

## CHAPTER 1 -- THE DEAD REALTOR

### The Detective

#### FRIDAY MORNING

He circled the body sitting on the sofa while the other policemen watched silently. These were not Detective Barrett's men and he was acutely aware of being the only black man in the room. The town of Down River had no real detectives on their force, so they brought in men like Barrett from the decidedly more violent city of Bridgewater whenever there was a serious crime to be investigated. If nothing else, Barrett gave them credit for knowing their limitations.

"Who is this guy?" he asked the room. "Anybody know?"

"Saint John Barlow," said a young, local policeman.

"*Saint* John?" Barrett snapped. "*Saint?* I didn't know you had a *Saint* right here in Down River," he said with mock surprise.

"Well, that's what it says on his business card," the officer said, holding up a card.

"It says he's a saint?"

“No,” the policeman answered softly, “he’s a realtor.”

Barrett looked at the dead man. “The Dead Realtor,” he said, thereby nicknaming his corpse for the purposes of all future reference. For some reason, the whole situation suddenly struck him as strange, vaguely humorous. A realtor. What’s the point of killing a realtor? He looked around at the crime scene. “And this is one of the model homes, right?”

“A showcase home,” a young policeman said, eager to help. “You know, to show off the different floor plans to potential buyers.”

“I know what a model home is, officer,” Barrett said, writing in his small, spiral notepad. “I’m from Bridgewater, not Mogadishu.”

The young policeman swallowed hard, obviously intimidated by Barrett. “I just meant no one actually lives here.”

“Well, neither would I.” Barrett gave off a dramatic shiver. “Place gives me the creeps.”

The home was fully furnished fresh off the showroom floor with cream carpeting and soft yellow curtains. Joyless knickknacks and wedding photos of a fictitious, impossibly happy couple were set across the mantel. Artificial ceramic fruit glistened in a bowl in the center of a fully set dinner table. Oil paintings of nothing hung noncommittally on the walls. A never-used dog bowl with “DOG” lettered boldly on the side sat by the sliding glass door. A non-name for a nonexistent pet. The starkness of the bowl gave Barrett an emptiness far beyond anything invoked in him by the sight of a dead realtor. The intention had obviously been to imbue the place with warmth, but to Barrett it was about as homey as a mental institution. “How about the development? Are all the houses still empty?”

The policeman nodded. “They’ve started to show them, but they don’t officially go on sale for another week or so. The whole place is empty.”

“Well, this is sure going to boost sales,” Barrett said, crouching down to study The Dead Realtor.

Somehow, working crimes in Down River was even more soul crushing to Barrett than the streets of Bridgewater with its endless black-on-black violence and grinding hopelessness. Perhaps the citizens of Down River did not possess the same deranged frivolity as the tapioca-on-the-veranda crowd in the wealthier towns a few stops down the rail line, but it was the triviality of their fears that Barrett could not fathom. In Bridgewater, the kids were crunching crack vials under their feet and ducking drive-bys. Up here, they became hysterical if little Madison is not wearing her bike helmet.

Even violent crime seemed to be sterile here. Take the dead guy on the couch sitting there holding a golf club across his lap with his head lolled to the side as though he had simply fallen asleep watching late night re-runs of *Seinfeld*. He wore a pressed white button-down shirt open at the collar, black socks, a gold watch, and... nothing else. A pair of charcoal slacks were folded primly on the ottoman and a Jos. A. Bank blazer hung neatly on the back of a chair in the dining room that opened onto the living room. His shoes were lined up neatly at his feet. There was no blood. Hell, the guy even had a slightly bemused smile on his face as if to say, “No, really, I can explain all of this.”

Barrett stood in front of the body, a half dozen Down River policemen semi-circled around him. He took a pair of pale blue latex gloves from his sports coat and began pulling them on. Suddenly he stopped. It was silent. He listened. There it was. What the...? “Gentlemen,” he announced to the room. “What is the most disturbing thing about this crime scene?”

The men looked at each other, at the body, around the room, at Barrett. “What do you mean by ‘disturbing?’” one of them ventured cautiously.

“Utterly bone chilling,” Barrett said, pulling on the second glove. He raised a finger to his lips. “Shhhh. Listen.” The room was silent except for... “Hear that?”

Some of the men shrugged. No, they didn’t hear anything.

“Listen very closely,” Barrett whispered.

There was a pause as they all cocked their heads and then one by one they shook their heads again. Nope.

Barrett raised his hands and let them drop to his sides in the I-give-up gesture. “It’s the music, boys,” he said, gesturing at the air all around them. “It’s that awful, awful music. Seriously, what the fuck?”

And indeed, there it was: Piped-in music of unknown origin wafting soothingly throughout the house. A Sinatra tune pussified down by a gutless organ and muffled saxophone, the booming voice of Old Blue Eyes rendered up an octave and substituted in with the hollow, aluminum tinkling of a xylophone. And it wasn’t all that faint, either, just so numbingly banal that it had taken Barrett ten minutes to notice there was music playing at all. As for the Down River cops, they were obviously so used to being around this kind of music that it no longer rose to the level of actual consciousness.

A look of acknowledgement suddenly flickered in the eyes of the policemen around him, as if the music had only now been turned up so they could hear it. A few even smiled and nodded eagerly as if the old-pro detective had pointed out a clue so hidden that they could not possibly have been expected to spot it themselves.

Barrett finished pulling on the second glove and snapped it loudly. “Somebody please turn that shit off,” he asked with forced patience.

A policeman went to a wall switch and cranked down a knob but the music continued to play. “Can’t turn it off from here, sir. I think it’s controlled from the sales office.”

Barrett shook his head and knelt down on one knee in front of the body. “Poor bastard, how’d you like to get murdered to that soundtrack?” he said. He began his victim assessment, noting his findings aloud, but not because he thought that collaborating with the Down River police would be of any use. Barrett had been ordered by his captain to “keep DRPD in the loop on all cases” and to “stop treating their officers like severely retarded children.” There were politics involved, after all, client relationships and outsourcing contracts between municipalities that needed to be extended. Bridgewater desperately needed the income they got from loaning out detectives. Barrett’s solution was to make the Down River officers believe they were actually contributing to the case by feeding them the obvious details and then keeping them the fuck out his way with lots and lots of irrelevant busy work.

Barrett recognized the issue with The Dead Realtor right away, running his hand over a pronounced swelling a few inches inside hairline on the left side of the head. “Medium size hematoma, left temporal region,” he called out. He looked behind the ear. “Accompanied by Battle’s sign above the left mastoid process.” He looked at the policeman taking the notes. He recognized him from a previous investigation in Down River. Spaulding. Young, eager, not entirely a moron. Spaulding had paused writing midsentence, clearly confused. “That’s the victim’s left, not yours,” Barrett instructed.

“I know *that*,” the young policeman bristled at the baiting. “It’s all that other stuff.”

“It means there’s a big old scary knot above his ear and blood all pooled up behind it. Battle’s sign equals skull fracture.” Barrett feigned a right cross to the side of The Dead Realtor’s head. “Left side of head equals right-handed assailant.” He let his fist fall. “Or a

switch hitter.” He continued working from the head down, looking in the mouth and nose and palpating the neck, careful not to interfere with anything forensics might be able to turn up later. He leaned the body forward slightly and swept the back for blood and deformity but there was nothing. He felt the man’s ribs and abdomen and then moved down to something he had noticed the moment he had first looked at the body. It was so ridiculous he had been afraid to ask.

“Did you guys put this here?” he asked the room in a voice more appropriate for interrogating a class of first graders.

Nobody answered. They all stared at the little kitchen towel with its repeating pattern of grinning pigs in aprons that had been daintily draped across The Dead Realtor’s naked lap.

Barrett looked at each of the men individually.

“Yes, sir,” one of them finally admitted sheepishly.

“Shit,” Barrett said impatiently as he lifted up the towel with a gloved hand. “What, you guys never seen a --.” He cut himself short when he saw it. “Whoa, shit,” he laughed. “That’s, uh --.” He stopped and shook his head, smiling. “That’s something, alright.”

“What should I write down for that?” the young police officer asked.

“Why don’t you put down that you’ve got a Down River victim with a Bridgewater size penis,” Barrett instructed. Nobody laughed. He gave a big sigh and dropped the towel back onto the dead man’s crotch. “Don’t put anything,” he said to his note-taker. “Let the coroner come up with a name for that thing.” Barrett turned back to the body and knelt down to study the golf club The Dead Realtor still clutched across his lap. He noted what appeared to be dried mud impacted into the grooves of the rubber grip. Beyond that, he would not disturb what was likely the murder weapon and let forensics handle it instead.

He stood up slowly on knees creaky from a lifetime of sports injuries, jotted down some final notes.

“So you think it was the golf club?” an anonymous voice in the room asked.

“Most likely,” Barrett said, surprised to hear an actual question from a Down River cop. Well, at least one of them was putting in the effort.

“I’d have used the fireplace poker,” the voice commented.

Barrett kept writing. “Crime of passion, weapon of convenience,” he said absently. “People generally just pick up whatever is closest if they’re crazy mad enough. Guy probably got hit with club, killer runs away, the corpse here picks it up, takes a seat and dies still holding it.”

“Huh,” the voice said. “Or maybe he’s still holding the club because he was shoving it up someone’s ass.”

Barrett gave a small laugh under his breath. Working Bridgewater, he had heard plenty of inappropriate crime scene humor. “Yeah, what make you think that?” he asked, finishing up his final notes.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because there’s shit all over the handle,” the voice pointed out.

Barrett’s head shot up and scanned the men standing around him and saw the usual array of blank faces. He turned back to The Dead Realtor and leaned down to study what he had initially thought was mud caked in the handle. When he got about a foot away he caught the sharp stench of it. It was shit alright. He winced and pulled back.

“Don’t whiff it, dude!” the voice laughed.

Barrett straightened up and looked over the policemen looking back at him. “Who said that?” Barrett asked. A hand shot up from the crowd like a school kid asking permission to speak. Barrett let his eyes settle on owner of the hand and was surprised to find a teenage kid standing right smack, shoulder to shoulder, in the middle of the gathered policemen. The boy was wearing ripped up jeans, worn out Converse high tops, and a pair of oversized, white plastic-framed sunglasses covering his eyes. The black lettering across his white T-shirt read, “Don’t Be A Dick!”

Barrett and the boy stood locked in a strangely non-confrontational stare for a few long moments. There was silence in the room, except for a rather jaunty Hammond organ version of “Girl from Ipanema” floating out from the speakers in the ceiling. “What the fuck is he doing in the middle of my crime scene?” Barrett asked in as measured and calm a voice as possible.

“What the fuck you think I’m doing, Barrett?” The kid replied indignantly. “I’m trying to solve a murder over here.” He looked around the room at everyone looking at him. “What?” he said, holding his hands out innocently? “I’m the one who found him.”

Barrett gave the strange kid a long stare trying to remember. The boy looked vaguely familiar. “Alright, well don’t go anywhere, I’ll need to talk to you,” he said to kid. He turned to the cop closest to him. “Please get him out of here,” he said in the sort of carefully measured tone that let everyone know he was not happy about letting some kid hang out in the middle of a crime scene, especially a possible witness. “Now!”

“Damn it, Aiden,” one of the policemen whined in the sort of exasperated tone one would use on a puppy who had just chewed up a pair of slippers.

The kid didn’t move. He stared at Barrett and slowly shook his head with a look equal parts dismay and disappointment. “That is so rude,” he said incredulously.

Barrett was momentarily stunned into silence by the absurdity of the situation. Was the kid actually protesting his removal? And why were none of these idiot Down River cops doing anything to get him the hell out?

“Fine. Forget it,” the kid said calmly, his eyes still not leaving Barrett’s. “I’m getting out of here, anyhow.” He pointed up at the ceiling. “This fucking music makes me want to kill myself.” He rapped his knuckles twice against the wooden trim on the back of the sofa and then turned and walked straight out through the front door, swinging it closed behind him.

They all stared silently at the closed door. Suddenly, it swung back open and the kid leaned in with his hand still on the doorknob. “And by the way, it’s pronounced, ‘Sin-jin,’” he said, crisply enunciating each of the two syllables. Nobody answered. He nodded in the direction of the body on the sofa. “The dead guy with the giant weenis. His name. It’s pronounced ‘Sin-jin,’ not ‘Saint John.’” He looked at the blank faces of the men in the room one by one. “You guys have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?” He shook his head. The door swung shut again. Gone.

Barrett went to the picture window and stood with his hands on his hips watching the boy walk out over the grass to one of the police squad cars and casually hop up so he was sitting on the trunk with his feet hanging over the side. “Who is he?” Barrett asked the room.

“Aiden Babble,” officer Spaulding answered with a nervous swallow.

Barrett looked at the young cop. “You’re shitting me, right?” He looked at the kid idly twanging the big radio antenna on the back of the cop car and felt himself being sucked down the rabbit hole into the Wonderland that was the town of Down River. Why did shit like this always happen to him here and nowhere else? How was it possible that Aiden Babble, the infamous

Rape Baby, still one of the most recognized names on the planet, could linger in an active crime scene without any of the dozen or so cops stopping or even noticing him?

“Someone get the visitor’s log from the sales office and put in a request for electronic records off that lockbox,” Barrett ordered without even looking at the men. “And get the names of all the victim’s real estate clients in the last year. Maybe Sin-Jin here sold someone a shitty house somewhere along the way. Find out what other properties he’s shown in the last couple weeks. Have this place inventoried to see if anything is missing.” Barrett pointed to the cell phone on the dining room table. “And get me every phone record, text message, photo... everything there is off his cell phone.” He looked around the room. “You, Spaulding. Find out if the security cameras in this place are working and get the video if they are,” he ordered, assigning the most important task to the most capable man in the room, relatively speaking.

The men scattered into action. Barrett walked out of the house and over to the Rape Baby sitting on the cruiser. He flipped open his notebook. “Name?” he asked, even though he already knew. The boy told him, along with a phone number and an address. Logan Circle? Barrett thought as he wrote down the address, suddenly realizing where he had seen Aiden Babble before. How could he have forgotten? It was the Todd Beck murder two years before. Todd Beck lived on Logan Circle. It had been the same sort of situation. Barrett had been interviewing the man’s wife, Samantha Beck, when he looked up and found Aiden Babble sitting quietly on the kitchen counter munching a banana and listening in. Barrett remembered being baffled as to how and when the kid could have shown up without him noticing. And if he remembered correctly, the kid had been indignant even then about being asked to leave. “Logan Circle, huh?” Barrett repeated casually, deciding not to acknowledge their previous encounter. “That’s not too far from here, is it?”

Aiden Babble nodded up to a pair of rooftops visible at the top of a long wooded hillside about 100 yards away. “That’s me right there,” he said.

“So want to tell me how it is you found this body?”

Aiden shrugged. “I don’t want to, but I will. I was passing through the neighborhood, went inside that model home and... bingo! Dead realtor.”

Barrett waited, but the kid just smiled as though that explained everything. “What do you mean you were passing through and just went inside?”

“What do you mean what do I mean? I was cutting through and had to take a piss, so I went inside. How was I supposed to know Biggus Dickus was dead on the couch inside?”

“How did you gain entrance?”

“Gain entrance,” the kid laughed under his breath. “You mean how did I get inside? Sliding glass door.”

“Uh-huh,” Barrett noted. Clever boy. “So you know him?”

“Everyone knows him. His face is all over town. Shit even comes in the mail with his face on it. Granted, he looks a little different than he did in there,” he added, motioning to the model home.

“You mean real estate ads and all that?”

“Yeah. Hey, nobody does it better than St. John Barlow.”

“Excuse me?”

The kid shook his head. “Just check out the first lawn sign you see him on, you’ll know what I mean.”

Barrett tapped his pencil on the pad, deciding not to probe the comment any further. “If he’s so well known, how come none of the officers know the correct pronunciation of his name?” he asked, genuinely curious.

“What, those guys?” Babble answered, motioning to the gaggle of cops outside the front door. “None of them live in town, can’t afford it.” He paused, watching them. “Besides, look at them. About a half a chromosome away from a mongoloid, every last one of them.”

Barrett suppressed a laugh and then looked the boy over. “Nothing else I should know about this?”

“Nope.”

“See anything else? Any idea who could have done this? Any knowledge about anything related to this?”

“I don’t know shit about shit.”

“Other than hanging around, you didn’t touch anything in there, did you?”

“Nope.”

“Alright,” Barrett said, fishing around in the pocket of his sports coat and handing the kid one of his business cards. “Call me if you remember anything else.”

The kid handed the card back. “I know how to find you,” he said flatly.

Barrett gave him a long look. “You need to clear out of here now,” he said.

The boy slid off the fender of the cruiser and saluted Barrett. “You are so absolutely welcome, Detective Barrett,” he said, turning to amble his way down the street.

Barrett watched him go until the kid took a corner and disappeared. He shook his head, bent down and pinched up a tuft of grass and rolled it between his fingers absently, looking up and down the street. The Concord Ranch development was made up of orderly lines of houses

with neatly mulched beds, buried power lines and white concrete drives. Barrett could see that the developer had simply alternated four or five models in the subdivision and plopped them side by side, the houses far more expensive than they were unique. The complete absence of any personal items in any of the yards – no toys, no cars, no bikes, no newspapers in the driveways, not even a garden hose in sight – lent the neighborhood a sterile, almost clinical atmosphere, as though it were the control group in some elaborate social experiment. It was a ghost town in reverse.

Barrett tried to conjure up something resembling compassion for the crime and the town at hand. He could not do it. He had seen heartbreak and death too many times before in Bridgewater. Daily. He was already suffering from compassion fatigue and was not going to use what little of it he had left on the occasional death and sadness visited upon the privileged folk of Down River. They sure did not seem to give a shit back, either, sucking up law enforcement resources from the bigger city and prioritizing even their most victimless crimes over anything that happened in Bridgewater. What was the quote? “One death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic.” To the people of Down River, anything that happened in Bridgewater was clearly just a statistic.

But then again, even Barrett had become mostly desensitized to the anguished mothers yowling over the bodies of their dead sons, the beat-up girls always telling him, “but I love him,” and the endless tossing of young black men into jail. He had long since removed all moral decision making out of his police work. There were no such things as “mitigating circumstances” or “letting it slide” with Detective Clyde Barrett any more. If they did the crime, they did the time. A simple “if, then” equation: *If you fuck up, then you go to jail.* It didn’t matter if you were stealing a canned ham to feed your starving baby or if you shot the local drug

dealer for selling an overdose to your son. He took them all down. He didn't have the energy to parse through the morality of people's actions any more. It was pure emotional self-preservation.

A news van pulled up, *Live on 5 News!* airbrushed across the side, the little broadcast dish mounted on a pole telescoping into the sky. Plump and stumpy-legged local television reporter Hank Dash Reporting! climbed down from the passenger side in his familiar crime scene attire: open collar, shirt sleeves strategically rolled up high. The look was carefully calculated to imply that Hank Dash Reporting! was no mere spectator, no common reporter, but that Hank Dash Reporting! was part of the story itself, right in there mixing it up with all the misery and gaping exit wounds. Dash had been a ubiquitous television presence in the lives of local residents for so long that a derivation of his rather pedestrian tag line – “This is Hank Dash Reporting!” - had, at his relentless insistence, become his accepted full name. He had become... Hank Dash Reporting!, complete with exclamation point.

None of these things bothered Barrett all that much. He knew that news was packaged and marketed and no longer merely reported. What bothered him about Dash was that his happiness quotient seemed to be in perfect one-to-one correlation with the sheer awfulness of the crime. The sadder it was, the happier Dash became, his utter delight dimmed down only for as long as the camera light was on. Barrett had long ago concluded that all local on-air reporters were clinical sociopaths, but none more so than Hank Dash Reporting!

Dash bee-lined towards Barrett, trying to disguise his eagerness by mixing a little sissy skip into his step. He shot a coast-is-clear glance in each direction, barely able to contain his glee. “Death in Down River!” he said, air quoting around it. “How much fun is this?”

Even to Barrett, Dash's up-beat, game-show host chatter always felt grotesquely incongruous with a homicide scene. "Yeah, all kinds of fun," Barrett said without enthusiasm.

Dash leaned in conspiratorially. "I hear he's got a huge weenie," he said, with a lighthearted lifting of the eyebrows.

"Who told you that?" Barrett asked.

"The Rape Baby, who else? Just saw him walking down the street over there. Kid knows fucking everything about everything in this town."

"Apparently," Barrett sighed.

Dash waved his cameraman over. "What do you say, Detective, can I get a few on-air quotes from you?"

"Fuck no," said Barrett. "You know better than to ask, Hank."

"I don't get it, Barrett. You've got to be the only person in America who isn't desperate to get on television."

"No good can come of it," Barrett said. "Anyhow, you know the routine: You need to talk to the Down River Police Chief for any official statements on a crime in Down River."

"Yeah, great, that fucking moron," Dash muttered under his breath. "He's so obsessed with his highway sign hacker that I doubt he even knows this shit is going on." Hank Dash Reporting! scrambled off and went about his business setting up the remote, going so far as to jump into several of the Down River police cars himself to re-park them in the middle of the street at odd angles, doors flung open, roof lights twirling, in order to give the scene a greater sense of alarm and panic.

Barrett watched in amusement and then flipped open his notebook and made a list, but he already knew what he was going to do. He'd get a warrant, search The Dead Realtor's home, go

through his computer, make a list of clients and acquaintances, and then, one by one, start scaring the shit out of them to see if something might shake loose. He'd startle them with loud knocks on their doors; stand a little too close when interviewing them; lock eyes when he asked them a question; walk around their living rooms casually picking up their shit; interrupt them when they tried to answer. He'd watch their hands tremble, develop stutters, use the wrong words, contradict themselves in consecutive sentences. Barrett found it all vaguely entertaining.

Officer Spaulding came out of the house and stood at the curb puzzling over the cop cars suddenly scattered all over the roadway with their doors wide open and light bars whirling.

"Where's your chief this morning, Spaulding?" Barrett asked the confused policeman.

"He's got some sort of computer expert in today. They're trying to find out who's been hacking into the message signs on the parkway."

Barrett had to clear his head after that bit of news. The Chief of Police couldn't make the one homicide of the year because he was... What?

Officer Spaulding suddenly seemed to comprehend the absurdity of what he'd just said. "It's a really big problem," he said defensively. "Some hacker keeps putting up prank messages on our electronic highway signs."

Barrett motioned at the homicide scene around him. "Murder," he said simply.

The cop grew anxious. "It's getting to be a dangerous situation," he stammered, apparently unwilling to admit the obvious: his chief was indeed a fucking moron. "I mean, it's very distracting for motorists. The messages are starting to get really, you know... Rude!"

"Rude?"

"The one yesterday said, 'What Now Bitches?'"

"My, that *is* rude," Barrett said. "What does it mean?"

The cop shrugged. “Nobody knows.”

“Well, one certainly cannot be expected to tolerate that sort of rudeness in Down River.”

Barrett said sarcastically. He scratched his head and looked back at the model home containing The Dead Realtor. “You know who else is a very rude person?”

Spaulding followed Barrett’s gaze to the model home and then anticipated the answer.

“Uh, the guy who murdered St. John Barlow?”

Barrett patted the young cop on the shoulder. “Bingo, Spaulding. Bingo.”

“Hey Barrett,” Hank Dash Reporting! interrupted them, calling out from where he was making his final adjustments in front of the camera. “Wouldn’t you say the people of Down River are ‘*Shocked*’ over this murder?”

“No,” said Barrett. “They don’t even know about it yet.”

“And wouldn’t you say that police are ‘*Baffled*’ by this crime?”

Barrett shook his head. “Not in the least.”

“Excellent,” Dash nodded, lining himself up in front of the camera with the scrambled police cars as backdrop. The cameraman counted it down. “We’re on in three, two, one.”

Dash lit up. “Police are baffled and a small town in shock over an apparent homicide that took place in the model home just behind me...”

Barrett watched, amused. He no longer expected the truth from anyone. Dash yammered through his live report filled with inaccuracies and irresponsible assumptions.

“From the town of Down River,” Dash concluded his remote with a dramatic pause before his signature sign-off. “This is *Hank Dash Reporting!*”

The cameraman lowered the camera.

“Nice,” said Barrett.

Dash grinned. “Fucking Down River,” he said, summing the whole place up with contempt.

“Yep,” said Barrett. “Fucking Down River.”

## CHAPTER 2 -- SAMANTHA

### The Widow

#### **THURSDAY (the day before)**

There seemed to be a low sizzling sound in the room, like a fuse burning down. Samantha knew it was really just in her head. It was the sound of her losing her temper. She did not have the patience for this sort of skirting around the issue any more.

“So really what you are saying is he’s weird, right?” she said, dropping the evaluation report back onto the table.

There was a confirmatory silence in the room before the school principal waded in. “Weird is not a word we like to...”

“Oh please shut up,” she snapped, not really caring that she was shitheading the man in front of his own staff. She just could not take another semantic psycho-sterilization by that man. She had developed a firm dislike of him, a bureaucrat whose only purpose seemed to be to obscure the meaning of words. The man did not protest. A banner hanging across the wall above their heads read, “EVERYONE DESERVES RESPECT,” but the principal, teachers and

school psychologist in the room seemed to understand that reprimanding Samantha Beck for that violation right now would be a very, very bad idea.

She tapped the report. “I mean, really, what am I supposed to do with information like this?”

She knew she was not being fair to the team of educators in the room. It was like taking a swing at the doctor when he informs you of your malignant tumor. But the truth was, she didn't really care. When she and Todd had first moved to Down River from The City, he had made her swear she would exercise patience with her new neighbors. It didn't last. It was the way they circumnavigated subjects, chose their words for maximum inoffensiveness, and lingered at the deli counter wondering whether they should have non-fat or low-fat cream cheese on their bagel that day. These people just wore her out. She had lived her whole life in The City with doormen who let you know when you were getting fat and deli workers who told you to “figure it out, lady, it ain't that hard,” at the slightest hint of indecision. Even as a defense attorney, she preferred to litigate in the courtrooms of judges who halted lengthy and obtuse discourse with a sharp, “Get to the point!”

“So he's a little eccentric,” she went on, determined to protect her son from any categorization or labeling she knew he would end up wearing the rest of his educational life. “Stop trying to pathologize him; he's only six years old, for god's sake.”

There was another pause. “I'm sorry, Mrs. Beck, but the results of the evaluation clearly put Jackson on ‘The Spectrum,’” the school psychologist weighed in carefully, as if fearing Samantha might stick a pencil in her forehead upon mention of the word.

Not the fucking dreaded *Spectrum* again. No one even added the word “autism” to it anymore. It was just *The Spectrum*. Samantha almost expected ominous organ music to fill the

room when people said it now. “So what, now he has to eat lunch with all the other weirdos?” she shot back, knowing full well that he already did.

The psychologist physically recoiled in her chair. “That’s not what being on The Spectrum means.”

Samantha waved the woman off dismissively. “Then why don’t you people get to the point and tell me what we are talking about here.”

“We are trying to define settle on an assessment,’ Mrs. Beck,” the principal answered, clearly irritated now. “So we can decide upon a —”

“I do not agree with your assessment,” Samantha cut in, briskly tapping a fingertip on the table top. “That’s for the record. I do not accept your assessment.”

The man blinked, composed himself and went on. “So that we can place Jackson into the best environment for his—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. What’s this *‘placed’* and *‘environment’* shit?” The room was silent. The school representatives looked at each other nervously, none of them wanting to be the one in Samantha Beck’s line of fire when they dropped the bomb on her. Samantha straightened up in her chair and fixed a glare on each of them in turn. “You’re talking about sending him to another school, aren’t you?” There was a long silence. “I do not consent to that. Is that clear?”

“This is not a court of law here, Mrs. Beck. We are not required to get your consent,” the principal said, giving Samantha a vaguely sardonic smile. Big mistake.

Samantha copied the same smile back at him. “But you will find yourself in a court of law if you are not very careful.”

Jackson's teacher bravely stepped into the breach to avert a snarling dog fight between the two. "We think a special needs environment might be beneficial so that —"

"How did he score academically?" Samantha challenged, already knowing the answer.

"Outstanding," the woman admitted.

"Great, then we're all done here," Samantha said. She stood up from the table and lifted her heavy briefcase bag onto her chair and began shoving her pen and notepad into one of the outside pockets.

"It's a socialization issue, Mrs. Beck," said the principal. "He needs to be in an environment with peers who will be less, uh, judgmental of him."

"Judgmental?" Samantha said, continuing to pack up her briefcase. "If he's being bullied, it's your job to stop it. Zero tolerance for bullying, that's the post-Columbine policy, right?" She slung the bag over her shoulder and picked up the report. "As far as I'm concerned, this discussion is over, you hear me?"

The man let out a dismissive puff of air. "Maybe it would be best if we had Jackson's father here too for this discussion."

Samantha froze staring at the man in disbelief. She heard someone in the room whisper, "Oh, shit." She let out a breath, gave a tight smile and nodded. "Yeah, I'll get right on that."

"Okay, Okay," Jackson's teacher said, raising both hands in mediation and surrender. "I apologize, Mrs. Beck. Maybe everyone here is not completely up-to-speed on your, you know, situation."

Samantha looked around the room. "No, really, someone want to set that meeting up?"

The principal shrugged. "I was only suggesting we might be able to get a better consensus if—"

“Bill. Bill,” the school psychologist cut in, a tremendous urgency in her voice. “Please, let’s just end this now. Mr. Beck is no longer in the picture, so, so...”

The principal started to say something, but then stopped, sensing that he may have committed some enormous error somewhere along the way.

Samantha turned to leave.

“Mrs. Beck?” Jackson’s teacher called out to her just as Samantha was opening the door. Samantha turned back, still holding the door open. “How much does Jackson understand about what happened to his father?”

A silence descended upon the room. The sound of the air conditioner suddenly seemed like a roar. “You mean how much does a six year old boy understand the concept of murder?” She held up the evaluation report with one hand in front of her as if displaying a royal proclamation. “What do you think?”

The woman nodded in understanding. A look of horror and confusion appeared on the principal’s face while the others looked down at the table or moved their pencils around, anything to avoid eye contact with the widow of a murdered man, the mother of a screwed up child.

Samantha shoved the report into her briefcase bag. “But then again, who really does?” she said, letting the door swing shut behind her as she left.

Samantha walked out to the playground to find her son and take him home. It was just past 1:30 and the lower grades were letting out. Children scampered past with their backpacks, laughing and running to meet their parents, climbing onto buses, or scaling the big log huts on the playground set. At the edge of the playground Samantha could see Jackson by himself

pretending to vacuum the grass with the flat backside of a big, plastic rake he had gotten from the kindergarten area. “Hoovering,” he called it. He moved in long, sweeping thrusts, extending his arm far out while gracefully going up on one foot just like he had seen Wilma Flintstone do it on Boomerang Channel reruns. Even from that far away, Samantha could see he was making those strange vacuuming noises of his. Vacuum cleaners. Hoovers. His enduring obsession. Every conversation, every game, every... thing, always looping back around to the subject of vacuum cleaners. Samantha shook her head slowly. “Shit,” she said, under her breath and then set off across the field to get her son.

Samantha had never been able to mitigate the emotional anguish that scenes like this elicited in her. The pure sweetness of the boy and his simplistic joys were always mixed with the menacing probability that it would be that very innocence and these endearing eccentricities that might eventually lead him to a life of perpetual sadness. She wondered how he was going to feel when he finally figured out that the vacuum cleaners that gave him such pure happiness were also the cause of the derision and rejection inflicted upon him? What sort of bewildering confusion and hurt will he experience when he finally understands that the damn machines have betrayed him? He seemed to have emerged from the death of his father scarred but not defeated, but Samantha knew the boy might not make it through the betrayal of the vacuum cleaners nearly so well.

Samantha watched him as she approached. Each time Jackson finished vacuum-raking a geometric area of grass, he stepped back and examined it, his hands shooting up to briefly flutter in front of his face. Just a quick flashing of the hands and then back down again. Most people would not have noticed it. At least not at first. But if he became anxious or frightened or especially excited, the motions became prolonged and exaggerated and very hard to miss. She

knew the fluttering was just the way Jackson fended off all strong emotions, good or bad. He had started to do it almost precisely from the moment he first understood that he would never see his father again.

He was deeply focused on his task and didn't see her until she was close to him. He looked up and smiled. "Oh, hi Mom," he said, cheerfully. He went on with his Hoovering. "I'll be done with this task in just a second. Just have this area over here to finish up."

Samantha knew better than to tear him away from one of his "tasks" unless she absolutely had to. He did not do well with abrupt transitions of any kind. Her life with him was a series of pre-warnings - Jackson, 20 minutes and then we have to... Jackson, ten minutes and then... Jackson, five minutes... - and then waiting him out until he was ready to go on to the next thing. Rushing or forcing him usually resulted in meltdowns and pitched battles that were never worth it.

She sat down on the playground bench and waited and watched the boy, refusing to look in the direction of the parents and other children for fear she would find them sneering or snickering at the sight of him. She remembered the school evaluation report in her hand and decided to flip through it while she waited. She scanned the sections: "Background." "Testing." "Interpretation of Results." She paused at "Summary & Analysis" and skimmed through it, unable to bring herself to read it thoroughly, not really wanting to know. The words and phrases jumped off the page, snapping at her with jagged teeth. "Atypical behavior." "Low level eye contact." "Disconnected." "Difficulty understanding emotions." "Underdeveloped empathy." "Atypical hand gestures." "Obsessive interests." "Socialization difficulties." "Atypical vocabulary." "Vulnerable to..." "At risk for..." "In danger of..." "Cannot rule out..." "Special needs." "Classification." "Categorization." "Atypical, Atypical, Atypical..."

Right when she'd had enough, there it was, afterthoughtishly dropped in near the very end of the report: "Indicated – Autism, Not Otherwise Specified."

She lowered the report slowly and looked at Jackson Hoovering his carpet of grass. Those fuckers. Okay, so it was not a shock. Okay, so she knew she had been avoiding it, denying it through willful ignorance by refusing to follow up, to read up, to acknowledge the presence of the nebulous Spectrum looming over him like a fog waiting to swallow him into its misty innards. But goddamn them for putting it down in black and white. Now he was stuck with it. All she had wanted was to give him a few more years of just being a kid before he became a 'This Kid' or a 'That Kid.' An 'ADHD kid,' or a 'Learning Disabled Kid,' a 'Spectrum Kid,' a 'Special Needs Kid,' a 'Whatever-They-Were-Going-To-Call-It Kid.' She knew that once Jackson was labeled, the label would become who he was. She didn't want him to be a 'Something.' She just wanted him to be a kid.

Samantha looked up and watched Jackson dragging his rake through the grass making his whiny vacuum sound. He set the rake down and studied his work. His hands fluttered up in front of his face for an instant. He turned and walked away with a brisk, approving nod, apparently satisfied. He came to her and gave her a hug, nestling deeply into her arms. "Hi, Mommy," he said sweetly.

Samantha held the boy close. "Hey, kiddo. How did it go today?" she asked, patting him softly.

"Okay," he answered reflexively.

"Okay." It was the only answer he ever gave when she asked him. He could not, or would not, tell her what he had done or what things had happened to him while she was not with

him. She would never know what soaring joys, subtle cruelties, or life-changing humiliations he would experience without her.

“Okay,” she echoed back in a whisper. “Let’s hit the road, Jack.”

It wasn’t until her iPhone pinged her a reminder that she remembered she was supposed to be going out that night. A date. Her immediate thought was, fuck that. Cancel it. After a day like this? Cancel the damn thing. The last thing in the world she wanted was to...

But then she caught herself. She knew she had to go. She couldn’t keep letting every excuse or little scheduling conflict become another reason to sit in the house with Jackson playing Candyland, watching Ice Age II or drawing vacuum cleaners. Meeting men was no longer an optional activity. She knew that her responsibility to Jackson meant a hell of a lot more than life insurance, taking her vitamins and threatening school officials. It meant safety nets for all the worst case scenarios, all those “what the hell would happen to Jackson if...?” questions. What if the school says they cannot handle him anymore? What if his emotional issues suddenly got worse? What if his mother died and there was no one to look after him?

There it was: What the hell would happen to Jackson if something happened to her? The thought of it alone made her lightheaded enough to take a seat on the edge of the bed. It was no longer a remote possibility. She was in perfect health, but she was entering her forties now, edging into higher risk zones for breast cancer, cervical cancer, stroke... any number of nasty things that could take a woman out in a matter of months or even minutes. The raw truth was that Samantha had no good options when it came to people who could take her son if something happened to her. Her own mother was dead. Her father had always been incapable and awful and now he was old, incapable and awful. Her sister in Philadelphia was a borderline psychotic

spinster. For a while, Samantha's will had designated her old law school roommate, Joyce, as custodian of Jackson. But when she had last visited Joyce, she found Joyce's husband had become a hard drinking, pathologically ambitious prick. When Samantha suggested to Joyce that she really would not want her son to be "raised by some asshole," Joyce had suggested perhaps it was time she changed her will. Softening her choice of words had never been one of Samantha's strong points.

There had been a time when Samantha thought she might ask Austin and Mary Roberts, her neighbors across the street. They had been so kind to her after Todd was murdered. Austin would take Jackson to the park almost every day while Samantha went through the numbing administrative work required to wrap up a dead person's life. Austin was really the only other adult to have any meaningful relationship with Jackson, the only one who seemed to have the patience for the boy. But the wife, Mary, was a slightly different story. Way too intense and borderline bitchy toward Samantha. So she let go of the idea, even though Austin still came over to visit Jackson or take him to the park every once in a while.

Samantha knew she should have been "out there" the last year making friends, bringing new people into her circle, going to events where there was at least a chance she might meet a new father for Jackson. Even without a "new man," all it would really take was one girlfriend or one couple she trusted and respected to connect with the boy and the pressure would be off. But she had done nothing to cultivate a social life or romantic relationship. Not yet. Funny how having one's husband stabbed to death can take away one's eagerness to throw a dinner party or put up a profile on *Match.com*. Besides, she had been too busy doing what she does when things get bad: pulling up the draw bridge, getting even tougher and viciously protecting her son. But it

was time to get past the psychological blocks, to start prioritizing, following-up leads, getting the word out. Time to start treating the man search like a job search. How romantic.

Samantha dragged herself off the bed unenthusiastically. Not only was she physically exhausted, behind on work and emotionally drained, her date for the night was a long-shot on the husband front. On the other hand, St. John Barlow was probably the right sort of guy with whom to step back into the whole boy/girl thing. He was nice and easy to be around and he consistently made her laugh. Ok, so the Proper British Gentleman persona was a bit forced, but it was also kind of cute. She preferred people who tried a little too hard over people who did not try hard enough.

It also helped that she had known him for a relatively long time. He had been the realtor who sold her and Todd the house five years before. Todd took to calling him, “Saint John, Patron Saint of First Time Homebuyers,” because of the infinite patience and thoughtfulness with which Barlow endured their endless requests to see more houses and repeated last-minute price balking. Since then, they had always paused to talk whenever they saw each other around town. Once, she ran into him at what was billed as a neighborhood get-together but had turned out instead to be an excruciatingly tedious real estate industry mixer given by her neighbor, Mary Roberts. St. John had rescued her that night from a series of mind-numbing conversations about HELOCs and Re-Fi’s by sitting with her on the stairs and goofing on the parade of toupees and jackass slacks going in and out of the event. She had also been genuinely touched two years earlier when she spotted him standing alone in the crowd at Todd’s funeral.

Of course, it had not occurred to her to call anyone other than St. John Barlow when she became curious about the new Concord Ranch development going up just on the other side of the woods a few hundred yards away. She had only stayed in her current home because it was

familiar to Jackson and represented a direct line of continuity back to his father. But deep down, she had already resigned herself to the awful inevitability of the total erasure of Todd from Jackson's memory. The house made her sad. The smaller, newer homes and maintained common areas of the development just made too much sense not to at least check it out.

She and St. John had gone through the model homes together a week earlier. Somewhere along the way he mentioned that they had had a problem with high school kids getting into the model homes at night and using the bedrooms for "romantic encounters." "Romantic encounters," that was how he had said it in his very proper English accent. She found his formality and hesitation at saying it rather endearing. For her part, she had laughed and said, "Oh man, why do the kids get to have all the fun?" To his credit, and her slight disappointment, he had not tried to parlay the comment into a sexual advance. Only later, when he asked her how she was getting along without Todd and the conversation touched briefly on the loneliness of being a single mother, did the idea of "getting together for a drink one evening next week" come up.

Come to think of it, it had been she who had actually suggested it. Alright, so the imperative of finding a "back-up" for Jackson had not been purpose number one when she hinted at the idea of a date. She also needed to start moving some of those "long-term sanity savers" up the priority ladder a bit too, including breaks from Jackson, non-legal interaction with other adults and, on a vastly more pragmatic level, getting laid.

It had been two years. Not because she was honoring the memory of her dead husband or was too emotionally fragile to see another man. It was none of that. She missed Todd, sure, even sometimes in stabbing bursts that took her out at the knees. But she did not go for any of that knee-jerk mourning period stuff. She simply had not had the interest, time nor energy to put

into dealing with men. It just sort of slid to the bottom of the old inbox as she and Jackson clawed their way through life. Sex? Yeah, sure, would love to. If only she could, you know, swing by and pick some up on her way home from work. Like a pizza. Or a manicure. Unless she could trim off the ancillary before/after interaction, sex just didn't fit into her schedule very well at this point. What she really needed was something more like a "service agreement" with some brain-dead 25 year-old thrilled with the idea of sleeping with a 40 year-old widow. Someone who would do his job and then go away. Immediately.

She took a deep breath, went to the walk-in closet and made a quick clothing decision. She pulled a blouse over her head, shook out her short hair and smoothed her skirt. She looked in the mirror. She'd always been pretty. Piercing green eyes set wide in a manner that made her look world-weary in a sexy kind of way, hair naturally sandy blonde, square shouldered, with long, athletic legs. She turned sideways and glanced at her full-breasted profile. God knows those had not hurt her any over the years. She went to the drawer, pulled out a pair of new panties and swapped them out under her skirt. She straightened up and then froze at the reality of what she had just done. "Oh, man," she said aloud. "Here we go again."

She checked her watch. It was almost a quarter to 7:00; she had to be there in 20 minutes! She heard indistinct voices murmuring in the other room and knew her babysitter was already there. Samantha's 17 year-old neighbor, Skyy Allen, looked after Jackson after school three to four days a week. But when Samantha hustled out to the kitchen she was found Aiden Babble there instead. It was not a complete surprise. Samantha, like most of the neighborhood, had long ago become accustomed to Aiden miraculously appearing inside her home as if molecularly transported there.

“What’s up, Aiden?” she said, watching the kid leaning over the counter repeatedly force-ejecting a Pop Tart out of the toaster and trying to catch it in midair.

“Son of a...,” he said, deep in concentration. “I think I’m just gonna stick a fork in there and get it.”

“No, no,” Samantha said urgently. “Don’t do that.”

Aiden glanced up at her. “I’m shitting you. I’m not a complete moron.” He flicked the lever again and this time caught the Pop Tart, but instantly mangled it in the process. “Ouch!” he yelped, throwing it down on the counter and shaking his hand wildly. “Fucking thing is like napalm inside.” Aiden held his burnt hand with the other and leaned forward with them both down between his knees. He looked up and scanned Samantha up and down once. “You look date-like,” he said, grimacing in pain.

“How so?”

“Cleavage.”

She looked down at her blouse.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“None of your business.”

“Yes it is. I’m babysitting your son.”

“Skyy is.”

“Nope. I’m subbing for her.”

“What happened to Skyy?”

“Her adolescent angst is flaring up. Asked me to cover for her.” He stood up straight, still shaking his hand. “I can’t even tell you how much this hurts.”

Samantha leaned over, flicked on the faucet and pushed the handle to the cold water side and then stepped away. Aiden walked to the sink and put his hand under the running water. “I could ask Austin to look after Jackson if you have something else to do,” she offered.

Aiden rolled his eyes. “Please, don’t encourage it any more than you already have.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Encourage what?”

“His little obsession with the MILF across the street.”

Samantha knit her brow in confusion until she realized he was referring to her. “Hush,” she said. She was very well aware of Austin’s slight infatuation and was very careful not to send out any inadvertent rays of hope in his direction. But she didn’t put the hammer down on him, either, the way she would have with any other married man. There was really no point; the guy was as loyal and honorable as a basset hound. He wasn’t coming on to her or fly fishing her with sexual innuendos or anything like that. It was more of a desperate hopefulness that seemed to inhabit him whenever he was around her.

Samantha turned and walked into the living room. “I think ‘crush’ is probably more like it,” she said, looking around the room. “Where’s Jackson?” she asked.

Aiden motioned with his chin toward the window. “Still out back.”

“What’s he doing?”

“What do you think?”

She didn’t even have to look.

“It’s a veritable Hooverville out there,” he said.

She nodded at the heap of disfigured Pop Tart on the counter. “Dinner?”

“Yeah. Main course, anyhow.”

“What’s the side dish, dare I ask?”

“Cheez-its.”

“Super,” she said flatly.

“I’ll throw in a pear for Jackson if it makes you feel better.”

Samantha went to the window and looked out at Jackson lining up a collection of old vacuum cleaners, nozzles and dust bags. She watched him absorbed in his strange obsession. Her heart felt heavy all over again. “Do you think he’s weird, Aiden?” she asked, not taking her eyes off the boy. For some reason she had always been able say things to Aiden Babble she would never say to anyone else.

Aiden looked up from where he was reassembling his Pop Tart and studied the scene for a few seconds. “Definitely.”

She gave a big sigh. “Well, thanks for not bullshitting me.”

Aiden held up the plate with the damaged Pop Tart on it. “He’ll eat this, right?”

“Not a chance,” she answered.

“I bet he will. Watch.”

Jackson slid the glass door open and came into the kitchen. “Hey, Aiden, you want to come out to my Hoover store?” he chirped enthusiastically. “I have a wonderful new selection.”

Aiden looked down at the boy. “Sure, Jackson. I need a new Hoover, the last one you sold me sucks.”

Jackson stared at him with a look of concern.

“Get it?” Aiden said. “Sucks? Vacuum cleaner?”

Samantha laughed for the first time that day. It was just too stupid not to.

“Look, even your mom gets it,” Aiden said to Jackson, “and she’s pretty slow.”

“I got it,” Jackson said, “it’s just lame.” Jackson went over to the kitchen counter and studied the mangled Pop Tart.

“You’ll eat that, right?” Aiden asked.

“I’ll eat the one that’s still in the toaster,” the boy answered.

Aiden smiled at Samantha. “Smart boy.”

“Kill it?” Jackson asked hopefully.

Aiden nodded solemnly. “To the In-Sink-Erator with him.”

Jackson broke into a grin, loving all things mechanical and noisy. He scooped up the freakishly reconstructed pastry and fired it into the sink, straight down through the rubber gasket into the bowels of the garbage disposal.

Aiden flipped on the water and nodded to the boy. “Do it.”

Jackson lunged across the counter and flicked the wall switch. The garbage disposal roared and clattered to life as if someone had thrown broken glass and metal down its throat rather than just some over-processed bakery product. “Die Frankenstein Pop Tart!” Jackson howled, hands fluttering wildly in front of his face in sensory overload.

“God that thing is loud,” Samantha yelled over the racket. “Why does it sound like that?”

“We’ve been throwing all kinds of weird crap in there,” Aiden yelled back.

“It’s the In-Sink-Erator of Death!” cried Jackson gleefully.

“Turn it off,” Samantha ordered, wincing.

Aiden leaned over and flicked the wall switch and the disposal rattled to a halt. “God, I love that thing,” he said, smiling.

Samantha shook her head. “You know, Aiden, I can’t decide who is worse, you or him.”

Aiden gave a slight head motion in the direction of the grinning, fluttering Jackson.

“He’s much worse.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “That’s not what I meant.” She glanced at her watch, suddenly realizing she was supposed to be meeting her “date” at that very moment. “Oh no,” she sighed. She grabbed her wallet off the counter and shoved it into her purse and then began digging around for her iPhone. “I better text him.”

“Who are you going out with?” Aiden asked.

“None of your business,” she said, pulling out her iPhone and scrolling through her contacts. Aiden leaned in to look but she turned a shoulder to shield him. “Go away,” she ordered. She punched in a message and fired it off. “Sorry, running late. Be there in 10.” She looked at the screen until it successfully transmitted into the ethersphere of cellular communication. Almost instantly a text pinged back: 7:02 PM. St. John -“No Worries.”

She palmed her iPhone, suddenly feeling less late. “Gotta go, you two.” She knelt down and hugged Jackson and began to leave. She paused at the door and went fishing around in her purse again. “Key, keys, keys.”

“What time are you getting back?” Aiden asked her, walking with Jackson to the door.

“Not sure.” She looked up at Aiden and raised her eyebrows suggestively. “Maybe late.”

“Ahhh,” Aiden grinned knowingly. “Well, I hope you shaved your beaver.”

Samantha froze, her arm still buried in her purse. “Wait. What?” she said in a stunned voice. “What did you just say?”

“Just sayin.’ If you’re going on a date you should --.”

Samantha cut him off. “Oh, no. No. Don’t even.” She glanced down at Jackson and then threw Aiden a stern, *What-The-Fuck?* glare.

He gave her an innocent shrug. “Hey, that’s the style now. You don’t want to be the only one out there with some big, hairy eighties thing going on.”

“Enough!” she said sharply. She caught herself from laughing. Why could she never get mad at this kid? She didn’t know anyone who could consistently pull off his level of outrageousness and get away with it every single time.

“I didn’t know you had a beaver,” Jackson said, genuinely excited at the possibility.

“That’s my point, Jackson,” Aiden said, putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Hopefully she doesn’t.” Samantha stood looking at him with her mouth hanging open, dumbfounded. “Oh, he doesn’t know,” Aiden said, mussing Jackson’s hair dismissively.

“You know, Aiden,” she said, barely holding back a laugh. “That’s just way over the line, even for you.”

“I’m just sayin’, that’s all.”

“OK,” she said, holding her palms out toward him to stop. “I’m going to leave now. I’m begging you, Aiden, don’t say another word. Just call me if anything goes wrong.” She backed out of the door cautiously, hands still up.

“I’d love to have a beaver,” Jackson said as the door swung closed behind her.

“Totally,” she heard Aiden answer from behind the door. “Beavers are very cool.”

She walked out to her car and then paused. She went back to the house, opened the front door and leaned in. Aiden was in the kitchen launching the remaining Pop Tart out of the toaster while Jackson sat on the counter trying to catch it in midair. “Aiden,” she called out to him from the doorway. He looked over his shoulder at her. “Thanks for looking after Jackson.”

He nodded and turned back to the toaster. “Check this out,” he called to her. He flicked the toaster switch with his finger and the Pop Tart leapt into the air. Jackson caught it at the apex of its flight and then held it up triumphantly. “Got it!”