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MILLER'S CHAPEL

By

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Prologue

New Jersey, 1980

“Get in.”

She got in the car. She was nervous, but she didn't think he would hurt her. They drove through the deserted town, pulled onto a dark road, and sped off at forty mph.

She asked, “Where we going?”

“What do you care, you little nigger whore?”

She turned her head away from him so that he wouldn't recognize her fear. Through the window, nothing but a dim moon illuminated the trees rushing by.

The man asked, “So, how's your new boyfriend?”

“Who? What boyfriend?”

“Don't give me that crap. You know who.”

He reached over and grabbed her knee. The speedometer climbed to sixty as he squeezed her leg and watched the road. She gently tried to push his hand off her leg, but he held it firmly and squeezed harder. He asked, “You been whoring around in the family?”

The girl understood now. He was talking about his father. She didn't know how he knew about that. For six months, she had tried not to think about what happened, but the awful events of that night now seared her memory like a branding iron.

“I didn't do it. I didn't want to do it. It was him. He made me.”

Molly struggled against his hand, now drifting up toward her private parts. She held her legs closed and pushed on his hand to prevent it from getting any farther up. The speedometer soared to seventy.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to stop screwing everybody in the family, and you will, God damn you.”

Molly was terrified now. “Slow down. I’ll do whatever you want. Slow down, please.”

“Not yet.” He accepted Molly’s restraint of his hand and withdrew it, but slapped her hard on her stomach. “Getting a little heavy in the gut, there, ain’t you, Molly?”

She winced at the shock and folded her arms across her abdomen, which protruded beyond her normally sleek figure. Molly was pregnant.

The man shouted, “I never touched you, and then I find out you’re making mongrel babies with my old man.”

“He forced me. I swear. I didn’t want to.”

The man moved his hand off of her body, never taking his eyes off the road. He reached across her and opened the passenger door. It was hard to do against the wind, but he was strong and young. Still, the wind against the door made it difficult to push against. With his left hand on the steering wheel and his right arm outstretched toward the open door, restraining Molly in her seat, he gave up, steadied the car with both hands on the wheel, and stomped on the brake. The door flew open, almost coming off its hinges, and then slammed shut. Molly plunged into the dashboard. A reach to his right, a click of the handle, and the man turned his body toward her. He kicked her into the door with his right foot. The door flew open again at sixty mph.

Molly clutched at the door handle as it swung farther out. He delivered another kick, and another at fifty. The car was at forty now, not much resistance on the door, and easier to keep open. Molly was half in, half out of the car.

The man pushed on her legs and twisted the steering wheel with his left hand to keep from crashing. Molly fell out, but she clutched the slippery door handle with her left hand. Her right hand frantically grasped the top of the doorframe as her legs dangled onto the road, scraping the asphalt painfully. She reached for the top of the door with both hands, desperately trying to get back into the car.

A last look at the road, and a last kick with his foot put Molly onto the road at thirty mph. Her leg and hip slipped under the wheels of the car, which veered to the left from the bump. Molly's head and face were shattered with uncountable mortal wounds and her body and baby were flattened under the tires.

The man turned the wheel against colliding with the trees to the left and right, the car eventually ending up facing in Molly's direction after two spins. The engine had stopped from the violent turn, but he quickly restarted it and crept the car back to where Molly should be. He got out and looked around for the body. She wasn't hard to find. He examined Molly's mangled remains, dragged her deeper into the woods, and laid some branches and leaves over her casually, careful to make sure he could find her the next day, but nobody else could.

"Shouldn't mix races, Molly. It ain't right. Mongrel coloreds. Not any more." The man walked back to his car and drove off.

Chapter One
New Jersey, 1990

Four teenage boys drove down a deserted road in the middle of the night. Ben Bradshaw sat in the passenger's seat and studied a map with a flashlight. "Slow down. It's going to be to the left up here."

A boy in the back asked, "Where we going, anyway?"

Ben said, "Miller's Chapel."

The boy groaned, "Ah, come on, not again. That place doesn't even exist."

"Yes, it does. Joe Mullen, from Algebra, he's been there. He said it's on this road."

Ben looked at the road and then at the map. He wondered if they were where they should be, since the map showed a straight road, but they obviously approached a bend to the right a hundred yards away. "Damn, I don't think we're on the right road."

From the back of the car came the sound of beer cans opening. One of the boys handed a beer up to the driver and opened another one. The driver steered the car in the general direction of the road, held his head back, guzzled the whole can with one swallow, and let out a loud belch with his eyes closed. He still had his eyes off the road, indifferent to the approaching bend as the car drove itself at sixty mph.

Ben yelled, "Oh, my God!"

Ben grabbed the wheel and tried to pull it to the right, but the driver held it fast with his leg to keep it straight. “Hey, Ben, stop that. You’re... holy shit...”

The driver slammed on the brakes. His empty beer can tumbled to the floor and drifted under the brake pedal. He pushed hard, but it wouldn’t go down. The bend arrived fast. All the boys, front and back, gawked at the road and at the right turn ahead, only fifty yards away.

The driver stood up in his seat and pushed down with his full body weight. Finally, the can crunched under the pedal. The car slowed and crawled to a halt.

The driver picked up the can and threw it out the window. “Holy shit.”

Ben said, “Let me check again for that bend.” He shined his flashlight on the map.

A teenager in the back said, “Jesus Christ, Ben, you almost got us killed.”

“Me? I didn’t do that. Stop drinking.”

The driver said, “We’re getting out of here.”

“No, I see where we are now. See? We’re on the right road, I think.”

From the back came, “Aw, come on, Ben, let’s just go.”

“No. We came this far. I’m pretty sure this is the road. Wait a minute. Joe Mullen said it’s just past a bend. I remember he said that. I think this is the road now.”

The driver reluctantly pulled ahead and rounded the bend at thirty mph. Ben leaned across the console and peered out the driver’s window into the darkness. Ben said, “Slow down a little. It’s going to be to the left up there.”

The driver pushed him back. “Get off me, Ben. Jeez, what are you doing?” He turned around to the boys in the back. “He’s getting fresh.” They laughed. “Give me another beer.”

A boy in the back sent another unopened beer up to the front. The driver aimed the car with his knees holding the steering wheel and steadied it with his legs. Good enough. The road was straight here. He adjusted his aim a little to make the car curve smoothly to the right into the

middle of the road, then back left to straighten it. With both hands off the wheel, he popped the beer-can top, took his eyes off the road, looked up, and put the beer to his mouth.

Ben shouted, "There it is!" His mouth was right at the driver's ear.

The driver pushed the brake pedal as hard as he could, both feet. He dropped the can into his lap and tried to recover it, but the momentum of the full beer carried it forward, where it smacked into the dashboard and dropped to the floor, beer all over the place. The boys in the back plowed into their seats ahead, their open beers spraying the cloth and ceiling of the car. The car stopped.

The driver screamed, "Dammit, Ben, what the hell are you doing? Now my dad's car stinks of beer. I'm in deep shit."

"I saw it, back there. Back up."

The driver laid his head on the steering wheel. "Ah, Jesus Christ, this is ridiculous. I'm turning around. We're going over the bridge like we planned."

The boy behind the driver wore a pair of tan shorts, which were now soaked with beer. "We can't go over there now. It looks like I peed myself. Fuck you, Ben. Let's go home."

Ben said, "No, it's just back there. I saw it."

The driver shook his head. "This is the last time I'm doing this, Ben. You don't like it, get your own car. And if this place doesn't exist, I'm going to beat the shit out of you." The car backed up slowly.

Ben squinted through the driver's window. The boys in the back watched out the left side for a dirt road. One of them spotted it. "There's a road there."

Ben said, "Yes, that's what I saw. That's it."

The driver stopped and drove forward, turning left onto the dirt road. They came to an overturned tree blocking their way. Ben said, "Joe said you can't drive that far. You have to walk. This has to be it."

“Ah, come on, Ben, it’s getting late.”

“No, let’s get out. It’s just a little farther.”

The boys got out of the car, stepped over the tree, and walked down the dirt road. It was pitch black, except for a rising full moon that barely cleared the trees. Ben shined his flashlight on the ground ahead and waited while the boys relieved themselves in the woods. Ben led, watching for obstacles, and then turned around so that his friends would have some light as they caught up. They came to a clearing in the woods, an unusual place for the trees to be so sparse.

A boy yelled, “Oww. Oww. Something bit me.”

Ben cautioned, “Everybody stay still.” He walked back to the boy, carefully feeling his way among the branches. The boy with the tan shorts sat on a log.

“Something bit me on the leg.”

Ben stooped down with the flashlight. There was a one-inch scratch on the boy’s leg, but no blood. The boy looked down at Ben angrily, but with a plea for help. “What is it?”

Ben said, “It’s not so bad.”

Ben shifted the flashlight left and right, peering closely at the ground. The others watched as the various logs, stumps, rocks, and dead branches were illuminated by the faint and fast traveling light. There was nothing dangerous so far.

The driver yelled, “What if it was a snake?”

That did it.

“Oh, my God, let’s get out of here.”

The boys all panicked, except Ben. “It wasn’t a snake. Calm down.”

The wounded boy said, “Well, what the hell was it? Look at this.” Ben shined the flashlight on the boy’s leg again. It was indeed getting more and more red, but it was a long scratch, not a snake bite.

Ben searched the ground for a stick, or a rock, or anything that would indicate what caused the scratch and disprove the snake theory. "It was probably just a sharp stick. I'll see what it was. Stay here." Ben went just five feet behind the boy and pointed his light at the floor of the clearing. A young plant rose a foot out of the ground where the clearing ended. "This is it. See, look. It's got thorns on it. You probably brushed against this plant."

"I don't care what it was. I want to get out of here."

Ben knelt on the ground to remove the plant and bring it over, but the spikes were too numerous. Curiously, his right hand sank into the dirt when it supported his weight, but when he shifted to his left hand, it didn't go down. The ground there was as hard as stone. He wiped away some dirt and grass with his left hand.

There it was, a row of broken bricks. Beaming his flashlight across the clearing, another row of bricks rose an inch out of the ground, eight feet away, and aligned in the same direction. The ground between the bricks was perfectly flat.

Ben walked to the middle of the clearing, stooped down, and rubbed some more dirt off the eight-by-eight area. A flat stone appeared. Another stone lay next to it. "Oh, my God."

The driver yelled, "What is it, the snake?"

Ben said, "No, this is the chapel. This is the chapel, where they used to give the eulogies."

"What? What the hell is a eulogy?"

"A sermon, you know, to talk about the dead people when they died."

The driver glanced over to his friends. One of them whispered, "He's nuts."

Ben heard that. "No, I'm not. This is Miller's Chapel. This is the chapel, see? Right here. Wow, this is the Chapel, where it used to be. This is the chapel, Miller's Chapel."

The full moon peeked over the dense trees to the east, illuminating the clearing. Ben turned off the flashlight. A dozen headstones appeared as the boys' eyes became accustomed to the brightening moonlight. Ben said, "This is it, Miller's Chapel, the lost graveyard."

The driver said, "Can't be too lost, here's a beer can." He kicked it to the side.

Ben said, "I can't believe we found it."

The boys peered into the woods. More and more headstones became visible in the diminishing darkness.

The moon spread shadows across the ground like ghostly fingers. Mysterious shapes were all dark against the rising light. In front of the boys, and curving around the chapel, stood solemn headstones. They all slanted one way or the other.

The boys gawked at them. "This is weird."

A boy said, "Let's go."

"Yeah, Ben, this is spooky."

Ben went into the graveyard and shined his flashlight on a leaning grave. He had to get on his knees and angle it up against the tilt. "Look here. This guy died in 1850. I can't read his name. Can you make it out?" Ben rubbed some dirt off the headstone and asked, "Do you know what life was like in 1850? Only like," he paused to calculate, "forty-one years old."

"Come on, Ben. That's enough."

"Only forty-one years old. How did he die? Was he sick? Don't you see?"

"Yeah, so he died. So what? Come on. We've got to get out of here."

Ben, on his knees, focused the flashlight to the left. Another headstone was far down in the ground and leaning west at thirty degrees. Ben walked over to it, then went behind the headstone and gripped it tight with his thin-skinned teenage hands. If he could just pull it up straight, he might be able to read the name on the stone without crouching down. And another

thing, maybe if the last marker of that man's life were pointing skyward instead of slanting west, maybe Ben could restore a little dignity to the man who rested there.

Ben pulled, with no effect. He pulled again, hard. It hurt. He looked at the scrapes and bruises on his hands. "Help me. Help me straighten this."

The boys got it now. Ben was nuts. One of them whispered, "We've got to get him home."

The other boy agreed. "This place is giving me the creeps." An invisible rabbit scurried through the brush in the eerie quiet. "Whoa, what was that?"

"Holy shit, the snake!"

The two boys from the back seat ran down the dirt road, crashing into trees and each other, falling down, trying desperately to get away from the imaginary snake. The driver watched Ben foolishly walk into the woods. "Ben, we're leaving." He looked back at his two cowardly friends behind him, running to the car. "Ben, let's go, right now."

Ben wandered farther away from his friends toward a certain headstone that stood straight up. "I'll be right there. Give me a minute." This particular grave was newer than the others, not slanting.

The driver was alone at the edge of the chapel. The headlights of the car bit into the woods from fifty yards away, but they pointed far to the left, no help against the evil creatures who no doubt watched them now from their secret hiding places in the trees. He shouted, "Come on, Ben, right now."

Ben was able to read the name and dates on this headstone without crouching down. He shined his flashlight on it and said, "Wait, it's a lady."

The driver said, "God damn it, Ben, come on."

The inscription read, 'Molly Childress, 1960-1980.' Ben said to himself, "Wow. Twenty years old."

The driver headed for the car. “See you, Ben, we’re leaving.”

Addressing the headstone, Ben asked, “Why did you die, Molly? I’m sorry, very sorry. And why are you here?” He looked around at the graves, all so much different in posture than hers.

Focusing again on her grave, Ben turned to go, but just as the light moved, his eyes caught an unusual marking. He stooped down and steadied the flashlight. The initials ‘MC’ were scratched into the lower-left corner of Molly’s headstone.

“Hey, guys, come here. Look at this. Somebody carved her initials in here. See, ‘MC’, Molly Childress, see? That’s her name.” He said to himself, “Or Miller’s Chapel.”

The driver ignored him, and the other boys were already at the car. Ben heard the engine of the car start and shouted, “Hey, guys, wait. Wait for me.”

A last look at Molly’s grave, and the initials, and the black woods, and the moon, and the crooked headstones, all of these things stirred a feeling of senselessness in Ben’s heart. “Sorry, Molly, very sorry. I’ve got to go. Maybe I’ll see you again, Molly. Sorry, Molly.”

Ben ran through the cemetery and caught up with his friends. They all got into the car and drove off.

Chapter Two
Chicago, 2010, Twenty Years Later
Thursday Evening

Ben Bradshaw stooped down next to a headstone. He held a piece of wax paper over the stone and rubbed it with a soft object. The image of the gravestone appeared on the paper, capturing the bumps, crevices, patterns, and features of the letters and character of the stone.

Ben wanted to do a good job on this one. It would make a great addition to his 'Famous Chicago People' collection. The letters appeared on his side of the paper as he rubbed, 'OSCAR F. MAYER.'

Just as Ben finished up with the dates, a security guard came up behind him. "What're you doing?"

Ben turned around. "Nothing, just taking, like, you know, a picture of this."

"That don't look like no camera. You're defacing private property."

The guard took out his radio and called, "Yeah, I got that wacko here."

Ben gathered up his stuff quickly and sprinted toward the cemetery gates.

"Hey, you, get back here." He shouted into the radio, "He's getting away."

Ben slipped and plowed headfirst into a headstone. Oscar Mayer fell to the ground. Ben looked back and saw the guard stumble, fall, get up, and limp toward him. Ben panicked. His

feet couldn't quite grip the slick grass, and his documents were all over the wet lawn. The guard was fifty yards away, but still coming, talking into the radio.

Ben gathered up Oscar Mayer with his left hand and clutched the top of the headstone for support. He fell again, face down in the mud, protecting Oscar from the force of the fall. He looked behind him. Wait. The guard seemed confused as he surveyed the cemetery, peering around bushes, looking for Ben. Ben could see the guard, but it seemed that the guard lost track of Ben. Ben held his breath and crouched low against the headstone. He maneuvered his body to allow the many statues and monuments to block him from the guard's view.

The guard turned in another direction. Ben angled his body again so that the guard couldn't see him, but that was only a temporary solution. He had to get to the gates, and fast.

Ben checked that Oscar Mayer was safely tucked under his left arm. He was careful to avoid exposing himself to the enemy guard. He clenched his bag with his left fingers, because he'd need his right hand free to pull himself up. His plan was to wait for the guard to look away, then grab the headstone he was using for cover and run to the gates. It was a good plan. The guard wandered to the left, but continuously searched for signs of the criminal Ben. Another guard came out of the building a hundred yards away. Ben had to go.

Ben gripped the top of the headstone for support with his right hand, ready to pull himself up for the sprint. He had Oscar Mayer cradled under his left arm and his bag in his left hand.

Ben angled his head toward the headstone for one last look, to make sure his right hand had a good grip, good enough to pull himself up and launch him toward the gates, but not firm enough that his skin and blood would end up on that headstone from some stupid piece of sharp, jutting rock at the top, just waiting to slice his finger open if he grabbed it the wrong way. He also needed to figure out how to get around the headstone, which interfered with his path to the gates.

Ben sneaked his right hand up and rubbed the top of the stone from his position on the ground. All right, no sharp edges. He got a good grip, but he thought he heard the guards coming closer and lay still. Ben couldn't tell where the guards were anymore because his face was flat on the ground.

Ben peeked around and behind the headstone to lay out his path to the gate. It was now or never. He'd have to run like a rabbit to get out of Rosehill Cemetery.

Then it happened.

The headstone that protected him bore the initials, 'MC' on the bottom left.

Miller's Chapel crashed into Ben's brain like a tornado in the night. His mind didn't even have to search for the image. The initials were just there, staring at him again, now, twenty years later, exactly the same, those same initials in the same place, same size, 'MC,' and the memory, still clear after all these years, of the grave of the girl who died at Miller's Chapel thirty years ago.

Ben sank down. "Oh, my God, oh, my God." The name on the headstone was Antisha Dunne, 1985-2009. Ben stared at the name, a girl's name, and then at the initials, but the security guards saw him this time. Ben got up and sprinted, dodging headstones.

He craned his neck backward to see if the guards were coming toward him, but not looking where he was going, and concentrating on protecting his prize, he tripped over a three-inch-high plastic fence and slammed into the arm of a statue. Ben held his shoulder as he bolted through the gates and into the street.

Chapter Three

Same Day, Thursday

Ben trudged up the stairs of a low-rent apartment building. Graffiti covered the walls. Shouts of “You whore,” and “Hey, Momma,” drifted through the hallway. He carried his gym bag, a tube of paper, and Oscar Mayer.

He got to the top step, but he was expecting another one. He couldn’t see because the tube of wax paper was across his eyes. Ben fell face-down onto the landing, his papers spewing onto the floor. His shoulder hurt from the statue he had just broken.

A neighbor at the end of the hall opened the door an inch. Ben heard it and looked up. The neighbor closed the door.

Ben said, “Sorry.”

He gathered his documents, pushed his extra paper into the gym bag, and unlocked his apartment door. Before he could go in, though, he dropped Oscar Mayer on the floor behind him. He bent down to pick him up, but the document unraveled and Ben kicked it as he stooped. Oscar Mayer slid three feet across the hall to a janitor’s closet, the corner sliding under the door. Ben pulled on the closet door, but it stuck. He pulled hard. It opened this time. He carefully extracted Mr. Mayer so that the corner of the document wouldn’t tear.

The door at the end of the hall opened again. A girl approached him and then stopped.

“Stupid white boy. Should have known.”

Ben looked up and saw Angela Monroe, a strikingly beautiful dark-skinned girl.

Angela asked, “What’s a white boy doing here?”

“I live here.”

“What? You live here? In this building? Are you nuts?”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have any money. I’m getting a divorce.”

“They all say that.”

“No, really. I can show you the summons.”

“You hitting on me?”

“No, no. I swear. I’m not. I wouldn’t do that.”

Angela walked past him. “Pull yourself together before I have to call the police, Ok?”

She strode down the hallway and down the steps. At the first floor, before she went out, she looked at the mailboxes, “Ben Bradshaw.”

Ben went into his apartment, sat at a table, and folded the extra rolls of blank wax paper neatly into the bag. He took the wax object out of his pocket and stuffed it into the bag, careful to avoid crinkling the papers. Then he laid out the scrolled gravestone duplicate of Oscar Mayer on the table and curled it backward to straighten it out.

Ben said to himself, “MC? What the hell? In Chicago?” He looked at Oscar Mayer for a moment, his triumph for the evening, but his mind drifted to the initials, ‘MC,’ on Antisha Dunne’s grave. He rolled Mr. Mayer fondly into a loose coil, carried him over to a cabinet, and laid him gently to rest on a top shelf, right next to Richard Warren Sears and Alvah Roebuck.

Ben picked up a pad and pencil and wrote, 'Miller's Chapel.' He looked up, then back to his pad. 'Mandi Christian. Mary Chandler. Morey Chaefer.' "No, that's an 'S.' What the hell am I doing?" He searched for some combination that would make him remember the name.

"Mighty Cute." He smiled to himself. "No, that's her."

Ben wrote, Antisha Dunne ?-2009. He couldn't recall the exact birth year, but he knew it wasn't that long ago, and he wasn't worried. He could get that. He just didn't want to suddenly lose Antisha Dunne's name, too.

But there was a problem. Antisha Dunne was 'AD,' and had nothing to do with Miller's Chapel. She was buried at Rosehill Cemetery on Peterson Avenue. Ben smashed those issues into his brain for later processing and went back to the question at hand, "Who was the girl at Miller's Chapel in New Jersey?"

Ben wrote, 'Minnie, Mercy, Mary, Maggie, Mandi, Money, Monkey, Maybe.' As he wrote each name, he crossed it out, drumming his left-hand fingers on the table. His right leg shook against the kitchen counter.

Ben rewound his memory twenty years. He remembered the dirt road and fast-forwarded to the overturned tree, the moon, the graves, and the boys yelling at him, and they almost left him there alone in the dark woods, and how the hell would he ever get home if they did that? Stop. Slow forward to the grave.

Ben recalled the image, 'MC,' comparing it in his memory to the one that he had just seen an hour ago. He could fit them like a glove over each other. The initials were exactly the same.

Ben tried again, desperately running forward and backward through his memory for the name of the girl at Miller's Chapel. No luck on the name. He was just too confused now.

Chapter Four

Same Day, Thursday, a Few Minutes Later

Ben heard loud knocks outside his apartment at the end of the hallway. An angry voice shouted, “Angela, Angela.” Ben stopped working and listened.

“Angela, open up.”

Ben opened his door slowly. He peeked out and saw a large black man furiously banging on his up-the-hall neighbor’s door, the beautiful dark-skinned girl who went past him a few minutes ago.

Ben went out into the hallway, closed the door quietly and locked it. “She’s not home. You can’t make any noise here. You should go. I don’t want to have to call the police.”

Jake rushed over to Ben and shoved his fist in Ben’s face. “Who are you? Where is she?”

Ben jumped back against the assault, a fist inches from his nose. Jake grabbed Ben’s shirt and glared menacingly at him.

Ben said, “I don’t know. I don’t even know her.”

Jake released Ben’s shirt with an angry huff. “Don’t piss me off, boy. If you know she’s not home, then you know where she is, or you’re screwing her.”

“No, I’m not. I told you, I don’t know her. I just talked to her for a second. I don’t know her.”

“She say anything about me?”

“Who are you?”

“Jake.”

“Yeah, I think she said you were her boyfriend.”

Ben wasn't sure if this huge black man would believe that lie or not, and for several seconds, Ben wondered if he shouldn't just bolt into his apartment, slam the door shut, and lock it tight, but too many seconds passed with Jake staring at him, not beating him up, and besides, Ben had locked his door, foolish, now that he thought about it. He waited anxiously for Jake's next move.

Jake said, “You see her tonight, you tell her I'll be back. I need her to do something.” He walked away, back to the stairs. Ben stood in the hallway for a minute and watched Jake go, but Jake turned back. Ben froze in fear.

“And just in case you're thinking of screwing her...” Jake lumbered back to Ben's location.

Ben wanted to get away, but his door was locked, and he didn't have time to unlock it. He needed protection until he could get his key into the door. The janitor's closet across the hall was always open. Ben reached for the handle and turned it. Maybe an open door would protect him, but with Jake approaching quickly, and Ben, looking down the hall at imminent pain arriving faster and faster, unfocused on his task of opening the closet door, Ben failed to remember that the door sometimes stuck. He pulled hard. The door sprang opened and smacked him hard in the face.

Jake stopped. “Let that be a lesson to you, boy, in advance.”

Ben fell to the floor. Blood streamed out of his mouth and nose. Jake went down the steps.

Ben sat, hunched over, with his nose in his hand. He tried to get up but got dizzy and dropped back against the wall.

Jake paused outside the building and breathed deeply. “Hey, Jude... two... three... Don’t make it bad... two... three...”

Jake stomped heavily back up the stairs, stopping at the top step. Ben looked up like a trapped rabbit as Jake looked at him from ten feet away. Ben glanced at his apartment door across the hallway. If Jake took one more step, Ben would run for it. He calculated his chances of unlocking his door, pushing it open, falling inside, slamming the door shut, and locking it from the inside before Jake could get to him. He needed more time. He secretly extracted his keys from his pocket and inched closer to his apartment door.

Ben was surprised at Jake’s remark, “Sorry, boy, but you pissed me off. Was you going to hide in that closet?”

It didn’t look as though Ben were going to get beat up just yet. “No. I was just looking for a... a mop... I’ve got... uh... water... You know.”

“Yeah, I know. Tell Angela I’m looking for her. Sorry, boy. Take care of that nose.”

Jake left the building. He didn’t see Angela coming.

Angela climbed the steps with grocery bags in her arms. Ben lay in the hallway outside his door, holding his nose.

“Oh, my God.” She dropped two bags on the floor and ran over to Ben. Blood poured out of his nose. Angela crouched down. “What happened to you?”

Ben looked into the eyes of the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen, for the second time tonight, same girl. For only a second, he considered using the sympathy ploy, but then he remembered that Angela had a problem. His name was Jake, the brute who had just left.

Ben handed Angela his keys. His hands trembled. “Can you open it?”

Angela turned the lock. They went in.

Ben's apartment was one large room with a bed and an open kitchen behind an eating counter. There was only a small chest of drawers next to the bed. The counter and the table were cluttered with wax-paper images of headstones, held down by books, tape, cans, and laundry-detergent bottles. Coils of loose paper lay on the floor. The place was a complete mess.

Ben fell into the bed. He held his nose, bleeding all over the sheets. Angela went into the kitchen area and wet some paper towels, then returned to the bed and held them against Ben's nose and mouth.

Ben said, "Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Ben, Ben Bradshaw."

"I know. I'm Angela Monroe. What happened?"

"You know a guy named Jake?"

Angela's eyes shot open. "Oh, no, Jake's back? Oh, no. Oh, God, please, no."

Angela rummaged around for the phone, which was hard to find in the clutter. "We've got to call the police." She found the phone on the floor and dialed.

Ben gently took it out of her hands. "He didn't hit me. It was an accident, my fault. I'll be all right. I should have stood up to him. Damn, I'm such a wimp." He held the towel to his nose and fell back into the bed.

Angela grabbed the phone. Ben released it without resistance. She said, "I have a restraining order on him. And you're not a wimp. He's 250 pounds. I'm calling the police."

"God. Why did you... How could you know a guy like that?"

"None of your damn business."

"You're right. Call the police. You're in danger. Call."

Angela dialed slowly and then hung up. She rested the phone in her lap. "What is all this stuff?"

Ben followed her eyes, her expression frowning at the headstone papers all over the floor, the counter, and the chairs.

“I collect headstones.”

“You what?”

“Well, not exactly.”

Ben’s nose bled again. He wiped it and winced in pain. “I, like, uh, I make an image of them, headstones. Call the police, come on.”

“No. They’ll think you’re a nut, which you obviously are.”

“Then give me the phone.”

“No, not yet.” Angela hid the phone behind her. “I have to find out what Jake wants. Did he say what he wants?”

“No, he didn’t. He said to tell you he needs you to do something. What does that mean?”

“How would I know?”

Ben noticed Angela’s confusion. Apparently she was thinking about this monster of a boyfriend and what he wanted her to do, probably drugs, money, prostitution, or God knows what. Maybe Ben should just ask her to leave and save himself a lot of trouble and money, of which he already had plenty, trouble, not money, he thought.

But she was just so beautiful.

Angela asked, “Why do you collect all this creepy stuff?”

“I don’t know. Neither does my soon-to-be ex-wife. She thinks I’m nuts, too.”

“You are, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. I just sit here some evenings and look at them. I think about who they were, when they died, and why they died, you know.” Ben looked down, embarrassed at how that sounded.

Angela said, “Let me wet another towel.”

She went into the kitchen area, stepping over a gravestone impression held open by some cans of soup. She glanced curiously at the headstone duplicates taped to the counter.

Ben called into the kitchen, "So why aren't we calling the police?"

"You'll have to talk to them, and they'll never believe you. You're too crazy. They'll see all this stupid stuff and probably put you away." Angela came back into the main room with the fresh towel. "Can you afford a lawyer?"

"Damn. That security guard. They'll probably find out about that."

Angela squinted at him. "What?"

Ben said, "No, I can't afford another lawyer. I can't even afford the one I've got. You think they'd put me in jail?"

"Ben, look at this place." Angela waved her hand around the apartment. She turned back to Ben. "What security guard?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said, 'That security guard.' You said, 'They'll probably find out about that.'"

"Well, no, maybe not."

"Tell me, mister."

"All right. You see, I usually do very obscure graveyards. Overgrown, you know. Nobody takes care of them. It's something about the people being forgotten. It bothers me, people with nobody to come by and do flowers, you know." Ben winced at Angela's sour expression. "That's the people I usually do."

"And the security guard? Jesus, Ben, no wonder you're getting a divorce."

"I know. I'm not usually this rambling. I'm a computer programmer."

"And the security guard?"

"Ok, so tonight I wanted to get Oscar Mayer."

Angela scowled at him.

Ben said, “You know, the hot dog guy, Oscar Mayer, you know?”

“Of course I know who Oscar Mayer is.”

I’ve been eating a lot of them lately, hot dogs, too much. You know, I don’t have any money. Too expensive to eat right. That’s why I wanted to get Oscar Mayer. I’ve seen a lot of him lately.” Ben paused for a moment. “I’m getting a divorce. I don’t have any money. That’s all I have to say.”

“Ben, make some sense.”

“All right, let me explain. He’s buried at Rosehill Cemetery on Peterson, Oscar Mayer. I have a lot of famous people, over there.”

Ben pointed to a cabinet across the room. Angela went over and opened it. Shelves were full of images. The fronts of the shelves were marked in tape with ‘Famous,’ ‘Died Old,’ ‘Died Young,’ and ‘Died Long Ago.’

Ben said, “I’m still processing them. Like, ‘Died Old’ could also be ‘Died Long Ago,’ or ‘Famous.’ I’m working on that. I have a code, but I’m not done. My Civil War collection is underneath.”

Angela opened another drawer and saw dozens of other headstone papers. She came back warily and stood between Ben and the apartment door. “So?”

“So, I was doing Oscar Mayer, and this security guard caught me.”

Angela asked, “What do you mean, ‘caught you?’”

“Well, he caught me waxing Oscar Mayer.”

“You were waxing Oscar Mayer?”

Ben sucked in his breath. “Yes. Wait. I hold the paper over the stone. Sometimes I tape it if there’s a wind. I have a kit. Here, look.” Ben went over to his bag and took out a dark object that looked like a hockey puck. “This is the wax. I rub this wax over the paper. It makes an impression of the headstone.” Ben hoped that his explanation was enough.

“Why don’t you just take a picture?”

Ben said, “Oh, no, that’s not the same, nowhere near the same. A picture can lie, but not this.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “So, the security guard?”

“Yes, the security guard. I had to get away, so I jumped over a little fence where I wasn’t exactly supposed to be.”

“And?”

“Well, I sort of knocked an arm off of somebody.”

“You what?”

“Not somebody, but a statue or something, so I had to high-tail it out of there.” Ben rubbed his shoulder and smiled. “But I got Oscar Mayer.”

Angela said, “You’re insane. So now the police are after you for destroying property. Is that it?”

“Yeah, well, more or less, yeah.”

Angela closed her eyes briefly, but longer than a blink. Ben could almost see her eyes rolling under the lids. She said, “I’m afraid Jake will come back.”

“Not tonight, I don’t think. Of course, you can stay here if you’d like. Maybe you should. You can sleep on the floor.” Ben realized how bad that sounded. “Or I could. I’ll sleep on the floor. You can have the bed. I’ll sleep in the kitchen. You know, he might come back.”

“Hitting on me again, aren’t you? You just can’t help yourself, can you, mister?”

“I wasn’t, I swear.”

Angela said, “I have to get home. I have to go to work tomorrow.”

“Where do you work?”

Angela glared at him suspiciously.

Ben said, “Aw, come on. I’m not doing it. Look, I work at the Tribune Tower, downtown.” He wiped a little more blood from his nose for sympathy. “But I’m calling in sick tomorrow, give my nose time to heal by Monday, I hope.”

Angela said, “I work at the library on Foster.”

She opened the door and walked out. Ben followed her. She went down the hallway to her own apartment.

Ben said, “I’m a light sleeper. I’ll hear if anybody comes up here.”

Angela went in and closed her door without another word.

Ben spoke through the door. “Hey, can I get your phone number?” No response. He put his ear to the door and tapped. “What if he comes back? I might have to call you to warn you.”

Nothing. Ben walked slowly down the hall to his own place.

Angela’s door opened three inches. Ben heard it and turned back hopefully. A piece of paper dangled between two light-brown fingers. Ben took it, and then the click, clang, and chain screech of Angela’s door locking tight echoed through the silent hallway.

“Good night, Angela,” said Ben, under his breath. He studied the number, all odd digits, easy to memorize. He smiled as he went into his apartment.