

# PAUL CLEAVE

'Uses words as lethal weapons' *NEW YORK TIMES*

To catch  
a killer...

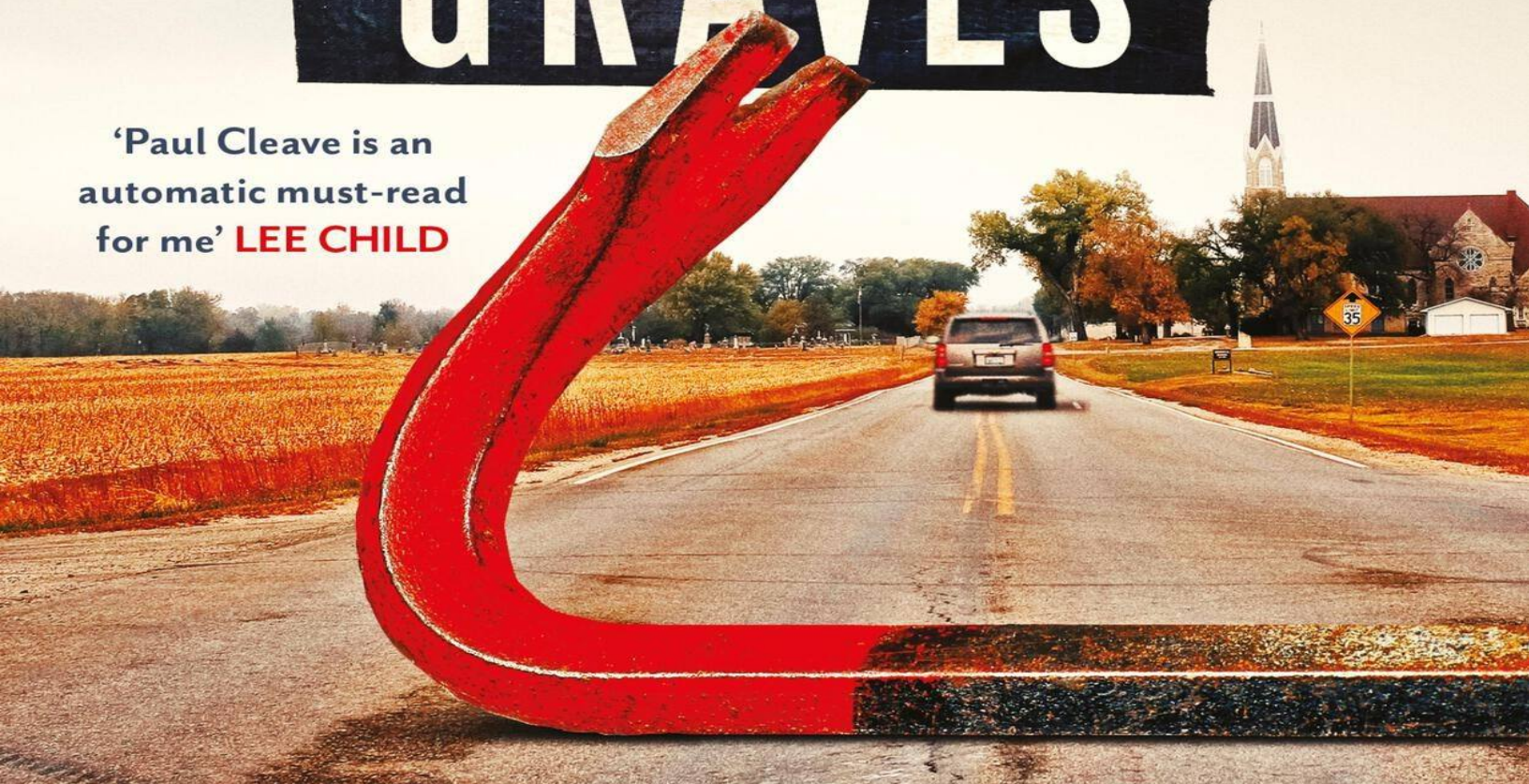
# HIS

Maybe you've  
got to be  
one...

# FAVOURITE

# GRAVES

'Paul Cleave is an  
automatic must-read  
for me' **LEE CHILD**



## PRAISE FOR PAUL CLEAVE

PRAISE FOR PAUL CLEAVE WINNER of the Thriller & Suspense Gold Foreword Indie Award

SHORTLISTED for the Ngaio Marsh Award

BEST INDIE NOVEL: Crime Fiction Lover Awards

‘Expect the unexpected is all I can really say. Prepare to be revulsed, amused, surprised and stunned, but most of all prepare to be entertained. I love the tension, the pace and the occasional madness of *His Favourite Graves*’ Jen Med’s Book Reviews

‘A totally must-read novel. *His Favourite Graves* had me at page one and never let go. It is full of twists and turns and plenty of “what the hell?” moments ... A completely different take on a crime story but very enjoyable. Highly recommended’ Sally Boocock

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‘You may think you know where it’s going, but you couldn’t be more wrong. A true page-turner filled with dread, rage, doubt and more twists than the Remutaka Pass’ Linwood Barclay

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‘Riveting from start to finish. Smart and twisty, this book will get under your skin’ Liz Nugent

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‘Almost three books in one! Multiple murders, dedicated detectives – past and present. Complex, detailed and oh, so clever’ Sam Holland

‘An absolute BELTER of a book ... I’d forgotten how good Paul Cleave is!’ Sarah Pinborough

‘Another blisteringly good read from Paul Cleave ... Gripping from the first page and full of deliciously dark twists and turns. You can’t be a true fan of crime fiction if you’re not reading Cleave’s books’ Tom Wood

‘Cleave conjures a wrenching tale that moves swiftly and hits hard ... the crackle in his sentences and a dark seam of humour prevent things from getting too bleak. A superb novel from a champion storyteller’ Craig Siston

‘The sense of dread builds unstopably ... an intense, chilling read’ Gilly Macmillan

‘What starts out as a slow burn quickly ratchets up the tension and the twists, sending you spiralling down a hill of depravity and desperation’ Kirsten McKenzie

‘I don’t think I breathed from about halfway through to the end. A masterpiece from a crime genius’ Susi Holliday

‘Cleave writes the kind of dark, intense thrillers that I never want to end. Do yourself a favour and check him out’  
Simon Kernick

‘Tense, thrilling, touching. Paul Cleave is very good indeed’

John Connolly

‘Relentlessly gripping, deliciously twisted and shot through with a vein of humour that’s as dark as hell’

Mark Billingham

‘An intense adrenaline rush from start to finish’ S.J. Watson

‘A riveting and all-too realistic thriller’ Tess Gerritsen

‘A gripping thriller ... I couldn’t put it down’ Meg Gardiner

‘This very clever novel did my head in time and again’ Michael Robotham

‘A true page-turner, with an intriguing premise, a rollercoaster plot and a cast of believably flawed characters’ *Guardian*

‘Nerve-shredding’ *Crime Monthly*

‘The complicated, pacey plot is full of ideas and intelligence, as well as characters that work’ *Literary Review*

‘The psychological depth of the leads bolsters the complex plot. This merits comparison with the work of Patricia Highsmith’ *Publishers Weekly* STARRED REVIEW

‘What is really compelling about *The Quiet People* is neither its neat twists nor the topical examination of mob rule, but Cleave’s portrait of Cameron as he goes rogue under pressure and tries to use his writer’s skills to save his son’ *The Times*

‘Uses words as lethal weapons’ *New York Times*

‘A cinematic, raging, rollercoaster of a plot with a wry humour ... *The Quiet People* is wildly entertaining and will keep you guessing right to the end’ *New Zealand Herald*

‘Cleave’s whirligig plot mesmerises’ *People*

‘This thriller is one to remember’ *New York Journal of Books*

‘Compelling, dark, and perfectly paced, New Zealand writer Cleave’s psychological thriller explores the evil lurking in us all, working relentless magic until the very last page’ *Booklist*

‘A superb novel from a champion storyteller’ *Crime Watch*

# His Favourite Graves

PAUL CLEAVE



**ORENDA  
BOOKS**

To the cast and crew of *Dark City – The Cleaner* ...  
thanks for making miracles happen.

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# Day One

## Chapter One

The coffin has a set of vents low in the front, angled down, giving Lucas a narrow view of the floor. When he presses his hands against the metal walls, they flex fractionally outwards before bouncing back, seemingly closer after each attempt as though the walls are shrinking around him. When he tries to turn his body, elbows and knees hit walls, and when he attempts to straighten the cramp out of his back, his head hits the ceiling. He's a five-foot-eight, thin and flexible sixteen-year-old teenager in an upright coffin that's six feet tall, but with a shelf three-quarters of the way up that can't be moved, forcing him to hunch. If he hadn't been so thin the others probably couldn't have stuffed him in here in the first place, but they did, and they laughed while doing it, while other students walked by, ignoring his pleas for help. Why would they care? It's not like he's the first kid in the history of kids and schools to be stuffed into a locker. He's going to wet himself, pass out and then die, and tomorrow morning they'll find his body ankle-deep in piss. He focuses on the air vents. It's a chicken-and-egg scenario. Did bullies see the vents and figure they could stuff kids into lockers without them running out of air, or did the manufacturers figure kids would get stuffed inside and didn't want them suffocating?

The way he sees it, he's on his own. His cellphone is in his bag, which might be on top of the lockers, or in a dumpster behind the school, or stuffed into a toilet. It's been half an hour since he heard anybody, and soon one of two things is going to happen. His dad is either going to notice Lucas isn't there, and do something about it, or he isn't going to notice, and do nothing. It's going to come down to whether his dad started his drinking today before three, or after, which is something his dad has gotten particularly good at since his mom up and announced she was leaving them two years back.

In the distance, a slight whirring that, over the following few minutes, grows louder as it gets closer. All the teachers are gone. Mondays are like that, teachers wanting to place the day in their rear-view mirrors so they can rush home and uncork the wine. What he's hearing is the janitor pushing a floor polisher. It has to be. He holds off banging on the door because there is no way the guy will hear him over the noise, not yet anyway. So he waits, and he tries not to wet his pants, and the air gets thicker and the idea he could be in here till tomorrow solidifies. Would he survive? He imagines his gravestone:

*Lucas Connor, sixteen years old, gone too soon, but who really cares?*

Certainly not his mom, who left, and not his dad, who would drink himself into a state where he wouldn't even recognise he was now living alone.

He focuses on the whirring, picturing the janitor as he pushes the floor polisher closer, and when he thinks it's as close as it's going to get, he bangs on the door.

The floor polisher doesn't slow down. Of course it doesn't, because the janitor will be wearing ear muffs, and there could be a hundred kids banging from a hundred lockers, and this guy wouldn't have the slightest idea.

He keeps hammering at the door. The floor polisher is now on its way in the other direction. He gives it everything he has because if he doesn't he's going to die in here, and if he doesn't die, he'll at least go mad, and maybe, just maybe, if the janitor can't hear him he will at least see the door rattling.

Which might be what happens, because the floor polisher stops moving, and the motor slows, and dies, and then there are footsteps. Through the vent he can see heavy brown shoes come to a stop in front of him.



Lucas gives the door one last whack, and says, 'Please. Please help me.'

The feet come closer, and the janitor asks, 'What is this? You pulling some kind of prank on me?' His voice is low, and slow, and confused-sounding. Lucas has never spoken to the guy before, but he's heard other students calling him Simple Simon.

'No prank. I got locked in here. Please, you have to help me.'

'Damn kids,' the janitor says, and he taps on the door. 'This one?'

'Yes.'

'What's the combination?'

'I don't know it.'

'How can you not know?'

'It's not my locker.'

'What kind of boy gets himself thrown into somebody else's locker?'

One who can't stand up for himself, Lucas thinks. One who is smaller than the boys putting him in here. One who doesn't have any friends to help him. One who's shy and tries to keep himself to himself. One whose parents don't even like spending time with him. Instead of any of those, he says, 'Can you just get help?'

'There's nobody to get,' the janitor says. He taps his knuckles against the door, and Lucas imagines him looking at it like it's some kind of puzzle to solve. 'Let me get something I can pry it with. Wait here.'

Lucas isn't sure if that last part is a joke, and figures it isn't since the guy sounds genuinely put out by it all. The footsteps fade. He counts them until they disappear, then he counts off two long minutes where he becomes convinced the janitor isn't going to return, but then he does, Lucas counting the footsteps as they get louder.

'Okay. This might be loud,' the janitor says, and before Lucas can get his fingers into his ears, the crowbar bangs heavily into the locker. Metal squeaks against metal, and slivers of light appear around one side of the door as it twists. Those slivers turn into cracks. The tip of a crowbar comes into view, then disappears and comes back, able to take a bigger bite now. More squeaking as the door twists, then it folds around the lock and pops open. The need to get out is so urgent he panics when he can't. He can't because he's been stuck in this position for so long his back and legs have locked. He looks up at the janitor.

'Help me.'

The janitor is a guy around thirty, a little over six foot, but skinny like Lucas, with hollowed-in cheeks framed by a short beard, and long fingers topped off with dirty nails. A nametag sewn into his overalls tells the world his name is Simon, meaning the kids calling him Simple Simon are at least half right. He stares unblinking at Lucas for a few moments, then offers a hand with the third and fourth fingers missing – rumour being he bit them off when growing up in an insane asylum. Of course, there's no truth to the rumour. At least he seriously hopes there isn't as he reaches out and takes hold of Simon's hand.

He gets one leg out, then can't control himself as he collapses under his own weight, too quickly for Simon to keep him upright. The best Lucas can do before hitting the floor is to stop his nose breaking against it by cushioning his face with his hands. He tries to get right back up, but his legs are wracked with pins and needles, and he can't manage it. His bladder is tight and full and aware he now has access to a bathroom. He can see his school bag up on the shelf. His phone is in there – or, if not in there, in a dumpster, or in a toilet, or in pieces out on the field. He needs to call his dad and let him know what's happening.

He looks up at the janitor, who is studying him with that unblinking stare, as if, of all the

people he's pulled out of lockers today, Lucas is the most curious.

'I'm sorry,' Simon says, and Lucas doesn't know what he's sorry for, and doesn't get the chance to figure it out before a rag is pressed hard against his nose and mouth. He fights against the janitor, but the fumes are strong and he's already breathing them in, breathing in that dirty rag, the fumes dimming the world around him.

He feels the front of his pants go warm.

Then he can't feel anything.

## Chapter Two

The office is low-key, somewhat worn out, which is a good match for my close-to-retirement lawyer, Devon Murdoch, who looks like he slept in his clothes and used his tie as a napkin at breakfast. He's not the cheapest lawyer in town, but he's the next best thing, and he's sure as hell the best I can afford. He has framed diplomas hanging behind him, and in one of them I can see my reflection – a tired-looking guy who needs a haircut and a shave, and a good night's sleep, and who a year ago had mostly black hair, which this year is mostly grey. I have to be the oldest-looking forty-year-old guy in town.

'It's here somewhere,' Murdoch says, hunting through a pile of papers on his desk. His hand finally lands on what he's looking for, and he seems pleased with himself when he says, 'Here we go.'

He hands the bill to me, and it makes him one step closer to becoming a cheap lawyer out of my price range.

'Jesus.'

'Sorry, Sheriff, it was never going to be cheap.'

'I know, but ...'

'And there will be more.'

'I know that too.'

'I'm managing to keep the wolves at bay, but it's not easy.'

'They want blood.'

'Of course they do.'

I look at the bill again. It's a little over eight thousand dollars. As was the one last month. Two months ago it was ten thousand.

'Look, James, I know things are tight, so I'm giving you an extra month on it, but ... well, things are tight for everybody.'

'We all have bills to pay, I get it.'

'How did things go with the bank?'

'Not great,' I say. It's been three months since I paid my mortgage. 'Last week they sent a letter to say if I miss another payment, then it's the end of the road. You know the irony?'

'Tell me.'

'If I refuse to leave, then, as sheriff, it will be my job to force my own eviction. Hell, maybe I should do just that – throw my own arse in jail just so I have somewhere to stay.'

'I'm sorry, James. It's a shitty situation, and one of the worst I've seen. And selling?'

'I got a real-estate agent coming by later this week. It's an option, but not a good one. Anything I come out of the house with will get thrown into more fees, plus I'd still have to pay rent somewhere. And that's even if I could sell it, in time. Plus my dad still needs care, and that's not cheap. I'll see what they say.'

'It sounds exhausting.'

'You got no idea,' I say, and the truth is I've barely slept more than a few hours a night since this all started.

'And Cassandra?'

'She'd help, I guess, but it's not like we can move in with her. She did leave for a reason.'

Murdoch looks at me, seeming to search for something to say that can make this easier. I'm losing my family and my house. We're throwing Band-Aids at gaping wounds, and I don't know what to do. I really don't. A month from now I'll probably be homeless.

'I still don't know how I got here,' I say. 'It wasn't his fault.'

'I completely agree with you, as would most, but somebody died, James.'

'I know somebody died.'

'It's a tragic loss, it really is. But your father lit the fire that burned down the entire care home, and it's a miracle there weren't more casualties. And that family is hurting. This is emotional for them – and they're on a crusade.'

I say what I've told him a hundred times already. 'The care home should have been keeping a better eye on him.'

'I know, and you know I agree with you, and it's why the care home have settled, but —'

'But the family is hurting, and they want us to hurt too.'

'That's what it comes down to. I have another meeting with their lawyer next week, but unless there's a sudden change of mind, then you need to prepare yourself for the storm that's coming.'

I fold up the bill and tuck it into my pocket, knowing everything he has just told me will make up part of the next bill. I need to get out of here before we tick over into the next half-hour. 'Thanks,' I say, standing up.

He stands up too. 'I'll keep you updated.'

I head out to the street. My police cruiser is parked outside a bar. The cruiser is a white SUV with a strip of lights on the roof and a bull bar on the front, *Acacia Sheriff's Department* in blocky blue letters running down the side. I'm unlocking it when I look up at the bar. I could go in there and find a dark corner to drown my sorrows. The problem is I'd probably fall asleep. That's the problem when you're a borderline insomniac – it's hard to sleep at nights but easy to nod off when you're not meant to. My lawyer summed things up well when he said it's a shitty situation. My dad spent his entire working life as a chef, and from the age of forty even owned his own restaurant. He got worried a few years ago when he started to forget the simplest of things, and remember things that never happened. There was paranoia and mood swings, and then he started saying some very cruel things to my mother, which she would have taken offence to if it wasn't for the fact she died ten years ago. What followed was a diagnosis – my dad had Alzheimer's. Things spiralled fast for him, and last year he moved into a care home. The problem is he had fifty years' worth of muscle memory driving him to cook, which is exactly what he tried to do at three in the morning at the start of this year. He ended up burning down the entire care home, and now he lives with me and, every second week, me and my son, Nathan. Cassandra moved out two months after my dad moved in. It was hard for her to stay, with my dad calling her the worst of names every day.

I don't give into the temptation of the bar, but I do pop a couple of pills to perk me up. My doctor prescribed me Adderall a few months back. I went from trying to not rely on it, to needing it every day, to having to up the dosage. I'm not proud of it, but it helps.

I drive home, picturing the cold beers in the fridge. The moment I pull up in the driveway, the front door opens and Deborah, my dad's nurse-slash-caretaker, comes hurrying out. Deborah is in her mid-sixties, warm, compassionate, and went through with her own parents what I'm going through with Dad.

'Everything okay?' I ask.

'Everything is fine, I'm just running late is all,' she says. 'I have a date,' she adds, grinning

at me.

‘Who’s the lucky guy?’

‘Somebody I met online. I still can’t believe that’s how it’s done these days. Can you imagine the action I would have been getting forty years ago if this had been a thing?’

‘I’d rather not.’

She laughs. ‘Your dad had a good day,’ she says.

‘Thanks, Deborah. Have fun.’

‘I intend to.’

She drives away and I head inside. My dad is standing in front of the TV, watching a guy with veins sticking out of his arms pitching a piece of gym equipment that will get your own veins sticking out too if you’re willing to give it three minutes a day.

‘Hey, Dad, how was your day?’

Dad doesn’t answer.

‘Can I get you something? A drink maybe?’

Still no answer. I move him to the couch and sit him down, and I’m not sure he knows I’m here. I can hear gunfire and explosions coming from Nathan’s bedroom as he plays whatever the hell it is he plays on his computer. I knock on Nathan’s door and open it. There’s an annoyed-sounding ‘what?’, and then I step in.

‘Just letting you know I’m home.’

‘Whatever.’

Nathan is a big kid with angular features that ought to make him good-looking, but are betrayed by a meanness that crept in around the time his mom moved out. He has dark hair swept to the side that overhangs his right eye. His other eye is fixed on a computer monitor as his hands fly across the keyboard.

‘Any requests for dinner?’

‘You could leave me alone for starters.’

I don’t have the energy to answer him, so I head into the kitchen and grab a beer. I’m just about to open it when my phone goes. It’s the station.

I hit answer. ‘What is it, Sharon?’ I ask, sounding grumpier than I intended.

Before I can apologise, she says, ‘Sheriff, Peter Connor is on the line for you. Says it’s urgent.’

I’ve known Peter since I was a kid. He was a year ahead of me in school and was always the cool guy because he was the guitarist in a school rock band. He gave up on the music, and went on to become a novelist with a range of successes. But the last few years haven’t been kind to him. He never bounced back after the critics turned on him after his last book, one saying it was aimed at people who liked to tear out the pages and set fire to them, before going on to call it Z-grade trash. Not long after that his wife walked out on him, having discovered the same thing that Deborah discovered – online dating. The only relationship Peter has formed since being single is with the bottle.

‘Put him through,’ I say, wondering if he’s gotten behind the wheel of his car and ended up in a ditch somewhere.

He comes on the line. His words are rapid-fire, and I can’t pick where one ends and the other begins.

‘Whoa, whoa, slow down, Peter. Slow down and try again.’

Another flow of syllables.

‘Take a deep breath,’ I say.

Peter takes a deep breath. I hear it happen, like a vacuum cleaner flicked on for a brief moment. I picture him pacing the room, his knuckles white as he holds the phone tightly. 'My boy,' he says, slower now, not by much, but enough for me to understand him. 'My boy didn't come home from school.'

Something twitches in my stomach, and I picture his son Lucas.

Peter fires off short sentences. 'He always comes home. From school. He has a curfew. Five o'clock. He knows if he's not home by then he gets in trouble. So he's always home by then. Always. Usually by four. Always by four. Never fails. Except for today. I need you to find him. It's ... You ... you have to find him.'

It's a little after five now. Summer is close and the days are getting longer. There are three more hours of daylight left, and this time next month it won't be getting dark till well after nine. We're fast approaching the time of the year we spend the rest of the year waiting for. It's also the season for kids being notoriously late. They're off swimming in quarries or smoking in the woods or hitting baseballs. They're breaking curfews and not giving a damn.

'Kids always have a way of showing up,' I say, and immediately regret my choice of words. I am, after all, on the phone to a crime writer. There's only one thing a crime writer is going to say to a statement like that.

Peter goes ahead and says it. 'And sometimes they show up dead. They show up in shallow graves stabbed or strangled, or tossed into dumpsters. And as you well know, Sheriff, the world is full of kids who go missing and never show up at all.'

He's right. But still ... 'Maybe he's got a flat tire. Or he's gone to a friend's house. You've called his friends?'

'He doesn't have any.'

'Have you called the school?'

'Nobody was answering, which is why I've come here.'

'You're at the school?'

'And he doesn't have a flat tire because his bike is here and it's perfectly fine. Something has stopped him from biking home, and from calling me.'

The twitch in my stomach twitches again.

This can't be like last time, can it?

## Chapter Three

It's all happening fast – too fast. Of course it is ... there was never any plan. Has he made mistakes? It's a stupid question – of course he has. But in that moment he didn't care. It was like a biological impulse took over, and he stopped being Simon Grove and became something else – something different, a something that he has been other times during his life. He doesn't like that something, but he can't control it. Nobody can control biology. There are pills, and medications, and therapies to try and get you to think one way when all you can think is another ... but that can't forever repress a fundamental need. And right now his need has him speeding away from town with a boy in the trunk of his car, and, Jesus, it's not like he hasn't been in this situation before.

They're on the highway. There's not a lot of traffic and there's no reason that he stands out, just one car among many, but he wonders if other drivers can tell how nervous he is. He sure as hell didn't wake up today knowing he'd end it by burning bridges, which is a very real possibility right now. He can't turn back – in part because he has no real excuse for why he stuffed the kid into the trunk, and in part because he doesn't want to. He also can't keep driving, because he's bursting with the same need that got him into this mess. But at some point soon somebody is going to notice the kid isn't where he's meant to be. Could be it's happened already, or it could be the kid has shitty parents who haven't even noticed – though Simon seriously doubts the parents could be like the ones he had growing up. He pictures phone calls being made to friends before a call is placed to the police, then the police going to the school, finding the busted-open locker with the crowbar out front.

Jesus. He didn't even take the time to clean up after himself. He couldn't, because the need was both sudden and strong, and it had been a while, and when you're driven by biology ... well, you think about the consequences later. This need has been building for a while, as it always does, and the irony is he had put in for vacation next week anyway. He was going to head away and scratch the itch with some random kid in some random city, where he could walk away without any consequences, dining on the memory until the need became too strong again to ignore. Why the hell couldn't he have just waited till then?

Biology. That's why. Fucking biology.

However, there might just be a way he can have his cake and eat it too – something his final mother used to say, which was just one more reason to have killed her. Recently he bought a camera to film these occasions, but perhaps it can have a second purpose.

Up ahead is the turnoff for the old sawmill. He learned the history of this place when he moved here a while back. The town of Acacia Pines came into existence a hundred and fifty years ago, with a sawmill as the heart and the churches built around it as the soul. Soon the stores and the houses were expanding outwards, eating up the land at a slow but steady rate, then sixty years ago they'd eaten up enough of it that there were more folks who didn't like the trucks barrelling past their houses and shaking the china in their cupboards than there were those who did. So the sawmill was torn down and rebuilt out of town, on a bigger site with more room for expansion, but, like towns and cities are apt to do, long-term forecasts of how big places are going to be and how busy the roads are going to get don't tend to look as far into the future as they ought to be looking. After all, something in fifty years' time is somebody else's problem.

Ten years ago, Acacia started being featured on travel shows. The forests were popular spots for hikers. Motels had to be built. More restaurants. More industry. The town has been expanding constantly over the last ten years as people come to visit and don't want to leave. A few years back there was a spike in the service sector on account of some hikers at the end of that summer claiming they spotted Bigfoot out in the mountains (complete with out-of-focus photograph), though he suspects the rumour was started by an owner of one of the new motels – motels which were booked up solidly as people from across the country came looking for proof. The sawmill needed to expand too. But instead of expanding it, a new one got built a few miles closer to town than the old one, the old one left abandoned for nature to reclaim.

He takes the turnoff.

The road to the mill is curved and rutted with dips and troughs and made up of gravel pushed so hard into the ground by thousands of trucks that it doesn't make much noise driving over it. Soon the old mill comes into view, large cinderblock walls stained with exhaust, windows high up, some of them broken, a flat roof, some of it rusted, and large roll-up doors along the front, some of them dented, all surrounded by a sea of concrete which, in turn, is surrounded by an ocean of trees. He pulls up to the main door. He leaves the car running and gets out. He unlocks a small side door and steps through, then uses the chains to roll up the large ones. The rattling chains remind him of that Charles Dickens novel where Christmas ghosts preach doom and gloom to a man destined to die alone. Not that he read the book, but he has seen various versions of the movie.

He gets the door all the way open, and goes back to the car. A minute later he's parked inside and those chains are rattling again as the door closes. They're all alone. All alone in the middle of nowhere where nobody can hear a thing.

His nerves turn to excitement.



## Chapter Four

I go back into Nathan's room.

'I gotta go out for a bit. I need you to keep an eye on your grandfather.'

'I'm busy.'

'Hopefully it won't be for long.'

He doesn't say anything. Instead he keeps playing the game.

'Nathan?'

'What?'

'I said I...'

'For fuck's sake,' he says, and he stands up and switches off the computer.

'Goddamn it, Nathan, I'm just asking for —'

'I said I'll do it, okay? Didn't you just say you have somewhere to be?'

I stare at him for a few moments, not knowing the best response. This is classic Nathan these days, and every way I've tried to deal with it has only ever been the wrong way. I could ground him, or take his computer away, but in the past things like that have only made him worse. And right now I don't have the time to deal with it.

'I'll call you soon to check in,' I say.

I radio Sharon on my way to the school. I update her, ask her to have Deputy Hutchison meet me at the school, and to get Principal Chambers on the line. She says she'll get right on it. I drive through town. Stores are closing and restaurants are opening as people go from buying books and clothes and camping equipment to thinking about food and wine and dessert. Sharon calls my cellphone, saying she has Chambers on the line. She transfers the call. I tell Chambers what's going on. He sounds concerned. Of course he does. We went through this two months ago. He tells me he'll be at the school in ten minutes.

I buzz the sirens at intersections and cars pull aside. People on sidewalks turn to look. It's a rare sight. I pass storefronts where the sun reflects off the windows, blinding drivers. I pass a swimming pool, a movie theatre, a bowling alley, a strip mall, more stores and offices and motels, then there's the school. A long driveway edged with trees sweeps from the road to a drop-off area, but also branches into a parking lot. There's a low wall out front with *Acacia High School* lettered across it, along with painted-over graffiti. Beyond it the main building is made up of three wings forming a squared-off C, each wing long, and plain, and identical, as if churned out by kitset manufacturers and shipped here ready to assemble, complete with flags to hang every thirty yards for colour. Peter Connor is pacing the ground, and only stops once I'm out of my car and in front of him.

Peter is a few inches taller than me, topping out at six foot. He's always been solid, but it doesn't look as good on him as it did back in high school, when he was on stage in tight clothes impressing all the girls with his music and his muscles. Now all that mass has been redistributed, mostly to the centre, where it stretches at his faded T-shirt that says *Cats Against Being Eaten*, which was the name of his band back then. His eyes are sunken, and his greying hair a mess, like a man who gave into middle age without a fight. We don't shake hands. He's panicked. Jittery.

'Show me the bike,' I say.

We walk to the bike stands. They're in the same place they used to be, and where they will

remain long after the ice caps have melted. Coming to my old school makes me question how twenty years have gone by so fast, all while making me sadly aware the next twenty will go the same. The school has expanded over that time, with more buildings added beyond the three main wings, a brand-new gym too, and a bigger assembly hall. That's what Acacia Pines is, a town that expands – from the grocery stores to the schools to the motels and farms and graveyards. Ten years ago we had twenty thousand people, now we have thirty.

The bike stands are exposed to the elements. There are enough for five hundred bikes, but right now there's only one in there, a lonely blue mountain bike a couple of years old at best. There's a lock around it.

'This is definitely Lucas's bike?'

'Yes.'

'And the lock?'

He looks at me, confused. 'What?'

'Is that his lock?'

'Why wouldn't it be?'

'Because somebody might have played a practical joke on him by locking the bike with a lock that isn't his.'

He still looks confused. 'Then he would have gone and gotten a teacher, or he would have called me.'

It's what I figured, but I still had to ask. A cruiser identical to mine approaches. Deputy Hutchison. And, behind her, a white sedan. Principal Chambers.

'Maybe,' I say. 'But is it Lucas's lock or not?'

'I don't know. Probably.'

We walk to the main entrance. Chambers and Hutch stop talking when we reach them. Deputy Lisa Hutchison is thirty, tall, good-looking, serious. She grew up wanting to be a cop because her dad was a cop. Her dark hair is pulled into a ponytail and her thumbs are hitched over the top of her holster. Chambers is tall, balding, with wisps of grey hair combed flat along the sides. His glasses are too big and his mouth too small, his ears wide and his nose long, like he was put together at the Mr Potato Head factory by Mr Potato himself. He was one of my teachers back when I came here. The guy taught history, and now he's become it.

None of us shake hands. 'I want to see Lucas's locker,' I say.

If Lucas's bike is here, then there's every reason to think he's here too. Kids got jammed into lockers back when I came here, and I doubt the practice has ended, along with lunch money being stolen and hallway wedgies.

'Then follow me,' Chambers says, and he leads the way.

## Chapter Five

The coffin is metal, and narrow, and after spending thirty minutes on the road, has finally come to a stop. Lucas may be a shitty judge of janitors, but he's an excellent judge of time. You can't drive in Acacia Pines for thirty minutes unless you're driving in circles, meaning they've left the confines of town and headed south, because south is the only direction you can go. Since they left town he's been wondering what they're heading for out here. It's all farms and forestry, and he figures there are dozens of ways to be disappeared in either.

As for the coffin, he is folded and jammed into it, and something hard digs into his back, all angles, all solid, something he can't get away from. Mostly the ride has been in darkness, except for when the trunk glows red from the brake lights, but it's back to being dark, and the only sound he can hear is the engine pinging and tinging. A moment ago it was all rattling chains and heavy doors. His wet jeans are tighter now, and cold, and they smell, and the denim chafes against his thighs. His chest is tight, and the duct tape across his mouth is preventing him from sucking in deep breaths, and his hands being taped behind him puts pressure on his shoulders. The only parts of his body not threatening cramp are the parts humming with pins and needles. He has never in his life ever come as close to being as scared as he is right now. And to make things even worse, whatever the janitor used to knock him out has given him a headache. He feels sick too. Not just terrified sick, but nauseous sick. He tries to roll over, to shift his weight off his right shoulder onto his left, but can't manage it. Aside from urine, he can smell gas, and cleaning products, and can still smell the chemical the janitor used to knock him out. The air tastes combustible. But, no matter what, he's come to the decision that he's not going to cry. He's not going to beg for mercy either – in part because he doesn't think a guy who throws children into the trunks of cars will be merciful, and in part because he thinks Simple Simon will get off on it.

How would his dad write somebody out of this situation? That's a question he's been asking over and over on the drive out here, but his mind has only been able to find examples where those characters didn't make it. Some must have survived, surely, but when he tries to think of them he draws a blank. At some stage he's going to go from praying he can survive this to praying that the end comes quickly. He doesn't watch a lot of movies, but he has seen enough to know that once the duct tape appears, a shallow grave being pawed open by wildlife isn't far behind. Soon the question won't just be will they ever find him, but in how many pieces?

He's pulled from his thoughts by footsteps getting closer. The car door opens, then there's a click, and the trunk pops up an inch. A moment later it's opened the rest of the way, and a moment after that Lucas is blinking against the light of a dimly lit building that's far brighter than the inside of the trunk. The janitor reaches in and hauls Lucas up and over the edge of the trunk before letting momentum and gravity take him to the floor, the impact hard enough to make his teeth rattle and have him taste blood. He fights to keep the tears back.

The janitor looks down at him. He's different from before. Same overalls, same hair, same beard, but all of it dark and rotten. The rumours are true – this guy did bite off two of his own fingers, and was probably in the insane asylum for biting off other people's fingers too. He imagines the janitor's darkness as a physical entity, a parasite that has taken over and is now controlling him like a puppet, that parasite a tapeworm looping and slithering around inside the

janitor and pulling all the levers.

Simple Simon cuts the tape between Lucas's feet, then gets him standing. They're in an emptied-out factory, a few shelves with cardboard boxes left behind, some pieces of wire and steel cut-offs and sawdust littering the floor, along with glass from the windows where rocks have been thrown through them. He can smell wood. And glue. And grease. There's an old mountain bike leaning against the wall and an empty drum, heavily dented, lying on its side. He looks at the drum and wonders if the janitor has stuffed some other unlucky soul into it in the past. There are cinderblock walls and steel beams and high ceilings. The metal door is big enough for trucks to roll in and roll back out. There's a set of offices and rooms at the back at floor level, and another set above.

It's the old sawmill. He's never been here before, but it can't be anything else.

Simple Simon shoves him toward the offices at the back. The pins and needles in his legs have him stumbling, and the janitor grabs at him to keep him balanced. His body has been forced into uncomfortable shapes over the last few hours, and now his mind races with images of further shapes to come. They reach the office closest to the stairs, one with a window looking out into the forest. There's a wooden desk to his right and an old filing cabinet on its side with a camera on top of it to his left. There's a broken pot in the corner containing a dead plant, and stacked next to it a pile of phonebooks almost as tall as him. There's a diseased-looking mattress on the floor, and it's to the mattress that Lucas is shoved. He falls onto it, dust puffing out of it, along with enough bacteria to start a pandemic. Still, he fights the tears, even though he knows what the mattress is for, just as he knows why the camera with the glowing red light on the filing cabinet is pointing at him.

There is no help coming.

No hope.

Lucas starts to cry.