be right back, friend.”

“No problem, Bobbo,” I said, pronouncing it wrong again. He scowled and made his way into the small office behind the counter.

I moved over a little and watched him dig through the desk. After finding a small black notebook, which I assumed held the safe combination, Bobbo got to finding me some change.

I looked away, not wanting him to think I was a thief. I studied the wall behind the counter. It was covered with local advertisements, lost pet notices and a dispenser for rolls of lottery scratch-off cards. An old plastic cigarette pack holder was hung underneath a novelty singing fish. All were typical backcountry gas station paraphernalia.

All except the frame hung right in the middle of the wall. There were no ads or lost cat papers crowding it, just a halo of off-white cinder block. The black plastic frame outlined its contents, a bright red piece of paper, demanding attention and a tinge of urgency. It must be important. Every regular customer waiting for change would notice it immediately if they just refocused their eyes over Bobbo's shoulder. The paper would have peeked around him, flirting with locals and travelers like myself, daring them to ask the obvious. Since I took an indirect route to the cash register and had an indirect encounter with the slumbering Bobbo, I only just recognized the fiery notice. Without Bobbo, I was free to investigate the paper. It was the only object in proximity that didn't immediately belong with the redneck motif.

I checked on Bobbo still trying to open the safe then glanced back at the frame. In order to read the black letters on the red paper I leaned as far over the counter as I could. I propped myself up and stood on my tiptoes, braced by my hands on the countertop.

Whoever designed the message clearly harbored strong sentiments and certainly wanted every human in search of gasoline to believe in their blazing credo. But he must have had incredibly good eyesight or terribly poor vision because what he had in flare, he lacked in basic color scheme and graphic design.

I dangled precariously over the counter's back edge and squinted to read the text.

In the frame was a list of ten items with the list's title in big bold letters that read: "The Paradoxical Commandments."

I started reading them out loud but softly under my breath.

"One: People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered. Love them anyway.
Two: If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good

anyway. Three: If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway. Four: The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Five: Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.”

I paused at five and read the line over again, this time in my head.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.

I read five over once more. I couldn't pull my eyes from that line. I think I hated it. But I totally agreed with it.

Uneasiness and some other uncomfortable emotion began creeping down my brain stem, into the buzzing nest of nerves. I had to move on to number six. I never got the chance.

“Hey friend, what the hell are you doing?”

Startled, my hand slipped and I stumbled backwards off the counter. I caught my balance on a candy rack before I fell, Bit-O-Honeys scattered on the linoleum. As I pondered the fact someone, somewhere still enjoyed Bit-O-Honeys enough for them to continue being manufactured, I looked up to see Bobbo standing behind the counter. He held a wad of bills in one hand and the other was resting on the screwdriver next to the cash register. His fingers started curling around its handle in anticipation of trouble.

“What? Oh shit, no. I'm sorry Bobbo,” pronouncing it correctly for the first time. I put my hands up in a gesture of innocence.

“You trying to get into that register, friend? I wouldn't try it.”

“No, absolutely not Bobbo. I just want my change and to pump my gas.”

“Then why was you climbing over the counter, friend?”

“I wasn’t. I was just trying to read your commandments back there.”

Bobbo looked confused. His knuckles whitened around the screwdriver.

“What are you talkin’ bout.”

I pointed to the black frame behind him. He hesitated but I shook my outstretched hand in assurance. He turned quickly and his stressed face calmed. His grip on the tool loosened. He gave me one last look up and down and concluded either I was no threat or that his lumbering frame could easily subdue my inferior one. Or at least he was confident in his ability to stab me with the screwdriver.

Bobbo punched a few keys on the register and the drawer popped open.

“Yeah, that there’s Mo’s idea of employee training,” he offered as he shuffled a few bills.

“Who?” I asked.

“Mo. Mohammed, Ajay Mohammed. He’s the owner of this joint, my boss. This is his station,” he said and without looking up, pointed to the glass storefront.

There on the window next to the door were white adhesive letters. From inside the store the words were backwards but still easily readable. I read out loud, “Ajay Mohammed – Owner.”

“Yup, that’s him. Good ole’ Mo,” Bobbo said, his words laced with sarcasm. He handed me two twenties and a ten dollar bill. “He puts them things up in all his stores around here. Says we should all live by them rules like they’re a code or sumthin’. Says if we all did, we’d change the world.”

His belly jiggled with a deep, cynical laugh. Bobbo clearly was only a believer as far as it earned him a paycheck.

I put the money back into the white envelope and stuffed it into my back pocket. Then I asked a question just for the sake of conversation. I had to make sure Bobbo wasn't planning on following me outside wielding a screwdriver. I mimicked his cynicism, hoping to keep his mind away from that possibility.

“So this can't be Mo's only gas station. How many stores does he have? Probably need a lot if he wants to change the world with a piece of paper.”

“About ten or twelve, I think. Has 'em from here on up through Georgia. Mo's got the dough. He's a little wacko, comes in here once a week always pointing at that damn list and askin' me if I'm livin' by the code. Then goes out back to count his money.”

“What do you tell him?”

“I always just say yes, boss. It's easier that way. But I don't think I've ever read the whole list. I figure when you got all the dough like Mo, it must be nice and easy to go around livin' all good and honest and preach to other men. He don't have to worry about two kids, an ex-wife or paying rent.”

I was getting more information than I really wanted. It was time to bid Bobbo farewell.

“Well Bobbo, thank you for being open. You saved my ass,” I said and turned to exit the store. I took one last look at the framed red paper list before I did.

“No problem, friend,” Bobbo said. “Sorry 'bout sleeping on ya. And for not having the change right away.”

“No worries,” I said. “Have a good night. I'm sure you can head back to sleep now.”

I pushed through the door next to Ajay Mohammed's backwards name. As I did, Bobbo yelled out one last sarcasm.

“Hey friend, don't forget to live by the code!”

The glass door closed behind me and I laughed. But it was an uneasy laugh, the kind that jolts your insides for a second, like a tiny, unconscious punishment.

I could feel the tremors of another headache. I thought of turning back to Bobbo and buying some Tylenol, or perhaps he knew where I could get something stronger. But I had enough Bobbo for one night. And for some reason, I really did not want to go back into the store. My body was instantly averse to standing in front of that red paper again.

I walked back to the Explorer in a daze, my mind hopscotching around the image of the red list of commandments on the store wall.

A few times it landed on number five. Be honest. Tell the truth regardless of the consequences.

It was a novel concept I never lived by. In twenty-one years of life I had done some bad things. I had hurt some people. Revealing truths would certainly have consequences, life changing ones. Being honest would make me vulnerable. I wasn't comfortable with vulnerable. But was I comfortable with the current state of things? Maybe I was warming to the idea of change.

The rear passenger side door was open. Shoddy was staring unconvincingly at the retro gas pump, a credit card in his hand.

“Hey Auggie,” he mumbled when I reached him. He was the only one that ever called me that and he did so infrequently. “You know this thing doesn't take credit cards?”

“Yeah, I already took care of it. Paid inside with Bobbo the attendant,” I responded, not looking at him. I was looking back into the car, checking to see if the girls were awake. Shoddy must’ve noticed the direction of my gaze.

“She’s still asleep, don’t worry.”

“Good,” I said, finally looking at his face.

“You alright man? You look like shit, with those bags under your eyes. Like a raccoon coming down off a bender.”

Where did he come up with those analogies? It didn’t matter, I barely registered this one anyway. The haze of headache surged.

I stared at Lindsey’s face pressed up against the glass.

“Hello, Augustine Shaw, wake up bro,” Shoddy said and waved his hand in front of my face.

I blinked and looked back into his eyes. We stared at each for a few seconds.

“You ain’t been right lately, bro. You’ve been off all week. I haven’t seen you this bad since, well, last Friday night outside Primal Bar,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” I got defensive.

“Before we left for Florida, last week, we went out drinking? Something happened that really fucked you up.”

I opened my mouth to respond but the words weren’t ready. Almost, but not quite.

“Forget it,” he said. “I gotta take a piss. Did you see a bathroom inside this shithole?”

“Um, I’m not sure. Go ask Bobbo in there. And don’t call him Bo-Bo.”

“Bo-Bo, got it. I’ll be back. You want anything?”

I just shook my head no. Shoddy shrugged and headed for the store.

After he left the haze descended again.

Taking the handle, fitting it into the gas tank, squeezing the handle. It was all done almost instinctively. I didn't even look at the numbers swirling by on the old pump's face.

I instinctively went back to staring at Lindsey. Her breath had fogged the glass a little near her mouth and there was a tiny wet smudge from drool. She didn't look comfortable. The seatbelt cut into her neck. There was a slight red mark around the strap where it gently compressed her skin. But she must've been sleeping well. With the door behind her open I could hear her muffled snores. They weren't feminine but they weren't Neanderthal either. More like heavy breathing. Her unconscious way of letting me know she was still there.

Lindsey must have felt me staring at her because for a moment she woke up; or at least her eyes snapped open and locked on my own. They were a deep blue: almost unnaturally so, with a hypnotic way of grabbing the attention of the opposite sex. Her lips curled up at the corners in a sweet smile. The way her head was tilted, resting against the window, gave her a coquettish smirk. I had seen it that way before.

The headache I anticipated exploded at that moment. A sharp pang sliced from ear to ear. It was a familiar pain but something I had never become accustomed to.

About a year ago I started getting the headaches. I had migraines as a teenager but these were different. They came strong and fast; they dissipated just as quick. I assumed it was some onset of adult migraines. But I never went to a doctor, which in hindsight was probably a bad idea. Over the last week, since the morning we left for Florida, they

came with more frequency and force. I never told anyone about them. I stuck with the migraine thing. I handled it as a young teen, wasn't something I had to worry about now. Besides, I was always good at hiding my emotions, especially pain. I hid pain really well.

What I had trouble with was guilt. I had a feeling that was ultimately going to get me. Not the headaches or speedy driving, but the mutinous guilt. Guilt over so many things that in so many ways hurt so many people, Lindsey included. It was corrosive. It chipped away the ramparts I erected to hide some things. The guilt was stronger than a sledge, more precise than a jackhammer and more determined than a late-1980s Berlin twenty-something. The pain was just a warning – a warning that the wall would soon come crumbling down.

Yes, the guilt was going to get me. The wall had cracked. I had to get control before a flood spilled through unchecked. You want one thing but you get the opposite, the dichotomy of control. You want to be honest but it makes you vulnerable. It was time to stop seeing that as a bad thing.

Ch. 3

With a snap the gas handle kicked out, breaking my grip and catching the meat of my palm in its ancient metal trappings.

At the same time Lindsey, her face pressed against the inside of the Explorer's passenger window, snapped her eyes shut. She was back in dreamland. Was she actually awake or had I daydreamed it?

I looked down at my right hand, a chunk of which was wedged in the pump handle. It hurt like hell but I made no immediate attempt to remove it. The world outside

the backwoods gas station was in slow motion. The pain in my hand was nothing compared to the searing headache ravaging my brain. And the newfound wound only served to draw my brain – albeit temporarily – away from its own battle.

The synapses fired, sensors started tingling, my fingers numbed. Blood trickled out in a thin, leaky strip over the metal hinge of the pump handle. The blood was rusty looking under the orange fluorescent gas station lamps. The normally healthy scarlet color was off, tarnished and sick looking. It wasn't bright red, like the framed list inside the gas station store behind the counter.

That damned scrap paper. I couldn't shake it. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.

I watched a blood droplet slip from my hand to the handle to the open air, freefall to the ground and make a tiny splatter in an oily puddle. A rainbow of red-orange hues shimmered in the greasy ripples.

The pain I could deal with. Neither the fresh cut nor the headache hurt as much as the look Lindsey had just given me.

Whether she was awake or not, real or imagined, her look made me realize how poorly I treated her. I regretted taking advantage of her friendship. I felt guilty about making her the rebound after a girl she could never live up to.

I did what I could about that situation. I said my apology. Lindsey accepted it. In an unspoken moment a few hours earlier, we had concluded our affair. But that didn't mean there was nothing left to say.

I still had the headache. The guilt was still hammering away at the wall in my head. I hadn't told her everything. In truth, I hadn't told anyone everything. Not Lindsey, not Emily, not even my best friend Shoddy.

I watched another droplet fall into the grease puddle.

Perhaps it was time to knock down the wall myself. The truth would flood out like blood from an open wound. I would be vulnerable, freefalling, destined to splash down and cause ripples. But I'd be in control. I would have caused it.

A few blood droplets fell in tandem.

It was time for the wall to go. It just needed a little push.

"Hey man, you hit fifty exactly," Shoddy's voice floated into my ears. "How'd you manage that on this old piece of . . . holy shit! Dude, you're bleeding!"

He tossed a plastic bag he was carrying and hurried to me. He grabbed my wrist with one hand and with the other, pried my palm loose from the metal gas handle. The obstruction removed, the handle clicked into resting position. I let my hand fall to my side. Shoddy pulled the handle from the Explorer's gas tank and replaced it back onto the old gas pump.

"What the hell, Shaw?" he said.

I just looked down at my hand, rolled it over palm side up, and examined the gash. The blood glistened orange-red in the fluorescent light. Honesty and frankness, what a novel concept.

I looked up to Shoddy, back at my hand, then back up at Shoddy.

"What the hell?" he asked again. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," I mumbled.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

His eyes widened with doubt and confusion. Shoddy bent down and picked up the plastic bag from the store that he had dropped. He pulled out a shiny silver can and stretched it in my direction. I didn't take it. After a few seconds he shook it lazily to get my attention.

When I still didn't take it he said, “Fine, more for me.”

He cracked the can open. The pop-top clicked and carbonation whistled out. He tipped the thin can in my direction.

“You sure?” he said. “Last chance.”

What emerged from my mouth was unfiltered and unrefined, even though I had subconsciously rehearsed it in my mind a hundred times in the last minute. Be honest and frank anyway. There was no more hesitation.

My lips parted and I said matter of factly, “Shoddy, I killed Duncan.”

The can in his hand tipped forward from his suddenly limp, outstretched hand and clattered to the ground. It lolled around for a second before settling in the oil puddle amidst my drops of blood.

I didn't move. I waited for his reaction.

“I know,” he said.

I don't know what I expected him to say, but it wasn't that.

His eyes caught my own. His arms hung down by his side, limply hanging on to the plastic bag. But he never broke the stare.

“When?” I said softly.

“When what?”

“When did you figure it out?”

“I didn’t know for sure until now. But don’t forget, last Friday night I was there. Well, for most of it. I was the one who brought you back in the alley behind Primal Bar. Nobody else was there at the time. Then I left you to go to the store for water. A little while later you stumbled up the street covered in garbage and God knows what else. I guessed blood. I’ve seen blood before, Auggie and you were smudged in it. When I read the Providence Journal Saturday morning in the car and saw the story about the body they found behind Primal, I made a few educated guesses.”

He paused, picking through his vocabulary for the right words.

“The dead kid in that article, beat up behind Primal, the description sounded like Duncan. I’m the only one who knew you were back there. And he’s the only one you would ever hurt. To that extent, anyway. Years of rage must be a powerful weapon. It had to be you who finally did it.”

He emphasized the last three words. Then he continued.

“You’ve been off all week, Shaw. I said it to you before. Something wasn’t right with you. There was all the Lindsey bullshit but that’s been going on for months. I knew there was something else.”

“You don’t know how right you are,” I said. I shuffled my feet a little. I reached up and wiped my hands down over my face from my forehead to my chin. Blood was caking my right hand and I must have smeared some on my cheek. I didn’t care.

“Don’t worry Auggie, I’m not going to tell anyone,” he said quickly, most likely reading my gesture to be fear. It wasn’t. It was mostly relief. “I know you don’t have it in

you to actually murder someone. It must've been an accident. You'll be fine, we just have to get home and figure out the next step."

The moment wasn't over. There were more steps to take than Shoddy could ever imagine.

I looked over at Lindsey still asleep, her head pressed against the window.

I thought of that fucking red paper again. I was in a dark cave and it was a torch, ready to illuminate the monsters that lurked in the shadow. Not a beacon of light but a terrifying tool of truth. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway. Half of the guilt was out there. No reason to stop now. I was finally gaining control. It started here.

"You know, in some sick way I think I knew it was going to come to this," Shoddy said. "The kid pushed you and pushed you and pushed you. I'm not saying he deserved whatever you did to him but there's probably someone, somewhere that would say you were justified. I mean, come on, it was Duncan."

"And Lily," I said.

Shoddy dropped the plastic bag again. Two more cans rolled out and into the same oil puddle.

"What?"

"I killed Lily, too."

He looked like a sunfish pulled from a pond by a teenager. His mouth puffed open and closed, eyes bulging huge. He finally mustered enough energy to stammer out a few words.

"I didn't know that."