

**A Very Lonely Road**

by

Jake Wiklacz ©

The sound of the car engine coughing and sputtering made my heart sink and my stomach knot. I always had a bad feeling about driving something that was twenty-three years of age. Even though it only had a hundred-thousand miles on it and had gotten me many places, I always had an uneasy feeling about it. And now, as I gazed past the steering wheel at the pitch dark and empty countryside, I knew my gut had been telling me something.

I looked to my right to see my friend Julie staring cockeyed at the glove compartment with a slight wince about her face.

“Amy, what was that sound?” asked Julie, in denial.

“It was the fucking engine,” I said. “I *hate* this car!” I slammed my hand down on the steering wheel, accidentally honking the horn.

“Well, let’s take a look at it, then,” said Julie.

“You know anything about engines?” I asked. Silence ensued. Julie pulled her cellphone out and started typing away.

“All I have out here is ‘extended’,” she said. “I got no bars.”

“Try to call somebody,” I said.

“Who should I call?”

“Literally anybody.”

“Oh, I know who.” Julie scrolled through her contacts and clicked one and then pressed her phone to her ear.

“Who are you calling?” I asked.

“Triple A,” she said.

Julie had her phone pressed to her ear for quite some time. The ringing kept going and going in an eternal loop.

“Oh, god,” she said.

“Is the line busy?”

“I don’t think the call’s going through.”

“Hang up and try again.”

Julie hung up and redialed. Pressed the phone to her ear. Waited. Nothing. My heart thumped. I hadn’t seen a car in half an hour. I took backroads whenever possible. I hated driving on the highway. Hated the danger, the road rage, the intensity of it. Julie and I had been on our way to a party in the mountains. Some preppy guy she liked was throwing it in his parents’ McMansion and had invited us, probably in the hopes that Julie would sleep with him. He was a frat guy and I wasn’t the biggest fan of his. Struck me as a douchebag.

Julie tried Triple A’s number a couple more times. It became apparent this wasn’t going to work. Fifteen more minutes went by and we still hadn’t seen a car.

“Call 9-1-1,” I said.

Julie immediately dialed the three digits. She pressed the phone to her ear. It rang once and someone picked up. Our faces both lit up.

“Nine-one-one,” said the operator, “what’s your emergency?”

“Hi!” said Julie. “My friend and I have broken down and are stuck out on -

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

“Hi, yes, I’m here. My friend and I are -

“Hello? Is someone there?”

My heart sank.

“Yes. Hello?”

Julie kept at it for quite some time. Five minutes passed and the operator still couldn’t hear. Julie hung up and called back, but the same thing happened.

“Goddammit, we’re stuck!” said Julie, nearing a state of panic but not yet fully there.

“We’ll be okay,” I said as I tried to stay calm. “It’s not like we’re on a desert island, or something.”

Ignoring my words, Julie opened the car door and stepped out and began huffing and puffing wildly. She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled at the top of her lungs.

“Help! Somebody help us!”

“Julie!” I said as I climbed out of the car. “Julie, calm down.” I approached her and caressed her shoulders. Her breathing grew shakier and shallower. I worried she was having a panic attack.

“Calm down, Julie. Calm down. It’s all right. They probably have our location. They’ll be out here. They can track our location. They’ll be here.”

“You don’t know that, Amy.” Her voice was sob-filled and tears were streaming down her cheeks.

I stepped out into the cold winter air and popped the hood and fruitlessly examined the engine. I wasn't sure if I was actually looking for something or if I was just trying to calm Julie. I waved my phone's flashlight around which illuminated the various complicated car parts. Something was leaking, that I could see.

My right eyelid fluttered as my peripheral was struck by a ray of light. I turned to see blinding high-beams coming toward us. They were so bright that I couldn't even see the vehicle they belonged to.

Julie immediately shot out of the passenger seat and leapt over to the middle of the road and hopped up and down like a jackrabbit. She waved her arms around and yelled "Hey! Hey! Over here!" repeatedly.

The vehicle—an ice white Cadillac Escalade with windows tinted well beyond the legal range—came to a halt in the middle of the road. We couldn't see inside. The Cadillac just sat there for a moment. Julie placed her hands just above her knees as she huffed and puffed, and I was pretty sure I heard her mumble "thank god" under her breath.

Another moment passed and then the driver side door opened. The car's interior light turned on and revealed three guys around our age inside. As I scrutinized, I realized I recognized them from school.

The driver was Keaton, frat guy. Julie had liked him at one point. Tonight he wore a blue fleece and chubbies shorts (even though it was freezing outside) and tall white socks. He was a thin preppy guy with a pronounced jawline that made him look like a movie star. He constantly wore a backward facing good ol' boys cap, so often that it seemed to be a part of his head. In fact, I wasn't sure if I'd ever seen him without it. He was a cocky sort of guy and always had a

wealth of animated and flippant facial expressions at his disposal, unfailingly with a flare of his nostrils, which looked like you could fit grapes in them.

Riding shotgun was Billy. He was short and rode the line between chubby and normal weight. He had blonde locks and one of those boyish faces, but boyish of the kind that chucks cherry bombs into the toilet because he wants to see what happens.

In the back was Peter and he wore a blazer and khaki pants. It took me a second to recollect his name. He always looked like a deer in the headlights and mostly kept to himself. Only his friends knew him, and he often served as their verbal punching bag.

Keaton stood up in the car and leaned out with his arms resting atop the driver side door. He peered at us.

“Yooooo!” he said as he chewed gum obnoxiously. “Is that Julie?”

“Yeah,” said Julie, a repressed sob almost escaping from her giggle. She was calming down now, smiling through her glazed eyes.

“What happened?” asked Keaton. “You guys pop a flat?”

“Car just broke down,” I said. “Don’t know why.”

“Well, that sucks,” said Keaton with a twitch of his head. He chewed faster now.

“Y’all on your way to the rager?” asked Billy.

“Yeah,” said Julie. “We were, until this...stupid shit happened.” She was acting all shy and flirty, now.

“We got plenty of room,” said Keaton. “Ya’ll can just cop a ride with us.”

“For real?” asked Julie.

“Yuh.”

“Sweet. Hell yeah.”

I hated how fake she'd act around these preps. She wasn't a party girl and she knew it. Neither was I but I owned it.

Julie and I hopped in the backseat, and Billy told Peter to sit up front. Billy got in the back with us and that made me uncomfortable. Like he thought he was gonna score with us.

“Glad we could be your knights in shining armor,” said Keaton.

“Me too,” Julie replied. “You guys ready to get fucked up at this party?”

“Hell yes. I've been looking forward to this all week long. Y'all ever seen his house, before?”

“No.”

“Well, it's dope. I'm trying to cop a third floor room to crash in.”

Keaton rummaged around in the cupholders on his door for a moment.

“Shine a light,” Keaton mumbled to Peter.

“Okay,” Peter replied. He shined his phone light and popped the glovebox and rummaged around inside. As he did this, something in the glovebox fell to the floor and hit the adjustment handles under the seat. Peter cursed and bent down to search for it.

“What is it?” asked Keaton.

“Uh...that multitool that you keep,” said Peter. “I think it went under the seat, I can't find it...”

“Dude, forget the fuckin' multitool. Just get the flask.”

Peter abandoned his search and continued to rummage around.

“To the left,” said Keaton, and then he repeated it a little more forcefully. Peter grabbed a small flask and shut the glovebox. Keaton snatched it out of his hands and popped the cap and took a big swig from it. He then held it out to me.

“Y’all want some?”

“Yeah, totally,” said Julie as she snatched it from him. *So fake*, I thought. Julie took a minuscule little sip and coughed. Keaton chuckled and shook his head. Julie passed me the flask and I immediately passed it to Billy, who looked taken aback.

“You don’t want any?” he asked.

“Nope, I’m good,” I said.

“Come on, have some.”

“I’m good.”

Billy shrugged and took a big gulp. As he did, I felt a tickling sensation on my right leg that I thought was nothing at first. Then I felt it again and I looked down to see Billy’s fingertips steadily stroking the side of my leg. He did this as he drank from the flask, as if him not looking would make it less obvious. I ignored it for a second, but he persisted even after passing the flask to Peter.

I casually brushed his fingers away as I pretended to itch my leg, but that didn’t stop him. He simply traversed my leg and found a new spot. And this time, his caressing was more deliberate.

“Can you please stop that?” I blurted.

The whole car went silent. Billy pulled his hand away and looked at me with a confused face. Keaton and Peter both cranked their necks and looked at me. Julie was looking, too.



“Stop what?” asked Keaton. “Who you talking to?”

“I’m...” my voice trailed off. I looked at Billy and took a deep breath. “I’m talking to you.”

“What’d I do?” Billy asked dumbly.

“You were...tickling my leg.” I used the word *tickling* to sound less accusatory. After all, I still wanted a ride out of here.

“I was?” asked Billy.

“Yes.”

“I...I don’t think...” Billy trailed off and then chuckled, smirking at Keaton and Peter with a *wtf* look on his face.

“Okay?” Billy continued. “I’ll stop...*tickling* your leg.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Billy shook his head and snorted out a befuddled laugh. Keaton looked at him with a snide smirk.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Nothing,” said Billy, still snickering. “Nothing, I just didn’t mean to tickle your leg.”

“Didn’t mean to?”

“Hey, come on,” Julie piped up.

“I brushed your hand away,” I continued, “and you came back and kept touching me.”

Billy snickered loudly and shook his head, scrunching his eyebrows and shrugging like someone who’s guilty and knows it. Keaton still sneered and stared intently at both of us,

seemingly entertained by the increasingly escalating situation. He giggled and playfully slapped Billy's knee.

"You dirty dog," said Keaton. "Control yourself."

"I didn't do anything," Billy chortled. "I'm serious."

"Whatever," I said. "Let's just forget about it. It's fine."

"Now, hang on," said Keaton. "Hold up." He paused to blow a bubble. The bubble popped and he licked the excess gum off of his lips.

"If we're gonna all ride in the car together," he continued, "we can't just be all awkward, and shit. I mean, it'll be kind of a...what do you call it?"

"Elephant in the room?" Peter mumbled. He now sat with his head slumped forward and stared down at his crotch.

"Yes!" said Keaton as he snapped his fingers. "An elephant in the room. Thank you, Peter. Yeah, we can't just sit here all quiet and awkward 'n shit. Ya know? Like, we gotta just be straight up with each other. Conflict resolution, ya know?"

I looked at Julie and she glanced at me, confused. Fake as she acted around this guy, even she had to admit this was getting bizarre.

"Look," I said, "it's fine. Let's just forget about it."

"Well you don't look like you've forgotten it," said Keaton. "Billy? Have you forgotten?"

Billy sat still for a moment and then shook his head *no*. Keaton looked back at me and shrugged matter of factly.

"It's just gonna be an awkward car ride if we don't resolve it, you know?" said Keaton.

"Well, how do we resolve this, then?" I asked, losing patience.

“I don’t know, I’m just the mediator.”

I stared at Keaton in disbelief for a moment, before uttering a disgusted *ugh* noise and shaking my head. Keaton huffed and grew suddenly impatient.

“We’re not gonna get anywhere, like this,” he said. He sounded like a disappointed schoolteacher.

“What do you want me to say?” I asked. I pointed at Billy. “Shouldn’t *he* be the one resolving the conflict? Maybe he should apologize, or something.”

“Apologize?” said Billy. “For what? I didn’t do anything.”

“Well, we’re just gonna go in circles, then,” I said. “Forget it. Can you please just drive?”

Keaton stared at me for a moment with a look of surprise on his face. “Well, there’s a start. *Now* we’re getting somewhere.”

“What?” I asked.

“You said ‘please’. *Now* we’re on a path to conflict resolution.”

I stared back at Keaton with a look of shock on my face. I could not believe how far he had drawn this out. I glanced at Julie. She stared awkwardly out the window, probably just waiting for the situation to taper down. But it didn’t seem like Keaton was going to let it. Keaton snatched the flask out of Peter’s hand and took a big swig and then let out a satisfied *ahh* when he was done.

“Okay,” said Keaton. “Let’s start from the beginning. Amy...you felt Billy’s hand tickling your leg, right?”

“Right,” I sighed, irritated.

“And you’re insisting he was doing it on purpose, right?”

“I...I guess. I don't know.”

“Yes or no?”

“I don't know. Sure.”

“Yes. Okay. But Billy...he says he didn't do it on purpose. Right, Billy?”

Billy nodded.

“So...” Keaton continued. He blew another bubble. “...are you calling Billy a liar?”

“Oh my god,” I said. I was fed up. I reached past Julie and opened the door and climbed out of the car.

At the same time, Keaton swiftly opened his door and stepped out. I attempted to sidestep him but he strode right in front of me. He gently touched my shoulder. I yanked my arm away and threw up my hands.

“Hey, hey, hey...” he said in a hushed tone.

“Don't touch me,” I said. “Do not touch me. Get out of my way.”

“Hey, calm down, calm down. We're just talking.”

“No we're not.”

“Yes, we are.”

“No. We're not. Get out of my way.” My anger level was reaching maximum threshold.

At this point, Keaton was like a bratty little child that you just wanted to trip or knock over, accidentally-on-purpose. He still had a snide sneer on his face that made him look like a sleazy conman or a lying politician. Those stupid nostrils flared and his obnoxious chewing rang in my ears like rippling mosquito wings. I clenched my fist.

“Just...listen to me, Amy,” he said with a chuckle. “Everything’s chill, let’s just calm down. Just go back in the car and we can -

I let out an irate grunt as my fist shot forward and slammed right into Keaton’s mouth. His head snapped back as he let out a loud *oof!* He staggered back a single step and clutched his lip. I heard Billy utter “oh, shit!” from the car.

I walked past Keaton in a huff and approached my car. I figured I could at least take refuge inside it, lock it if I needed to. I took long and purposeful strides across the asphalt. I thought of Julie and how she should be joining me in the car. This situation was getting dangerous. But I had to focus on getting there myself. Then I could motion to her, encourage her to make the right decision. I hoped that these guys were just all talk, maybe having a bad night.

I suddenly felt a jolt of sharp pain fire up my leg as my knee buckled. Keaton’s foot had slammed into the back of my knee. I fell to one knee and before I could get up, I felt Keaton’s arm slip around my throat as he put me in a sleeper hold. He dragged me backward as I coughed and gagged. I could hear Julie screaming and yelping from the cadillac.

“You fuckin’ serious, right now?” Keaton shouted in my ear. I felt little drops of his spittle hit my earlobe.

I hadn’t drawn a breath in at least ten seconds, now. I felt my pulse pound in my throat, rapidly increasing in pace by the second. My eyes watered which caused my vision to blur. Keaton dragged me all the way to the cadillac and threw me up against the side, just below the gas tank. From there, I could see Julie kick and scream in the car as Billy wrangled her. She had no chance. Billy was stocky and played football and he had her in a viselike grip, his arms wrapped firmly around her midsection, just under her chest.

I panted like a dog as I took deep breaths of the cold air and clutched my throbbing throat. I gazed up at Keaton, who now looked like some malevolent phantom in the pale moonlight, clouds of his cold breath exiting his mouth and nostrils. He motioned impatiently at Peter.

“Peter, can you help me out here?”

Peter got out of the car and approached Keaton like an obedient child. He looked real skittish and had permanent puppy dog eyes that said *whatever you say, just don't hurt me*. Keaton caught his breath and pointed at me.

“Help me with her,” he said. He and Peter reached down and each grabbed me by the armpits.

I thrashed and kicked. Keaton and Peter backed away. Keaton stepped forward and roughly placed his foot up against my shoulder and forced me against the car.

“Stop that,” he said, spoken like a parent to their 3-year-old. “Stop it, now. This is ridiculous. You are out of control.”

I spat defiantly at Keaton. The ejected saliva landed somewhere on his fleece. He looked down at it with disgust and rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“That’s nasty. Aren’t you supposed to be a lady?” Keaton giggled and followed with “Oh, wait. What do you identify as? Do you identify as white trash? ‘Cause that’s what you’re acting like, right now.” He stood and sneered at me for quite some time. I thought about trying to kick his kneecap, but I was fairly sure I would miss, and that would just piss him off more.

“Okay, listen up,” he said.

“Fuck you,” I replied.

“Don’t talk! Listen!” he screamed with sudden vigor which made Peter jump. He paused for a moment to find his words and to chew his gum. “I have a survival knife in my back pocket. If you kick like that again, there is a very severe possibility that you’re gonna get hurt. Do you understand?”

I stayed silent and that irritated him.

“Tell me you understand what I’ve said,” he insisted.

I nodded.

“So say it.”

“I understand.”

“Awesome!” Keaton’s mood flipped like a switch, and he was smiling and giddy once again. He and Peter bent down and grabbed me by the armpits, and this time I did not fight. They lifted me and shoved me into the backseat, where Julie had now gone mostly still but trembled as Billy held her in a tight bearhug and cupped his hand over her mouth. Her eyes met with mine and the look we shared was one of dread.

I laid there in the backseat, crowded and uncomfortable. My feet faced Keaton and Peter, who still stood outside the car. I had a direct shot at Keaton’s face, and I knew if I took it, I could break his jaw and probably knock him out. But I didn’t take it. If I missed, I might not get another chance. I had to bide my time.

Keaton looked at me with snide disappointment. “Was that punch in the face really necessary? Hmm? Alls I wanted to do was talk. That how your parents raised you?”

Silence.

“Take the wheel, Peter,” said Keaton. “I wanna get shitfaced and I don’t wanna hit a damn tree, or somethin’.”

Peter nodded obediently and hopped into the driver seat. Keaton rounded the car and got in the passenger seat.

“Let’s collect phones,” said Keaton.

Billy reached into my pocket and snatched my cellphone out. He did the same with Julie. He handed them to Keaton, and Keaton stashed them in the glovebox.

Keaton took his flask and gulped down copious amounts of the fluid inside. Peter turned on the car and started driving, and Keaton grabbed a bottle of whiskey out of the glovebox and refilled his flask. Peter drove like he was taking the road test. Both hands on the wheel and facing forward and going five miles below the speed limit.

A flash of light suddenly hit my peripheral vision. It was yellowish light. Headlights. I turned my head and was filled with hope. Not just any car, but a police car drove down the road and was coming up behind us. Our 9-1-1 call went through!

“Fuck, what is that?” said Keaton. “Is that a cop?” He looked at Peter and then Billy. “Just be cool.” Peter had the fear of god in his eyes.

I sprang up from my seat and reached for the door handle. Almost immediately, I felt Keaton’s tight grip on my wrist. *Fuck*. He clutched it with both his hands and then he released one hand and reached for my head. I desperately yanked away from him but he caught the ends of my hair and tugged hard and wrenched my head down toward the floor.

“Help!” I screamed, as if the cop would hear me. I could hear Julie’s screams which were muffled by Billy’s meaty hand.



“He’s gonna pass,” said Keaton. “Here, let ‘em pass. Pullover, pullover, pullover.”

I could feel the weight of the car shift as Peter pulled over to the side of the road. The next sound I heard was one of the worst I’d *ever* heard; the sound of the cop car passing us. The disappointment and the hopelessness I felt in that moment...indescribable. I realized that police car was more than likely a random patrol car, unrelated to our fruitless emergency call.

Keaton held my head down to the floor for several more moments. My spine ached from the awkward position I was in. Peter sighed with relief. Keaton and Billy both snickered.

“Fuck twelve,” said Keaton.

“Fuck twelve!” Billy echoed.

“Start driving, again. Let’s go to the shack.”

Peter obeyed. Once the car was moving, Keaton released my head. I leaned back up against the seat. Keaton kept his head turned and leered at me for quite some time. I stared out the window and avoided his gaze, but I could feel it burning into my outer vision. All I could think about were his last words. *Let’s go to the shack*. What was the shack? Probably one of their little hangout spots where they’d drink and roll up grass and bring girls to. And they were bringing a couple of girls there right now...

After a few miles, Peter veered onto some dirt road that snaked into the woods. The woods were pitch dark and the trees looked ghastly due to being stripped of their leaves by the January cold. Every time I thought the woods couldn’t get any deeper, I was proven wrong as the car continued to roll on down the path. We must have drove through that forest for at least five minutes. I wanted to open the car door and hop out and make a run for it, but they had child lock on the door.

“No better place to roll some bud than this,” Keaton said as we pulled into a clearing in the woods.

In the middle of the clearing was a rundown barn that must have been a hundred years old. It looked so sinister as the car’s high beams cast the grisly shadows of barren trees upon it.

“Peter, turn up the heat,” said Keaton. “I’m freezing my fuckin’ ass off.”

As Peter turned the knob, I could see that his hand was trembling uncontrollably. I thought maybe we could bring him over to our side. Then it’d be three-on-two and we could get out of this and -

“Okay!” Keaton yipped, snapping everyone out of their thoughts. “Uh, Billy you can let go of her mouth, no one’s gonna hear her scream.”

Billy released his hand from Julie’s mouth and she immediately started to wail, futilely calling for help that would *never* come. Not out here.

Keaton looked pissed. He took in a deep breath and screamed at the top of his lungs. “SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

Julie quieted down a bit but still sobbed under her breath. Keaton huffed and caught his breath and shook his head.

“For Christ’s sake,” he said. “What a greek drama.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a large pocketknife and folded out the shining survival knife he’d mentioned before.

“Okay, so here’s what we’re gonna do.”

“Please, just let us go,” Julie sobbed.

Keaton looked at her and shrugged. “Let you go? You’re free to go at any time. No one’s stopping you. Right, Billy?”

Billy nodded.

“Right, Peter?”

Peter nodded.

“You’re free to go,” Keaton repeated.

Julie immediately pulled on the door handle. It was locked, of course. The lock pin was the kind that retracted all the way down and so it was impossible to pull it up.

“What’s wrong?” Keaton asked rhetorically.

“It’s locked,” said Julie.

“So, unlock it.”

“I can’t.”

“Hmm...well, like I said, you’re free to go anytime you wish. In the meantime, let’s play a game to pass the time. Billy, what should we play?”

Billy simpered as he pondered for a moment. “Truth or dare?” he asked.

“Bingo, Ringo!” said Keaton as his face lit up demonically. He turned on the radio and flipped through stations and landed on one that played the song ‘Get Up’ by James Brown. Keaton bobbed his head up and down to the groovy beat, his eyes wide and crazed.

“Man, perfect song right here,” said Keaton. “So...funky. Okay, let’s let Amy start. Amy, truth or dare?”

I remained silent. Keaton’s grin started to slowly fade in the direction of a frown, which, I can’t lie, intimidated me. So I spoke up.

“Truth,” I said. *Has to be better than dare.*

“Dare, it is,” said Keaton.

“I said ‘truth’.”

“Amy, I dare you to make out with Billy for thirty seconds.”

“No.”

Keaton shook his head at me and smirked and waved the knife around. “Uh-uh, uh-uh, it’s a dare,” he said.

“Well I’m not doing it. Forget it.”

Keaton nodded and pondered for a moment. He glanced at Billy. “Hey Billy,” he said. “Hand that little piglet over to me.”

Billy hoisted Julie off of him and pushed her toward Keaton. Keaton snaked his arm around Julie’s throat and put her in a headlock, but he didn’t choke her. Just gripped her. He then peeled part of her coat off so that her shoulder was exposed. He placed the sharp edge of the knife to the skin on her shoulder. Julie wiggled around a little bit but Keaton had a firm hold of her.

“Now we’re ready,” said Keaton. “Amy, make out with Billy. Thirty seconds, that’s it. Promise.”

I didn’t budge. I glanced to the side to see Billy sitting there with a wide-eyed grin plastered to his face. No way I was gonna kiss him. No way.

My thoughts were fragmented by Julie’s sudden cries. Keaton slid the blade across the skin on her shoulder and blood ran down her upper arm. I sat up to do something but Billy stiff-armed me. Keaton continued to excruciatingly drag the blade across Julie’s shoulder as her bloodcurdling screams filled the car.

“Okay, okay!” I shouted. “Stop!”

Keaton stopped straightaway. Julie sobbed as trails of blood ran down her arm and dripped from her elbow.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Keaton asked me. “Give the boy a kiss. Look at that face. Who wouldn’t wanna kiss that?” Keaton and Billy snickered.

I took a deep breath and winced with disgust. I didn’t want to even go near him, but I couldn’t watch Julie go through such pain any longer. I sat up and puckered reluctantly. But Billy did not move. He seemed to wait for me to come to him.

“Lean in,” said Billy, confirming my suspicion.

I stared at him with disgust. I just could not bring myself to do it.

“Y’all might wanna cover your ears for this one,” said Keaton. Without warning he cupped his hand over Julie’s mouth and jammed the knife into her upper arm. She shrieked and squirmed as Keaton twisted the knife into her shoulder. I was pretty sure he was cutting bone.

“All right! Stop!”

Again, Keaton stopped without hesitation. He pulled the knife out of her shoulder, and that made a sickening squelch. He kept his hand cupped on Julie’s mouth to suppress her agonized sobs. “See?” said Keaton. “You play nice, *I* play nice.”

I took a deep breath and puckered up and closed my eyes and leaned forward. I felt Billy’s lips touch mine and he began slobbering all over my lips and sticking his tongue in my mouth. The taste was a strong mix of alcohol and cigarettes. It was a painful thirty seconds. Keaton sat by and giggled under his breath the entire time.

“All right, that’s thirty seconds,” said Keaton.

I pulled away from Billy but Billy persisted, leaning in every time I leaned out. Keaton reached over and slapped Billy atop the head.

“That’s enough, Billy,” he said. “Come on, it’s Peter’s turn.”

Billy snickered and wiped the saliva off his revolting kisser. I felt sick and I retched from the taste that still lingered in my mouth and probably would for a week. That is, if I survived this. Perhaps I’d be lucky to be tasting *anything* in a week’s time.

“All right, Peter,” said Keaton, “you’re turn. Truth or dare?”

“Uh...” Peter nervously racked his brain for what seemed like a very long time. He blinked rapidly and frequently and his eyes darted and zipped like hummingbirds. I couldn’t tell if he was extremely nervous or deranged or both.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Keaton asked with impatience.

“Uh, truth,” Peter stuttered.

“Pussy. ‘Kay, truth. Truth, truth, truth... uh... have you ever had sex before?” Keaton and Billy both exchanged a knowing glance and snickered as Keaton asked this.

“Come on, guys,” said Peter. He looked mortified.

“Peter, relax,” said Keaton. “We got everything we need. We got two girls in the car, right now.”

My heart sank. I knew where this was going, even though I didn’t want to believe it. I begged and pleaded with whatever higher power may (or may not) have been looking down on us. Pledged for it not to go this way.

“Nah, Keaton,” said Peter, shaking his head and fidgeting with his fingers. “Come on, man.”

“What?” Keaton asked in disbelief. “Peter...”

“Nah, man. You’re going too far.”

“Come on, Peter. Think with your peter.” Keaton and Billy got a kick out of this one, and Peter seemed to fight off a laugh, as well.

Julie’s eyelids were heavy and her arms and legs were limp. She may have been passing out from the pain. And things were only getting more dangerous. I had to figure out a way to escape this car. To make a mad dash for the woods. Scary as that dark forest looked, it seemed like child’s play compared to our current predicament.

“Peter, I think it’s time,” said Keaton. “What do you think, Billy?”

“Yeah, Peter,” said Billy, “you’re 20 years old. This is embarrassing.”

“Which one should he get?”

“Which one’s hotter?”

“Hmm...” Keaton glanced back and forth, at me and then at Julie and then at me again. His eyes settled on Julie.

“I think this one’s better,” he said. “Besides, she won’t put up a fight.” He leaned toward Julie’s ear. “You agree?”

Julie didn’t respond.

“She agrees,” he said. “All right, Peter. Time to put some hair on your balls.”

Keaton opened the car door and dragged Julie’s limp and helpless body toward the open doorway. I looked into Julie’s half-opened and pain-filled eyes and I just couldn’t take it. This was my best friend. I could not let this happen.

Keaton climbed back into the car and reached for Julie's legs. Now was my chance. I sprang forward and kicked like a mule. My foot made sweet contact with the side of Keaton's face. His head bucked to the side and then snapped back to where it was before I'd kicked. His face crumpled up into a pained wince.

"FUCK!" he shouted.

Evidently, I hadn't kicked him hard enough, because he sprang up from his seat and lurched furiously toward me. In the midst of the commotion, Julie rolled out of the car and fell to the ground. As Keaton clambered and clawed at me, Julie got to her feet and darted into the woods.

"Run, Julie!" I yelled. "Ru -

My words shifted into a gagging sound as Keaton slammed the palm of his hand up against my throat and squeezed.

"I'm gonna smack the fuck outta you!" he snarled. "Billy, grab her!"

Billy grabbed my ankles and I started to kick, but it was too late. He wrapped his arms around my ankles and locked them in a tight embrace. I couldn't kick my legs, not even an inch. Keaton, meanwhile, choked the hell out of me and got right up in my face. His foul, alcoholic breath clouded my nose as droplets of his spit shot into my eyes.

"I would advise you to stop kicking," he said. He stayed with his face right up to mine for a while. He removed his hand from my throat and backed away and climbed out of the car.

Keaton opened the glovebox and rummaged. He pulled out a roll of gorilla tape and tossed it to Billy.

"If she kicks, break her legs," said Keaton.



Billy taped the corner of the roll to my ankle and then wrapped the roll around my heels at least seven or eight times. *Shit, I thought. I'm really in trouble, now.*

“Be back in a jiff,” said Keaton. “Peter, feel free to have your way with her. She ain’t kicking, anymore.” Keaton jogged off into the woods in the direction Julie had gone. As I saw him running, I compared it to the way I saw Julie run into the woods. She was hurt, but Keaton strode like a healthy buck. He would surely catch her. Keaton disappeared into the darkness just past the tree line.

The car was silent. Billy sat in the backseat and caught his breath. He popped a cigarette into his mouth and lit it and took a deep puff. Peter sat in the front seat and stared at the steering wheel with those doe eyes.

“Do you think h-he’ll...he’ll catch her?” asked Peter.

“Prolly,” said Billy as he inhaled a drag. “I wouldn’t sweat it. She’s hurt pretty bad and she’s delirious, too. He’ll get her.”

“What are we gonna do after that?”

“Prolly do her, too. After this one sittin’ next to me. Just gotta finish this cig.”

“But what about after that? W-won’t they, like, tell?”

“They ain’t tellin’ nobody.”

“H-how do you...how do you know?”

Billy motioned out the window. “You remember that pond back there? We went to it one time.”

Peter squinted. “I think so,” he said.

“We’ll chuck ‘em in there. No one’ll find ‘em.”

“Are you...are you sure?”

“Yes, Peter. Chill, goddammit.”

Billy finished his cigarette with slow and deep puffs. He was so calm as he did it. You’d think he’d done this before. Tortured women, I mean. He wrapped up his smoke and doused the butt in the ashtray. And then he turned his attention to me.

“All right, Peter,” he said. “Let’s get this slut propped up.”

“I don’t know, Billy,” said Peter.

“You don’t know what, Peter? This is why you’re still a virgin, bruh. You ain’t taking opportunities.”

“I guess.”

“You guess? That *is* why. You wanna do ‘er up in the barn? I guess that’s better than a cramped car.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

“Aight. Turn off the engine. Shut the lights off so the car’ll start.”

Peter took the key out of the ignition and shut off the headlights and hopped out. I patiently waited for him to open the passenger door. When he did, I immediately lurched forward and thumbed the bastard right in the eye. I felt Billy attempt to grab me but I was too fast. I scooted out of the car and hopped toward the woods. But my bounding was too slow. So I crouched down and used my free hands to try and peel away the tape. Easier said than done, and Billy was already sprinting toward me. I pinched the edge of the tape and tugged at it. It started to peel.

Billy slammed into me like a freight train. I let out a grunt as the wind left my lungs. I fell to the ground with Billy on top of me, one half of my face smushed into the dirt and the dry leaves.

“Why the fuck would you do that?” Billy asked. “You’re just making it worse for yourself, you little bitch.”

Billy got up and yanked my face off of the ground and dragged me toward the barn. Peter followed, still clutching his eye where I’d poked him. He wasn’t angry. He still looked like a frightened fawn.

The barn was musty and smelled like hay and had the grimness of a tomb. The floor creaked when you walked on it. Billy dragged me over to the wooden steps and then he and Peter carried me up the stairs like furniture. At the top of the barn, there was an open doorway—a balcony of sorts—that looked out at the forest. I thought of Julie and wondered if she’d been caught.

“Let’s get her pants off,” said Billy.

“How?” asked Peter.

“What?”

“Her ankles are tied up.”

“Yeah, we’re not gonna pull ‘em all the way off. Just down to, like, the knees. Not even *that* far, honestly. Come on.” Billy circled around me and knelt down in front of my feet. His back faced the balcony.

“You hold her arms down,” said Billy, “so she doesn’t start thrashing.”

“What if she pokes me, again?” Peter stammered.

“Just cover your face. Punch her in hers. I don’t know, do something, Peter. Something besides scrambling around like a baby deer.”

Peter knelt down and reached for my wrists. I thrashed around and tried to hit him in the face again, but he was ready this time.

“Please, stop,” said Peter. “Stop struggling, please.”

“Peter, stop negotiating with her,” said Billy. “She’s a little monkey, just wrangle her. You don’t see a zookeeper trying to reason with the monkeys, do you?”

Peter caught both my wrists and then pinned them to the floor. He looked up and nodded to Billy. Billy crawled forward and grabbed at my waistband. And then I remembered I still had my legs. Billy crouched right near the wide-open balcony. It clicked in my head, and as Billy unbuttoned my pants, it was like an eclipse where the Earth and the moon and the sun all line up perfectly. I inhaled and tensed up and kicked harder than I’d ever kicked before.

It was beautiful. The way Billy bucked backward and flailed his arms as gravity established its dominance over him. He let out a frightened little squeal as he rolled back over the edge of the balcony and disappeared from sight and not a half-second later there was a wonderful *thump* and *snap* and then that was followed by Billy’s agonized squawks.

“Gah-ha-ha-ho!” Billy screamed. And he kept on screaming.

Peter got up and rushed over to the balcony and peered out. “Billy? Are you okay?”

I now had a shot at this idiot, too. I kicked hard but he must have saw it coming one second prior because he ducked and sidestepped it and rushed over to the stairs. Peter clambered down the stairs and I heard him rush out and start tending to Billy.

“Oh, god,” said Peter. “Oh, god. Oh, shit. What are we gonna do? Fuck!”

“I’m not fucking kidding, dude,” Billy groaned. “I think I’m paralyzed.”

As I peeled the tape off my ankles, I got a sort of sick satisfaction from hearing Billy’s agony. I only wished I could see him all injured and contorted right now. But there was no time to peek. Peeling away that tape was no easy task. Billy had wrapped me up good. I peeled and rounded my ankles about five times, and then the tape’s grasp was loosened. I yanked my ankles apart—which was a relief in itself—and tore the tape. I got up and headed toward the stairs.

“What the hell is going on?”

I recognized that voice. It was Keaton, back from his little hunting trip. I listened closely. I had to know what went down.

“Jesus, Billy,” Keaton said. “What the hell happened?”

“She...she kicked him,” Peter stammered. “She k-kicked him hard.”

“Kicked him? What the fuck happened?”

“She kicked him and h-h-he...he fell off the barn.”

“Christ alive. We tape her legs up and you still can’t handle her? You guys are a bunch of assclowns. Where is she?”

“She’s...she’s up in the barn, still.”

I winced as I heard crunching leaves and then creaking noises downstairs as Keaton entered the barn. He began whistling at me like a dog owner.

“Amy?” he taunted. “Amy, darling? It’s Keaton, your boyfriend. You still upstairs?”

I held my breath so he wouldn’t hear my panting. I kept silent and hunkered in the corner by the stairs. I didn’t dare move a muscle. Even a slight shift of weight would cause one of the floorboards to shriek.

“Amy? I’m coming up, okay?”

I cupped my hands over my mouth. My peepers felt the size of softballs. And then I very nearly leapt from my skin as I heard the bottom step let out a shrill whine. There was silence for a moment. Then the second step squealed. Keaton’s ascension of the stairs became a slow but steady rhythm like the swaying of a rocking chair.

*Creak... Creak... Creak...*

I had to come up with a plan and had very little time to do so. I remembered the stairs. *How many steps were there? Twenty? Twenty-four, maybe?* Keaton had covered about five. I wished I had something to whack him over the head with and send him plummeting down those stairs.

*Creak... Creak... Creak...*

He was at step number eight, now. Maybe nine. I had to think on my feet. *I’ll throw myself at him.* I could shoulder check him real hard and knock him off balance. The stairs were steep. More so than your average staircase. If you tilted back there’d be no catching yourself, no railing to grab onto. Nowhere to go but down.

*Creak... Creak... Creak...*

I kept count. I reckoned it was twelve steps. He was certainly on the second flight by now, on an upward trajectory to the second floor.

*Creak... Creak... Creak...*

I’d surely be seeing that good ol’ boys hat pop up at any moment. I clenched my teeth and got ready to barrel into this psycho.

*Creak... Creak...*

And then the silence came. Pure silence. Deafening silence. He had come to a halt. *Why did you stop?* He must have been assessing the second floor from his vantage point. If he could see most of the second floor, he could see that I wasn't there. And if he could see that I wasn't there, he likely knew I was hunkered in the corner.

More time passed and the silence continued and my ears rang and I thought I might go nuts. I listened closely and I was fairly sure I could hear his breathing. It was steady and very calm. Inhumanly calm.

My ears picked up a small shuffling sound and my eyes caught a brief fluttering movement, but it happened so fast that, before I knew it, Keaton's hand was reaching up from the staircase and had a firm grasp of my ankle. I screamed as his other hand emerged from below, the knife in *its* grasp.

"Oh, Amy!" he yelled. "You are my kinda girl! Hard to get, hard to get!" He laughed like some crazed clown as he thrust the knife forward. The blade came within an inch of my ribs and I felt the dull edge graze my side. That was as close as close could get. I bucked and kicked and tried to crawl away, but his grasp was tight.

"I thought we were bonding, Amy!"

He thrust down with the knife and this time it sliced the back of my hand. I knew it had happened but it was like I barely felt it. The adrenaline surged through me and told me I hadn't the time for pain. *Fine*, I thought. *If I can't pull away, I'll go toward you.*

I felt Keaton tug on my leg and this time I went with the current, so to speak. I used his strength against him and thrust my foot forward. My foot made contact with his shoulder. The

combined effort of my kick and his own tug was enough to send him falling back. He released his grip and tripped down several stairs and let out a low groan.

I leapt to my feet and without pause I shot toward the balcony. I didn't think of whether or not I'd make the jump because I had no choice. I ran to the edge and took the leap of faith and felt the wind comb my ears as I plummeted to the ground.

I landed on my feet and sharp pain shot up through both ankles. I stumbled forward and fell to my hands and knees but quickly got back up. I glanced back long enough to see Billy lying there on the ground silent. His spine was twisted and mangled and his wrists were bent like a praying mantis. I was no expert but Billy was going to be relieving himself into a bag for the rest of his life.

And in all this time I had forgotten Peter. Before I knew it I ran straight into him. He caught me by both wrists. We were now face-to-face and I could see that doglike expression still lingered in his eyes.

“Just stop!” he shouted. His voice was like a beggar. “I don't wanna hurt you!”

I wrenched my right wrist from his grasp.

“Stop!” he shouted. “Just sit down and we can -

His words morphed into shrill squeals as I jammed my thumb right in his eye and this time I didn't let up. I reckoned it was the same eye that I'd poked moments earlier. I pushed and twisted and leveraged my thumb around and I was pretty sure I felt his socket. The only thing that made me stop were Keaton's footfalls behind me. Time to go.

I yanked my thumb—now moist with eyeball juice—from Peter's eye and shot toward the woods. Keaton's footfalls were now crunches so I knew that he'd exited the barn.



My legs became a separate function from the rest of me. That's the only way I can describe it. They were like the wheels of a car that carried me where I needed to go, and fast too. I ran with my fingers pointed upward and slicing the air. The way Tom Cruise runs. My eyes had adjusted to the dark by now. They'd adjusted well. It was almost like daytime. I had the moon to thank for that, too.

After a while I realized that Keaton was no longer behind me. Granted, I was stuck out in this forest alone in the dark but I still felt relief. That maniac wasn't there anymore. And then I grew concerned as I thought of Julie. Wondered what had happened to her. If she'd gotten away or if Keaton had captured her or...done worse.

I kept on the move and steered clear of the path we'd used to drive into the woods. Time passed and my ears felt like they'd crack off from the cold. I must have been close to the road by now. I figured I'd flag down a car and get some help. At the very least I'd remain in hiding in the forest. *But that wouldn't help Julie, now would it...*

I suddenly heard the rumbling of a car engine behind me and saw the tree trunks around me glow slightly illuminated. I dropped to the ground and rolled behind a tree. I glanced back to see high beams making their way through the forest. It was them, alright. And then that damned Cadillac did the worst thing it could possibly do. It stopped. I lowered my face to the ground and shut my eyes tight and prayed for the best.

I heard two car doors open and shut, and then I heard Keaton say "I just saw her. Swear to god, I did."

"Really?" asked Peter.

“Yes, really. She’s over there, in that direction. She’s hiding.” Keaton spoke in such a mischievous tone. This really was just a game to him.

“I know you’re out there,” said Keaton. “Oh, hold up. I think I see her. Look, look, look. You see her head peeping out, over there?”

*Shit.* I tensed up and lay there so still that I felt paralyzed. Took extra care not to twitch even a muscle for fear that it would cause a few dead leaves to crackle. I heard two separate pairs of feet crunching through the leaves and the crunching got louder and closer.

“Yeah, there she is,” said Keaton. And then he raised his voice a tad. “Hey, Amy? I know that’s you.”

Time to go. I sprang up and bolted into the darkness of the forest and I immediately heard my pursuers break into a run. I felt pain shoot up through my ankles, probably from my eccentric leap an hour before. *Not now*, I told myself. I commanded my heels to stop with the pain and they obeyed momentarily. But those crunching footfalls behind me were getting close. I made the mistake of glancing over my shoulder and when I did I saw Keaton moving like a roadrunner, his scrawny frame almost aerodynamic. It was dark now and the faint rays from those high beams outlined Keaton’s grisly silhouette. When I turned my head forward again I saw a dark void—a pit—in the ground and then immediately felt a great shift in weight as gravity yanked me downward.

I fell into what must have been a dried up pond, maybe seven feet deep. Eight perhaps. However deep this pit was, it was enough to knock the wind from my lungs when I hit the ground. I groaned as I lay there in the soggy leaves. One of my ribs throbbed and I was certain it’d popped out. Though my ears rang I could hear Keaton’s sinister snicker just above me.

“Whoa, took a little tumble, eh?” he said. “That’s what happens when ya run in the dark. What a klutz. What a damn klutz.”

I rolled on my back and looked up to see Keaton and Peter stand at the edge of the pond and look down at me. Keaton giggled and pretended to try and shove Peter off the edge. I was so tired and in such pain and so fed up with all this that I wanted to die in that moment. I pushed and pushed to try and speak but my lungs would not allow it. I heaved but wasn’t granted the ability to inhale. This happened twice more and then I could breathe again and I could utter words that came out in weak grunts.

“P-P-Please,” I uttered. “P-Please just...just k-kill me.”

“Come on, Amy,” Keaton replied. “Don’t take the coward’s way out. You’re better than that. Besides, we still got more to do. Peter, let’s get her outta there.”

I sat in the backseat of the cadillac with my ankles and wrists duct taped. Before I knew it I was seeing that sinister shack once again, along with those tree shadows that casted themselves upon it. The only thing that was different from last time was that Billy no longer wriggled in agony on the ground. He was nowhere in sight.

“We’re ba-aack,” Keaton said as he smirked at me and bounced his eyebrows maniacally. He frowned and turned to Peter. “Turn the engine off.”

The two dragged me to the shack and when we entered I could hear faint grunting noises coming from the corner. Female grunting noises. It was Julie. She was hogtied with duct tape and her mouth was taped, too. I sobbed a bit when I saw her like this, treated like an animal.

“That’s sweet,” said Keaton. “Here. Go sit next to your friend.” He shoved me to the floor so that I lay next to Julie. I placed my head on her shoulder to try and comfort her and she nuzzled me to reciprocate.

Keaton walked to the back of the barn and took out his lighter and lit a single candle and set the candle on the floor in the center of the room. The candle’s flickering made his shadow dance on the walls and ceiling of the shack. He plopped down with his legs crisscrossed and let out an exhausted sigh.

“Whoo, man,” he said, “glad we got that outta the way. Got a little sketchy there, for a minute, but we’re back on track. Peter, get your ass over here.”

Peter stood sheepishly in the corner but obeyed Keaton and came and sat down next to him.

Keaton clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Okay, now we can start. So, *Truth or Dare* was a mild success. What should we play, now?”

Silence filled the room. Peter stared off into space as he nibbled on the tops of his fingers. Then Keaton patted the side of his face to get his attention.

“Hey, talking to you. What’s another game we can play?”

“I don’t know any,” Peter replied.

“Christ alive.” Keaton pondered for a moment and then snapped his fingers. “I got it. Look at us, the way we’re sitting.” He looked at Peter and Julie and I like we were supposed to respond. Then he gave up. “Spin the bottle! Let’s play spin the bottle!”

“Yeah,” said Peter. “Th-Th-That...that’s...yeah, we can play that.”

“Okay. I’ll use my knife as the bottle.”

Peter immediately perked. “Are you sure that’s a good i -

“Shut the fuck up, Peter. They’re tied like a couple of oinkers.” Keaton pulled out his knife and placed it in the middle of our little four-way. “Alrighty, who wants to spin?” He looked at Julie and I in a rhetorical fashion. “Guess you gals’ll sit this one out. *I’ll* spin the bottle since you are...encumbered.” Keaton placed his fingers on the middle of the knife and spun it.

The knife whirled like an airplane propeller and then slowed and stopped. The blade was pointed at Peter and the handle pointed to Julie.

“Alrighty,” said Keaton. “Peter and Julie, you lovebirds are up.”

Peter stared blankly. “F-For...for what?”

“Don’t you wanna pop that cherry?”

“I’m not really...feeling like that.”

Keaton rolled his eyes. “Well...then pop another cherry.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, stick something else in her.” Keaton motioned to the knife. “Peter, you gotta break *some* new ground, tonight. Ain’t this the whole reason you and me and Billy came out tonight? To have a time, to try new shit, to step outta your comfort zone. Right?”

Peter nodded.

“So what are you waiting for? Pick up the fuckin’ knife, Peter. Do *something*.”

Peter gazed at the knife for quite some time. Julie started to grunt and groan and weep. Peter reached for the knife and placed his hand on it and then scrutinized it with doe eyes for a little bit longer. Then he picked up the knife and crawled to Julie. Keaton casually popped a cigarette into his mouth and lit it and took a deep puff. He didn’t pay too much attention to Peter.

Julie's grunts and groans got louder and more frantic as Peter slowly raised the knife. It wiggled in his trembling hand.

"Now?" asked Peter.

"Yes, now," said Keaton as he stared off into space.

I rolled onto my side to look away. Just as I did, I heard a sickening stabbing sound. Julie's muffled wails followed. I had no idea where she was stabbed. It was too horrible to look. I shut my eyes and listened to her suppressed screams and her frantic but useless thrashing.

I heard Keaton blow a puff of smoke and then say "Hit her again. In the chest."

The sounds I heard next came in a horrifying sequence; Peter removing the knife, then silence, then another stabbing sound...and then *deathlike* silence. No more screams, no more stabs. Total emptiness.

Keaton did a slow clap. "Bravo. That was great, Peter."

Morning's very first pale light began to peek up from behind the horizon. I lay in the back of the Cadillac with the unbearable knowledge that Julie's corpse was in the trunk. Peter drove along a gravel path even deeper in the woods than the shack, and Keaton sat smoking cigarettes in the passenger seat and said something about dumping us into a pond. The one Billy had mentioned earlier.

As I lay there I thought of everything. I thought of Julie and how she'd gone so young and how her mother and father would handle her passing. I thought of my mom and what the news of my own death would do to her. I wondered if she'd ever get over it. Probably not. I laid

my head back and sighed and gradually came to a sort of peace as I looked back on my life and decided I'd lived it to the fullest of my ability. It was short, but it was well-spent.

And then I caught something glistening in the corner of my eye. It was under the passenger seat and the end of it was visible. I scrutinized for a moment to try and figure out what it was. And then it hit me. It was the multitool that Peter had dropped—followed by Keaton saying *forget the fucking multitool*—earlier in the evening.

I was suddenly no longer at peace. I had a chance! A chance to live! I slowly and quietly (but still purposefully) pivoted my hips and reached out with my bound feet. I placed my heels down onto the multitool and dragged. The multitool didn't budge. I placed my heels down again and pressed harder and this time, when I dragged, the multitool was moved by my feet. *Yes. Please, god, please!* I pulled the tool closer and closer until it was parallel with my shoulders. Now came the hard part; actually getting the tool into my hands without alerting the lunatics up front.

I wormed a bit closer to the edge of the seat. This would take some flexibility and I thought I may even have to dislocate a shoulder to reach it. I hoped not. My bound hands now hung off the edge of the backseat. I bit my bottom lip and stretched both arms and wiggled my fingers toward the multitool. The tip of my middle finger just grazed the top of it. I was maddeningly close.

My heart ceased a moment as Keaton glanced at Peter. Surely I was in his peripheral vision. If he glanced back at me, he'd certainly put the pieces together and his suspicion would grow and he would eventually scrutinize long enough to unveil my scheme. I slowly retracted my hands back up to the seat. No sudden movements. I didn't want to alert him.

Keaton *did* glance back and smirk at me. I held my breath as he did this, tried to look as frightened and hopeless as possible. *Please turn back around. Turn back around and light up another cig.* After a few unbearable moments, he did turn back around and he *did* light up another smoke. This was the best chance I was going to get.

I wriggled closer to the edge of the seat so that half my body hung off the seat. I stretched with more intensity than I'd ever stretched before. My fingers tapped the edge of the multitool and even moved it a bit. *Don't push it further away, you imbecile,* I told myself.

I stretched farther and harder. The fabric of my muscles felt like they'd rip at any given moment. My fingers danced around the multitool as they desperately attempted to grasp it. I was so close and for a moment I thought I might scream out with uncontrollable frustration. *Hold it together, this is your one shot. Don't wanna end up in a ditch, do you?*

My eyes went wide as I felt the multitool flimsily positioned between my index and middle fingers. I was *not* going to let go. No force on this earth was going to get my fingers to loosen their grip, weak as it was.

I rotated the multitool and my fingertips searched for the knife that was surely folded within. I found the little ridge that one uses to grip and unfold the blade from its resting place, and I wedged my fingernail into the ridge and pulled. I was careful to prevent the knife from making a *click* once it fully unfolded.

The knife was out. Now to cut myself loose. I gripped the knife and sawed away at the first layer of tape. This gorilla tape was firm. But I was more determined than it was. Though the muscles and ligaments in my fingers and wrists burned like furnaces, I kept cutting away. My



fear and my determination gave me superpowers. My mind already laughed maniacally at the thought of my imminent escape. The tape was now halfway gone.

“The hell’s that sound?” Keaton blurted.

My heart sank. Keaton glanced around the car like a bloodhound that had caught the scent of a deer. I wasn’t sure if I should speed up my cutting or stop completely. I chose to speed it up. If he looked down, he would see the knife, and my escape would be put to an end.

Keaton followed the sound of my cutting and his eyes drew downward and rested on the sight of my hands sawing away at the tape.

“The fuck’s going...” Keaton trailed off as his eyes adjusted in the darkness. “Fuck!” He reached for the multitool...

...just as I cut free from the tape. I sprang up as if back from the dead and raised the knife and plunged it down into the side of Keaton’s neck and pushed the blade deep and then twisted. A scream erupted from his throat and then transitioned into a gargling noise.

I felt the car jerk and then swerve as Peter panicked in the front seat. “What? What? What’s going on? What’s happening?!”

As I twisted the knife deeper into Keaton’s neck, hot blood sprayed out onto my face and in the other direction onto Peter’s face. The car’s swerving grew wilder and then it swerved off the path and hit a bump and hopped off the ground for a second and then crashed into a boulder. Peter’s head shot forward and slammed into the airbag. Keaton, the knife still stuck in his neck, flew forward and hit the dashboard. I hit the back of the passenger seat and that rang my bell. I faded out for thirty seconds or so. Maybe a minute.

I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was Keaton lying against the center console with the knife still sticking out of his neck and streams of blood flowing from both corners of his mouth. Peter was out of sight and the driver side door was open and when I peeked outside I could see him crawling along the ground at a turtle's pace.

Keaton's left eye was beet red, completely filled with blood. His hat had been knocked off his head and I realized this was the only time I'd ever seen him without it. I couldn't tell if he was dead or if he was staring at me, and then he blinked slowly. His mouth turned upward into a wicked grin. When he spoke, his voice was low and raspy and distorted—something I assume was down to his vocal cords being sliced—and it sounded satanic. Strange noises would emerge from his throat when he spoke and his warped voice would double and triple.

“Amy, you dirty girl,” he hissed. “I gotta hand it to ya.”

“Shut up,” I said. “Shut the hell up, right now. You're gonna burn in hell.”

“I've always been there, Amy. I've been there since the day I was born. I don't walk the earth like you do. I walk the spirit world, Amy. The spirit wo -

A cough emerged from his throat and interrupted him and when it came out so did little wads of dark blood. He took a deep breath and looked me right in the eyes. “Be seeing you... Amy.” His head dropped back and his jaw fell open and I saw that he was dead. *Forget the fucking multitool.* Those words ended up being the most ill-judged he'd ever spoken.

I climbed out of the car and almost tripped as I realized I had yet to cut the tape from my ankles. I did so and then I looked to the forest to see Peter still crawling through piles of dead leaves. I approached him and when I got to him I could hear his snuffles and whimpers and agonized groans.

“Sucks, doesn’t it?” I asked him.

“I c-can’t feel my legs, Amy,” he replied. “I-I think w-we hit...hit a rock, or something.”

“Yes, yes we did.”

“I n-need m-m-medical attention. I n-need an ambulance.”

“Yes, yes you do.” I paused for a moment and savored the weasel’s suffering. “Goodbye, Peter.”

I walked off through the woods and toward the road, following the path that the morning sun now kindly lit for me.