

FRANK YOUNG

KILLINOIS!

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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*To Justine,
my goddess of virtue*

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Morning sunlight glittered off the surface of the water. Sandstone cliffs rose high over the river. Birds called out from the scrub oaks and pines along the banks. Far in the distance, a barge drifted along with the slow current. The sky was blue, without a cloud, and the sun blazed into the heavens. Midwest summer air. An engine whined downriver. The engine grew louder, and a watercraft appeared on the horizon. The river surface was smooth. Tiny insects danced on the water. A girl in a red life vest was riding a Jet Ski, her long black hair whipping behind her. She was going high speed in a straight line, smiling with her lips closed, sitting up straight. She was young and tan, alone with the sun and the water and her machine.

A rustling in the bushes on the far side of the river, and a nearly invisible line rose up several feet out of the water. Droplets shimmered across the clear line as it straightened out from one bank across to an island mid-river. The girl maintained her speed, lifting her head up to fully catch the sun's rays on her round cheeks. Ahead, the line grew taut, and water droplets burst into the air. The machine rocketed toward the line. The engine sang, and the girl beamed. She barreled ahead. The line tore through her neck.

The girl's head flew off. Blood showered out as it spun in the sky, fanning an arc of red mist in all directions. The watercraft kept racing, a headless teenager gripping the throttle. Her head landed in the river twenty feet away with a deep plop, sunk below, and then popped back up and gently floated down with the current. The line slackened back into the water. The engine died as the body dropped backward, pulling the machine's emergency switch by the lanyard attached to the girl's life vest. Deep red blood poured out of the black gaping hole above her shoulders as the Jet Ski drifted sideways with the current. The body and craft slowly followed the head down the river, and birds resumed singing from the trees along the shore.

The black Jeep Wrangler blasted south down Highway 39. The soft top was down, the doors were stuffed in the back, and three boys yelled over the howling wind and the Rolling Stones.

“We still need ice,” shouted Scott Hey, the driver. He was muscular, with a thick neck and a buzz cut. One of his eyelids drooped lower than the other. He glanced in the rearview mirror for cops and then jerked up to ninety.

“Fuck ice,” said Jerrod from the back seat, “we need more beer.”

“What?” shouted Scott.

“We need more fucking beer, man!” Jerrod yelled again, leaning in between his two best friends. Peter Rockwood rode shotgun, bouncing his head to “Gimme Shelter” and watching the tall rows of corn fly by. Peter had dark brown eyes, brownish black hair, and a slight overbite. Scott elbowed Jerrod in the chest, knocking him back.

“We’ve got three cases of Coors Light,” Scott said. “Plus the girls are bringing some. How much do you fucking need?”

“More!” Jerrod yelled back. Jerrod’s long legs barely fit in the cramped back seat. His eyes were set far apart behind long reddish bangs, currently whipping in the wind.

“Plus we’ve got two bottles of So-Co and the Jack Daniels,” Peter said.

“We’ll only have two cases by the time we get to the marina,” Jerrod shouted from the back, and then tossed an empty beer can out the side of the Jeep. “Pete, would you be so kind as to beer me, you fucking fag?”

“Here you go, shitbird,” Peter said as he handed him a semicold one out of the cooler under his seat. “I think I’m about ready myself.” He opened another and took a deep drink. “What is it about noon-beers on a Thursday that tastes so fucking good?”

“The alcohol, you fucking lush!” Jerrod yelled.

The song faded away, and Scott turned off the radio. “So here we are, my friends—about a half hour away from one big-ass houseboat with our name on it.”

“Motherfuckin’ houseboat!” Jerrod yelled.

“We’ve got more booze than we know what to do with. We’ve got mister Johnny college sittin’ over here drinking noon-beers,” Scott yelled. Peter gave him the finger. “We don’t have to go back to our no good fucking jobs until Monday.”

“Fuckin’ A!” Jerrod said.

“And I think I am ready for my next beer,” Scott concluded. He tossed his empty out the driver’s side, and Peter handed him a new one.

“Don’t forget about the fucking talent,” Jerrod yelled. “Hot-ass bitches on a motherfuckin’ houseboat!”

“Watch that ‘bitches’ shit,” Peter shot back. “One of those bitches is mine remember.”

“Oh yeah, how could I forget,” Jerrod said. “Oh Petey, I’ll wait for you while you’re away at college. Petey, don’t worry about me, I’m all alone back in Dixon, and I’ve got nothing to do tonight.”

but swim around naked in my parent's pool."

~~"Yo, shut the fuck up, bitch!" Peter yelled. "I swear to God, seriously. Shut the fuck up about the pool, all right!"~~

"Easy!" Scott said, turning the radio back up. "Dude, you should have been there. Seriously, the party was insane. Naked chicks everywhere. I think there were like thirty chicks naked in that pool."

"Fuck that was great," Jerrod said.

"Fuck you both. Fuck you both up your stupid asses," Peter said, and then tossed his empty beer can back at Jerrod. "Which one of you pussies is ready for round three?"

Maggie Dymerski shifted her red Pontiac Sunbird into park and killed the ignition. “Pure Morning from Placebo shut off with the engine. She took the final drag from her cigarette and then flicked the butt out the window. Tapping her fingertips on the top of her steering wheel, she peered across the parking lot of the small town grocery store.

“Is this the right store?” Beth Miller asked, sitting across from her. Beth was tall and slender with platinum blond hair and light blond eyebrows. She had on cutoff jean shorts and a black bikini top.

“Yeah, Jack’s Grocery—that’s what he said,” Maggie answered. “Come on. Let’s go in you skanks.” Maggie and Beth stepped out of the car at the same time, and Beth’s younger sister Jen climbed out of the backseat. Jen was shorter than Beth, and her dirty blond dreadlocks were in sharp contrast to her sister’s shoulder-length hair. She wore a light yellow summer dress. All three were well tanned from sunbathing at Maggie’s pool. Maggie’s eyes darted across the front of the store looking for a VW microbus. Black D&G sunglasses covered her round freckled face. Her brunet hair was back in a ponytail, and she wore a low-cut, red tank top with soccer shorts. A few old people shuffled out of the store carrying loads of food in brown paper bags. As they passed by, an old woman walked out of the store with a bag slightly overflowing with packaged meat.

“There you go Jen,” Beth said. “You joining them for the barbecue?”

“Ha ha, so funny,” Jen replied. “Are you joining them to go suck some donkey dick?”

Beth stuck out her long tongue at her sister as they walked through the entrance. Maggie suddenly stopped. Jen walked into Beth. All three froze. Standing in front of them was a group of men, huddled around the cash register. The men looked like old farmers, or fishermen, in overalls and dark blue worker shirts and baseball hats. Their skin was weather-worn and smudged with grease or dirt. All of them turned silent as soon as the girls took a few steps in. The men stared.

“Okay,” Maggie said, taking one step forward. The locals continued to gawk. “We are going to buy some groceries now.” She paused, waiting for a reaction. She took another step, and their eyes followed her. She stepped backward.

“Whatever,” Beth said. “Weirdos.” The three walked briskly toward the nearest aisle, and the men watched them walk away.

“Oh shit,” Maggie said, “we need a basket.”

“You go get it,” Beth said.

“No, you go get it,” she whispered. Some of the men were leaning into the aisle to observe.

“You chicken shits,” Jen said. “I’ll get the basket.” She walked back up the aisle and scanned the front. “Of course,” she said. The baskets were stacked next to the window where the old men were standing. She marched up until she was standing face to face with one of them. She forced a smile.

“Pardon me sir,” she said in her best phony Southern accent. “Could you be a dear and hand me one of them little old baskets?”

None of the group said a word. They stared open-mouthed at Jen. One of the men nearest to

stack reached behind him, without taking his eyes off her, grasped the plastic handle, lifted a basket out, and handed it to her. Jen dropped the smile.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Why are you all staring at me?”

“Young lady,” one with no teeth finally spoke, “we’ve been meeting here a long, long time. This is what you call the good old boys club, I guess.” He grinned, and the rest of the group seemed to relax. “Watching you walk into our little store here is like, well, it’s like heaven for me and the cousins.” They all nodded in agreement. Jen grinned nervously.

“Okay, then...thanks.” She held up the basket, turned on her heels, and walked away. She felt their eyes on her body until she rounded the corner.

“What the hell was that all about?” Maggie asked.

“Oh, my God!” Jen said. “Fucking freaks.”

Beth and Maggie dumped some Gatorade and string cheese in the basket. The three walked together through the aisles, picking up their supplies. When they rounded the end of the snack aisle, a short store employee almost ran into them with his cart. His face was covered with acne. He looked directly at Maggie’s breasts and then turned to stare at Beth’s bikini top.

“Hey,” Maggie said, “up here, fresh.” He jerked his head up and looked at her through thick glasses.

“Doesn’t anyone in this town know it’s not polite to stare?”

The clerk blushed red, grunted, and scurried past them, spilling some bags of cookies as he escaped.

“Now we really need to get the fuck out of here,” Beth said.

“We still have to pay.”

“Fuck. Can’t we just run out? They couldn’t catch us.”

“Don’t worry, bitches,” Maggie sighed. “We’ve got plastic, and we’ve got tits. We are unstoppable.” She marched toward the front, and the sisters followed behind. Beth glanced back to catch the young clerk peering at them from behind the opposite end of the aisle. She put one finger up to her lips and smiled. His eyes widened. She lifted her hip slightly and spanked herself. His jaw dropped. She blew him a kiss, and then his head disappeared around the corner. She hurried to catch up with her friends.

An overweight woman checked them out at the front. She took her time ringing up each item, looking at the product and looking at the girls. Her arm fat jiggled each time she reached for something new. Behind her, the men mumbled to themselves and periodically shot glances. The woman had wrinkled lips and a faint mustache.

“Pack of Marlboro Lights too, please,” Maggie said.

“We don’t sell cigarettes here—have to buy them at customer service,” the woman said, breathing heavily.

“Where’s customer service?”

“Customer service’s closed.”

“If it’s closed, then I can’t buy cigarettes.”

“Guess not.”

“And you can’t help me out?”

“Nope.”

“Thanks so much.”

The woman held up a bag of chips and looked into Maggie’s eyes. She glared. Then she put the chips in a grocery bag and smiled.

“You’re welcome. Thanks for shopping at Jack’s. Have a nice day.”

“Ugh!” Maggie slammed the trunk of her car down. “What a bitch!”

“This whole place gives me the creeps,” Beth said. “Is that like a bad sign or something?”

“Well, luckily we aren’t staying here, we will be out on the river,” Jen said.

“Yeah,” Beth said. “Duh. You don’t think those freaks in there have boats?”

“Duh yourself, bitch. You scared?”

“I think that’s Jacob,” Maggie said, pointing at a rusty white VW microbus pulling into the parking lot. She waved, and the driver waved back.

“So does Peter know about him yet?” Beth said.

“No, why?” Maggie said.

“Just wondering,” Beth smirked.

Jacob rolled up next to the girls and rolled down the window. The engine screeched as he parked. Maggie ran up to greet him as he got out. He was several years older than her, tall and thin, with black hair pulled back into a ponytail. His cheeks had several days’ worth of stubble, and he sported a pointed goatee on his chin. He wore a faded purple tie-dyed t-shirt, dark green shorts, and was barefoot.

“Maggs, good to see you, girl,” Jacob said. Maggie gave him a warm embrace and pecked him on the cheek. She held his hand and walked him back over to the sisters.

“Beth, Jen, you remember Jacob, right?”

“Hey,” Beth said coolly.

““Sup,” Jen said.

“Nice dreads,” Jacob said. Maggie frowned.

“Thanks. Nice bus,” Jen said.

“So cool of you to come down this weekend,” Jacob said. “I can’t believe you all actually rented a houseboat, you’re going to have the best trip ever.”

“Only weekend we could get,” Maggie said. “All the other dates were booked. We’re lucky to get one, actually.”

“Yeah, they do pretty good business renting those things, for sure.”

“How can you stand living here?” Beth asked.

“What do you mean?”

“It was like...every one of the people inside that grocery store was staring at us the entire time.”

Jacob paused, looking up in the air. Then his eyes met Beth’s. “Oh, don’t let the locals spoil you,” he said. “I bet they were staring. You’re probably the prettiest things they’ve seen in years.”

“So Jacob,” Maggie said, and swung his arm by the hand, “before we get out on the water, you think you can hook a sister up?”

Jacob smirked. “Right down to business, huh? Yeah, I got what you want. You want to give it a try first?”

Maggie looked at her friends and then back at Jacob. “We’ve got a little time before our friends

get in. Yeah, sounds like fun.”

“Bertha has room for one more,” Jacob said, patting the side of his bus. “The other two will have to follow behind until we get there.”

“Get where?” Jen asked.

“Um, down by the river, before the bridge there are a few picnic tables. Usually it’s pretty quiet down there.”

Maggie tossed her keys to Beth, smiled at Jacob, and climbed in through the open driver’s side door of the microbus. Jacob watched as she crawled like a cat across the cracked leather seat. She bounced into the passenger side and then beckoned Jacob by curling her finger. Jacob smiled at the sisters and then pulled himself into the bus and shut the door.

“Don’t lose us,” Beth said. “I’ve never driven in Utica before.”

“No worries,” Jacob said. “You can’t get lost. Trust me.” He turned on the engine, sending high-pitched whine back through the parking lot.

“Should we ditch them?” he asked Maggie.

“No, of course not.” Maggie slapped his arm. “They have the money.”

“Just kidding, girl.” He pressed the power button on the Audiovox tape deck that was mounted on top of the dashboard. Maggie pulled up one foot on her seat and looked out the window at her friends as they drove forward. Drums and guitar rang through the speakers.

“Coming around, coming around, coming around,” multiple voices chanted to the music. She watched Jacob sing along under his breath.

“What are we listening to—Phish?”

“No,” he said. “Dead, man.”

“It all sounds the same to me.”

“This was one of the best concerts ever. Winterland 1977. The girls were wild back then.”

“Like you were there?” Maggie asked, suddenly losing interest as she looked behind her. The back of the bus was taken up completely by a bed. A pile of mismatched blankets partially covered the bare mattress. Brown and orange plaid curtains shaded the windows.

Jacob glanced behind him and then looked back toward the road. “Too bad you are out on the river this weekend instead of with me, we could put that to good use.”

“Whatever,” Maggie laughed. “My boyfriend wouldn’t like that too much.”

“That didn’t seem to stop you at Matt’s party.”

“Totally different. You caught me at a moment of weakness,” Maggie said. She watched the old houses on her side of the street turn to storefronts as they drove through the downtown. A few tourists were peering into a gift store window. An old man with a mutt sat on a bench. He wore a windbreaker pulled up over his head. He made eye contact with her as they drove by. She turned away.

“And that’s why you can’t stop thinking about me, right?”

“Or, that you have the best weed in the state.”

“So you’re using me.”

“You love it.”

“You’re right,” he said. “Use me and abuse me.” The downtown was behind them after only a few blocks. As they approached the bridge over the river, Jacob turned off to the right. Beth and Jen followed close behind. They took a wide loop down around to the frontage road.

“It was really sweet of you to help us put together this weekend. We all needed to get away from Dixon so bad. My mom is driving me fucking nuts.”

“My pleasure,” Jacob said. “You will love it out on the water. Smoke a little grass, drink a little

booze, listen to some tunage. Maybe that friend of yours Beth will even lose her big V.”

~~“Yeah right,” Maggie said. “Beth’s no virgin. She was the biggest slut in our class.”~~

“Oh. Jen then?”

“Why?” Maggie said, leaning away from him.

Jacob furrowed his brow. “Didn’t you tell me one of your friends back there was still a virgin?”

“I don’t recall. You wouldn’t have heard that from me.”

“You guys were teasing her at that house party. Something about daddy’s girl or promise rings?”

“I guess I don’t remember,” Maggie said. “If I told you at the party, I probably said a lot of things.”

“So is she?”

“Jen is still a virgin, yes. Don’t say anything. What do you care?”

“Just wondering,” he said, holding the steering wheel with both hands. The wheel was almost horizontal like a spinning plate balanced on a pole. “They are Irish twins, right?”

“Yes.” Maggie crossed her arms and looked back out the window.

“Don’t you think it’s funny how they are so close in age, same parents, same upbringing. One of them turns out to be a slut, and the other keeps her virginity all through high school? Siblings are interesting.”

“Don’t call my friend a slut. Can we change the subject please?”

“Sorry, that’s what you called her.” He waited for a response. “What am I talking about? I rambled on sometimes. Who cares, right?”

“You seem overly interested in my friends,” Maggie said. “And you’ve got this hottie riding with you right here.”

“Yes, indeed I do.” He pulled the van up to a grove of pine trees in a small gravel lot. He shut off the engine, turned off the Dead, and squeezed Maggie’s thigh. “You’re the one with the boyfriend, remember,” he said. “I’m here for you, whenever you need me, and whatever you need me for, and I don’t care about your friends.” He leaned in for a kiss, but Maggie popped open the door latch and spilled out into the warm morning air.

“Don’t we have to meet the idiots soon?” Beth asked, sitting behind the wheel of Maggie’s car.

“The marina is on the other side of the bridge,” Jacob answered. “No hurries, man.” He tiptoed barefoot across the gravel and leaned up against Jen’s side of the car. “You gals like to party?”

“Hell yeah,” Jen said. The two exited the Sunbird and followed Jacob to the picnic table by the water. Maggie stood back a moment with her arms folded. She didn’t know what exactly, but she had that feeling—that feeling like when she was at school and knew she had forgotten something but couldn’t remember what. She looked behind her and then up above at the highway. No one around, and no one could see them from the road. She watched Jacob joking with Jen, and she became momentarily embarrassed, realizing she was a little jealous. The feeling quickly faded.

“Jacob, don’t even think about lighting up that joint without me,” she said. She walked over and wedged herself between him and her friends. Jen and Beth both scooted over a few inches. Jacob leaned in and hugged her. She smiled at Jen, took the joint Jacob was offering her, and lit it with her Zippo.

The four took turns passing the weed. They watched the brown water, wide and shallow, lapping against the mud banks. White herons stood far out in the middle of the river. Great cumulus clouds soared high above the river. The pine needles smelled like camp to Maggie. She felt a warm pressure in her eyes. She laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Beth asked.

“Thinking of something. Nothing,” she said. “Something...nothing.” They all laughed.

“So are you joining us this weekend?” Jen asked, looking at Jacob.

“I wish,” Jacob said, “but I am needed elsewhere unfortunately.” He gazed out at the river, lifting his hairy chin. “You see, sweetheart, every year, on this weekend, my friends all get together, and we throw the biggest party around. Think Woodstock meets Lollapalooza.”

“So why aren’t we going to that?” Jen asked Maggie.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “Aren’t we invited?”

Jacob stood up and took a few steps toward the riverbank. “Private party, I’m afraid. I think you would have a great time, but these friends are pretty exclusive.”

“So where is it?” Maggie said.

“Can’t say.”

“When is it?” Beth said.

“Starts tonight. Goes for three days.”

“What’s so great about it?” Jen said.

“Everything,” Jacob said. “Drugs. Music. Art. The people. It’s one great big family, all living at the same time, you know.”

“We want to go!” Beth said. “Who doesn’t want to see three hot teenage—legal, I might add—bombshells at their party? It’s not really a party without us.”

“Look, I’m sorry I brought it up, all right? No party—forget I said it. Besides, you’ve got a houseboat. Wouldn’t you lose the deposit or something?”

“Mom’s credit card number and a fake ID,” Maggie said.

“Well still, you’re going to have way more fun on the river. You’re not all really into the hippie scene anyway, right?”

“True.”

“You’ve got a big bag a weed for your weekend,” Jacob said.

“Also true.”

“You brought some high school studs along to drool all over you the whole time, right?”

“Hey, Peter’s in college,” Maggie said.

“Well there you go. Ivy League boys smoke up more than anyone. So that’s why,” he paused, “you won’t be joining you this weekend. I’ve got plans. But maybe I’ll sneak out if I can, swim up in the dead of night, sneak up onto your boat”—he jabbed a finger under Maggie’s arm—“and get ya!”

“Ahh!” Maggie jumped. “None of that, none of that. You call my cell if you are coming out. We’ve got enough local freaks to be worried about. Anyone sneaks up on the boat—they are going to get fucked up.”

“Cell phone isn’t going to work out on the water,” Jacob said.

“What?” Beth asked. “What carrier?”

“Doesn’t matter. ET not gonna phone home out there.”

“Well, smoke signal or something. It’s too bad you aren’t taking us to that party.”

“Oh Jesus, man, the party, the party. Just relax, ladies, don’t worry about it. No hurries. No worries.”

“So what’s the party for?” Jen asked, fiddling with one of her dreads.

“To party.”

“Yeah, loser, but why? You say every year this weekend—what’s the occasion?”

Jacob sat back down and lit a second joint. He took a long drag, held it in, and then exhaled. The smoke billowed out from his lips.

“Summer solstice,” he finally said, coughing. He offered the joint to Jen, who took it and took a drag.

“Is that like the astrological thing, or like some pagan thing?” Maggie asked.

“Yes, both actually,” Jacob smiled. “Tomorrow is the longest day of the year for this part of the world. People throughout history have celebrated the equinox and the solstice. The days coincide with harvests and planting and life and death and rebirth.”

“That’s some heavy shit,” Jen said.

“Yeah, pretty fucking sweet,” Jacob said. “Before the Christian holidays, the ancient tribes would worship the things that were real to them in their lives. Things like the moon and the sun and stars and water.”

“So is that what you are all going to do—worship the river?”

“No, not really. Just celebrating nature in general. Knowing that thousands of years ago, people were dancing around naked, making sacrifices, blessing their food supply, cursing their enemies—around this same day. It’s like a ritual. Back in the day, all the village women thought summer solstice was the best chance of the year to get knocked up. It’s a real turn-on.”

“Lots of March birthdays?” Jen said.

Jacob thought about it. “Yeah, probably.”

“I like the dancing around naked part,” Maggie said, “but, you’re right—I’m not really into the hippie shit that much. No offense though, it works for you.”

“None taken. Now come here and let me spank that attitude out of you.”

“Nope.” Maggie stood up slowly, feeling the complete effects of her high. She was slightly dizzy. “No spankings. No drum circles. No hippies. We have to go meet the guys, I think. How much do we owe you for the bag?”

“On the house,” Jacob said. “Boat. On the houseboat. Get it?”

“Hilarious. Are you sure we can’t pay you?” Beth said.

“Sure as can be. Maggie, it was great to see you, stay safe out there. Girls, it was good hanging out again.”

“Thanks, Jacob,” Jen said, hugging him. Beth waved, said thanks, and walked toward their car.

“When will I see you again?” Maggie said, looking down at his bare feet. One of his toes was missing. She wondered why she hadn’t noticed at the party when they were lying naked on the boat together—probably because she was drunk at the time.

“That depends on you. When do you want to see me again?”

“Let me get through this weekend, and then I’ll give you a call. Have fun at your ancient pagan drum circle hippie-fest.”

“Have fun on your teenage sex romp jock cheerleader light beer puke-fest.”

“I will,” she whispered in his ear, and then licked it. He kissed her fully on the mouth and squeezed her tightly. She walked away backward, looking at him.

Jacob stood still in front of his rusted white microbus until the girls had pulled out of the parking lot and were circling back up the on-ramp. When they were out of sight, he jumped back in the VW laughing.

“Holy shit,” he shouted, grinning ear to ear. “Did you catch all that?” His eyes blazed in the rearview mirror. A pair of tiny black eyes sparkled from under the pile of blankets on the bed in back.

“Yes,” a voice croaked. “We did.”

The boys pulled into Utica half an hour later, half drunk and smiling. A cop car nosed out from behind a bank as they turned onto Main Street, and Scott pumped the breaks. The three turned their heads simultaneously as they cruised past the squad car, and a pie-faced officer glared back at them.

“Well, shit,” Jerrod said. The two up front nodded and both held their cans down low. The cop car turned out into the street as they passed and followed close behind.

A family of four crossed the street a block ahead, and Scott rolled to a stop. The cop car pulled up on their tail.

“Fucking pedestrians,” Jerrod said. The dad and mom crossing in front of the jeep wore pasty golf shirts. The mom had a sweater tied around her neck. The boy stopped in the middle of the street to pick something up. “Jesus Christ, kid!” Jerrod said. “Get the fuck out of the road!”

“Jerrod, shut up,” Peter said. “Hand me your beer, I’ll put it back in the cooler.”

“I’m not done with it yet,” Jerrod replied.

“Goddammit, shut the fuck up and hand me your beer!”

“Both of you chill out,” Scott said, checking the rearview mirror. “The cop’s not gonna do anything. We aren’t speeding.”

The dad walked back and grabbed his son by the arm.

“Come on,” Scott sneered. “That pig should arrest them for jaywalking. What the fuck, man?” The dad scowled as he dragged his son across the street, and Scott resumed down the block.

The cop followed until the next light then swerved off to the left.

“Fucking tourists,” Peter said. “Just walk out in front of traffic, you dumb shits. Obviously the police don’t give a fuck.”

“Hey, you guys see a liquor store anywhere?” Jerrod asked.

They looked on both sides of the street as they rolled down the main drag. Harley Davidson motorcycles sat out in a row in front of a local bar. Kids stepped out of an ice cream parlor with tan, red, white, and blue ice cream cones. They passed a closed restaurant and a t-shirt shop, but no liquor store. At the end of the next block, they saw a large vinyl sign advertising “wine tastings.”

“You think the girls would want some vino?” Peter asked his friends.

“You probably do, you fag,” Jerrod replied.

“Mm, yes,” Scott chipped in, “my name is Peter. My boyfriend and I would like a peach spritzer.”

“Whatever, pull in here,” Peter said. “I don’t see any liquor store, and I don’t feel like driving all over looking for one. I know Maggie likes white wine anyway.” As they pulled up, two women in their mid-forties got out of a Cadillac Escalade and walked toward the winery. Peter noticed one in particular who wore a white tank top pulled tight across her chest.

“Fuck yeah, look at that shit,” Jerrod said from the back seat. “Two MILFs getting some booze.” He stood up and leaned over the roll bar. “Excuse me, ma’am?” The two women turned. One smirked and continued walking, while the tank-topped one walked toward the Jeep.

“You better not stand up in that while you’re moving; you might fall out,” she said.

“Don’t worry about that, I’m a professional,” Jerrod said. Scott pulled to a stop, and he and Peter jumped out. “Do you know where a liquor store is around here?” Jerrod asked.

The woman breathed in, showing off her profile as she looked up and down the street. Scott walked into the store, and Peter stood watching as a spectator.

“No. Looks like you already found one though,” she said, pointing to the pile of empty cans in the backseat. “You look like you’re my son’s age. Are you even old enough to drink?”

“I’m old enough for a lot of things,” Jerrod said as he leaped out of the backseat. He walked right up to the blond mom. “We’ve got a houseboat for the weekend. Would you and your friend care to join us?”

The woman stepped back and laughed out loud. “Yeah, right. I’m sure our husbands wouldn’t notice us missing for the weekend.” She started walking back toward the entrance, and Jerrod and Peter followed.

“Well maybe we’ll run into you out on the river,” Peter offered. “You’re welcome on our boat anytime.”

The woman stopped before the door and turned to face them both. “I’ve been thinking lately that it would be kind of fun to party with a bunch of teenage boys,” she said. Peter and Jerrod looked at each other, and then back at her. “My husband works night and day, and I just sit around the house reading romance novels and thinking crazy thoughts.”

Peter swallowed. “What kind of crazy thoughts?” he asked.

The door swung open, and the woman’s friend stuck her head out. “Mandy, are you going to sample some wine with me or are not?” She gave the two guys a once-over and then looked back at her friend.

“I’m coming, hold on,” Mandy said. “These two young gentlemen have invited us to the houseboat for the weekend. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“No offense, boys, but I don’t think you could handle us,” the woman said.

“I’d love to find out,” Jerrod replied.

Mandy snickered. “All right, enough from you two,” she said as she walked inside. “You boys have fun playing with each other.”

Peter followed right behind. “We have girls meeting us at the marina.”

“Yeah,” Jerrod said, “hot young girls who like to fuck.”

Mandy turned around and smacked Jerrod across the face. Her friend, five other customers, and the woman behind the tasting counter all stopped what they were doing and stared. “You watch your mouth, you little shit. Why don’t you show some respect?”

“Jesus Christ, lady! Why’d you hit me?” Jerrod’s face burned red.

“We’re sorry.” Peter stepped in. “He didn’t mean anything.”

A man came out from behind a door marked Office. “Is there a problem here, miss?” he asked.

Mandy held her chin up and peered down at Jerrod. “No problem. Just teaching these boys some manners.”

“Well, then I suggest you buy something, sample something, or get out,” he said.

Mandy walked over to her friend and shrugged. Jerrod rubbed his cheek and looked around.

Peter walked up to the counter and asked for a sample of something red. The girl working gave him a plastic thimble of red wine. He took a drink and thought it tasted like rhubarb. “Too sweet. What do you have that girls would like?”

“A lot,” she said.

“What do you recommend?”

“What type of wine does she like?”

“I don’t know. White?”

“Can I see your ID?”

“You already served me something.”

“ID.”

Peter shrugged and pulled out his wallet. He gave her his fake. It was someone else’s ID who looked vaguely similar to him. The girl gazed at the ID for a few seconds.

“Where’s the birthdate on this?” she asked.

“Top left.”

“Okay, here you go,” she said as she handed it back. “So what do you want?”

“Your cheapest bottle of white wine.” He realized as he stood there that Scott wasn’t in the store.

The girl put a bottle down on the counter. Rock River White. “Is this good?”

“It’s okay.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“Thirty-nine fifty.”

“Thirty-nine fifty...what the f...,” he muttered. “Never mind.”

“Whatever,” she said, and put the bottle back up on the shelf.

Peter walked over to Jerrod. “Have you seen Scott?” he asked.

“Did you see the tits on Mandy?” Jerrod replied. “Tell me you wouldn’t want to titty-fuck those delicious milkers.”

“Of course I would, but where’s Scott?”

“How the fuck would I know? He’s probably taking a dump. Do you think she’ll come over to our boat?”

“To slap you again? Hopefully.” Peter saw another exit toward the far end of the store. He walked outside into a large fenced-in yard. Tall trees shaded the grass, and several people sat out in cast iron chairs. Scott was sitting next to Mandy and her friend. Each had a glass of wine in hand.

“Scott,” Peter said, “we’re going.”

Scott casually waved him off, and appeared to be telling some hilarious story to the two older women. They both laughed as he sat back and sipped his drink.

Jerrod walked up behind Peter. “What the fuck! Look at that asshole sitting there. He’s putting the moves on my MILFs!”

“Your MILFs? Dude, seriously, let’s get the fuck out of here. The wine costs forty fucking dollars a bottle.”

“That’s some high-class trim right there, buddy. Maggie and her friends have the bodies of ten-year-old boys compared to those two. I’ve gotta hit that shit.” Jerrod walked over to the three seated together. “Ladies, please ignore everything my friend says. He’s nineteen, he works in an ice cream factory, and he’s a bed wetter.”

Scott threw his drink on the grass, lunged out of his chair, and tackled Jerrod across the lawn. The women jumped up and screamed, and the man from inside the winery ran out.

“Get off my property!” he yelled. “I’m calling the cops, break it up!” Jerrod had pinned Scott and was rubbing his face in the grass. Peter grabbed Jerrod by the collar and pulled him up. “All three of you, get lost!”

The boys ran back through the store and out into the front parking lot. Jerrod jumped in back of the Jeep, Scott turned the ignition on, and Peter flipped over the roll bar into the passenger side. He

feet slammed down hard on Scott's shoulder.

—Scott howled and slugged Peter back. “That's my bad shoulder, you fucking asshole!” he yelled.

Peter looked back and saw the same cop from Main Street flying into the parking lot with lights flashing. “God fucking dammit,” he said.

The cop pulled up behind the Jeep. Jerrod kicked the cans under the seats. The three boys turned forward. Scott watched the officer get out and walk toward them in the rearview mirror. The cop carried a clipboard in one hand and kept his other hand down by his gun holster.

“License and registration,” he said in a nasally Southern accent. Scott handed him his actual driver's license and registration out of the middle console. The cop looked at the paperwork for several seconds and then jotted something down on the clipboard. “Where you boys from?”

“Dixon,” Peter said.

The cop took off his polarized glasses to reveal a pair of dark beady eyes. “Dixon what?” he asked.

“Dixon, Illinois,” Scott replied.

The cop leaned his head in so his face was inches from Scott's.

“I know where Dixon is on a map, young man,” he growled. “When you answer my question you address me as ‘sir.’” He leaned back out of the Jeep, and the boys were silent. “Now, one more time. Where. Are. You. Boys. From?”

“Dixon, sir,” Peter said.

“You shut up.” He pointed at Peter, and then jabbed Scott with the end of his clipboard. “You said it.”

“Dixon, sir,” Scott said.

“All right then. Tell me this. Do they tolerate ‘disturbing the public’ in Dixon?”

“No, sir,” Scott said. The three kept their heads straight ahead.

“Well then, why do you think we would tolerate it here in the beautiful township of Utica?”

“We weren't—” Jerrod started to say.

“Shut up,” the cop said. “Now listen here, the three of you. I do not like punks coming through here and horsing around in our establishments. It's bad for business. Do you understand me?”

“Yep,” Jerrod said.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I've got way too much to deal with today to be putting up with pissants like yourselves. Get to wherever you're getting to and knock off the BS.” He looked closely at Jerrod. “You boys been drinking?”

“No, sir,” Peter said.

The cop glared at the three of them. “Why are you in Utica?”

“We've got a houseboat for the weekend, sir,” Peter said, becoming the unofficial group spokesman.

“Houseboat? Well, let me tell you something else. You boys better not let me catch you drinking out on the water. We're patrolling all weekend, and I'll be watching for you.” He paused and then took a step back. “You boys hear about the Davis girl?” He had a strange look on his face.

“No, sir.”

“You probably wouldn't. You planning to Jet Ski?”

“No, sir.”

“Probably for the best. Last week, Miss Jenny Davis was out on her daddy's Jet Ski about five

miles upriver. You want to know what happened?"

Peter and Scott exchanged glances.

"What happened to her?"

"She was decapitated," he said, as his eyes widened.

"What the fuck!" Jerrod said. "Decapitated?"

"Watch your mouth, boy," the cop said. "Decapitated. A crying shame. She was prom queen, you know. Type a girl who wouldn't let any one of you touch her, that's for darn sure. The paper said it was an accident. Fishing line got caught up in some branches and tore right through her neck."

"Why are you telling us?" Peter asked.

"Cause if you're taking out a houseboat, that's the part of the river you'll be on. And I know it weren't no accident."

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you what happened. Someone strung up that line on purpose. I think someone killed her."

"Why?"

"Why? I don't know why. Jealousy. Sick perversions. I just know that too many accidents happen out on the river. And I think that if you boys know what's good for you, you'll cut out all this funny stuff, or there might be another."

"Another accident?" Jerrod asked.

"You've been warned," the cop said, putting his shades back on. "You boys enjoy your vacation now." He walked back to his car.

Peter turned to his two friends. "You think he's fucking with us?"

"Of course he is. Fucking pig," Scott said.

"Well, good thing we don't have any fucking Jet Skis with us," Jerrod said.

Scott backed the Jeep out of the parking lot, and they headed toward the marina.

The black Eagle Talon raced north up the back-country road. The driver downshifted into fourth gear and blew past the truck they were flying up on. He had a thick black mustache and a square jaw. He shifted back to fifth and looked over at the young, dark-haired girl in the passenger seat. She had a small upturned nose, black eyes, and dark brown skin. She looked straight ahead, biting her upper lip. He held the steering wheel with one hand. His large forearm was covered with faded black tattoos. He glanced at the clock on the dash. Los Tigres del Norte played at low volume on the AM dial. The driver sped past another farm truck.

“Don’t worry about me,” the girl said softly in Spanish.

“I’m not worried,” he said, whipping around a slow-moving tractor. “You’re ready.”

“I’m ready,” she repeated. She held her petite hands in her lap and hung her head. She closed her eyes and silently recited her prayer. The driver looked straight ahead, cataloging the road and the oncoming traffic. “You hungry?” he asked.

“No.”

“I’m starving. Let’s get something in the next town.”

“Do we have time?” she asked, opening her eyes. He took his gaze off the road long enough to give her a smile.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m hungry. Let’s get a burger.”

“I don’t think they serve burgers this early.”

“Yeah, they do,” he said. “Everyone serves everything these days.”

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