

HIJACKED LEGACY

A Seamus McCree Novel

Sample

James M. Jackson



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DEDICATION

*For my chosen and given tribes,
united by chaos and love.*

SIX MONTHS PRIOR

TYLER

TYLER GRIPPED THE STEERING WHEEL so hard he thought it might crack. These first five days working back in the office had been the worst. Two wasted hours commuting each day. COVID had proved he could do the work better at home, but it was the boss's way or the highway. Even with unemployment at "record lows," few employers would consider him. He was stuck at his job, stuck on the Mass Pike, stuck in life.

He was curious what had caused Charlene to insist they move their monthly get-together forward to today. It had better be damned important to force him to drive through this rush-hour crap. And parking near her Dorchester apartment was going to be a bitch on a Friday. Zach, who worked from home, would take off early and snag an easy parking space. While Tyler crept toward his exit off the Mass Pike, he patted a slob of Old Spice onto his cheeks and neck. Charlene liked him to smell nice.

Traffic moved better once he reached the Southeast Expressway. He pulled into the alley that passed for a street near Charlene's place and found a single on-street-parking spot three houses away. Had to be an omen that Charlene's summons was about something good.

At the door of the three-family, he pressed the bell for the second floor. With a metallic buzz, the lock disengaged. He thumped up the staircase. Charlene met him at her door with a Sam Adams in each hand. "Zach's here." She handed him a brew and closed the door behind them.

Tyler swished the sweet combination of malt and honey to warm it up before it froze his throat going down and took a slug from the sweaty bottle. "Hits the spot." He stepped on the heels of his tennies, kicked them onto the mat Charlene had placed by the door, and donned the slippers she insisted they wear. At the time she'd given them the slippers, she said, "I don't want to keep vacuuming your dirt."

He followed Charlene into the kitchen, rinsed the now dead Sam

Adams, and grabbed a second from the fridge. He sniffed the air like a hound on scent, picked up only a hint of lemon from the dish soap dispenser. "I'll bite. What's for dinner?"

Charlene gave him the stare she had perfected during her five years in the Boston City Police Department. He held up his hands in surrender. "Officer Bendick, what's twisted your tail?"

She smiled, swatted his bicep. "That's Officer Bendick, sir, to you, Mr. Kemp. I didn't have time to cook and ordered lasagna from Mama Risa's. Now that you're finally here, I can share all the news."

He couldn't decide from her mixed messages whether it was good news or bad and followed her into the living room. Zach had commandeered the lounge and was leaning over his laptop, eyes squinted like he didn't like what he was seeing.

Tyler tapped the beer lightly against the side of Zach's head. "Wassup, bro?"

Zach pointed to his screen. "I don't believe this shit."

Charlene puffed out her five-three frame. "What, you thought I lied?" To Tyler she said, "The judge dismissed the case because the star witness washed up on the banks of the Charles, all her fingers and toes broken."

Zach looked up from his laptop. "After torturing her, they bashed in her skull." He rotated his computer to show Tyler the information he had pulled from the web where the kid from MIT who had found her posted the cellphone pictures.

Bad news then. Tyler stated the obvious: "She dies. The drug dealer gets away with everything. The guy had a reputation. Why wasn't she protected?"

Charlene began pacing. "The prosecutor offered. Her boyfriend is a rich dude, invented one of those multi-player shoot-'em-up games. He paid for private security."

Zach said, "Phoenix Bluff. It's really the nuts. It launched our sophomore year. I can't tell you how much time I spent playing it. We . . ."

The look Charlene gave him could have frozen lava. "The big news is that rich guy caught me outside the courthouse and offered a quarter million bucks if I quote-unquote made sure the guy could never harm anyone ever again."

Tyler went still. Charlene, no matter how upset she was about the woman getting killed or the drug dealer skating on the charges, wouldn't

have gotten them together to cry on their shoulders. They had no secrets between them—well, few secrets—but emotional support wasn't their thing. She called them together because she was considering killing the dealer. Did she realize that or was getting them together some subconscious thing?

She had bent their ears many times since she had become police about how the justice system failed the victims, how something needed to be done to the worst of the worst who seemed untouchable. "Oh sure," she'd once complained, "eventually we get them. But, shit, Whitey Bulger was damn near eighty by the time they caught him." That, she maintained, was not justice. Tyler and Zach totally agreed. But what could you do?

A quarter-million is serious bucks. Like, six times what he brought home in a year before taxes. Somebody offered him that much, he'd do it. That thought gave him a jolt of energy. It would take serious planning to get away with it, but that might be half the fun. He kept excitement from his voice and asked, "You think he meant it, or was he just blowing off steam?"

"Oh, he meant it. Told me he'd pay in bitcoin so no one could trace it. Said if I didn't want to do it myself, he'd give me a ten percent finder's fee and pay whoever I found the two-fifty large." She shook her head, looked like she was replaying the conversation in her mind. "Definitely. And from Zach's reaction to who the guy is, I suspect to him that's chump change."

One thing didn't make sense to Tyler. Why had the guy approached Charlene? He asked her.

A smile twitched across her face. "He might have heard me mutter that the asshole needed to die. Like tomorrow."

Tyler looked at Zach to gauge his reaction. He was still tapping on his laptop. The guy was a friggin' genius in the cyber world—not so much with the real one. If Tyler wanted this, it was up to him to move this conversation forward. "Charlene, are you telling us you want to do it? If you're asking us to help, I'm in."

At Zach's wide-eyed stare, a flash of worry crossed his mind. Tyler hadn't intended to say that, but it was out there now.

Charlene stopped pacing, dropped onto her bean bag, tugged her hair, and stared up at the ceiling.

Zach, seemingly oblivious to Charlene's distress, said, "You guys remember me mentioning Adam Smith?"

Tyler's worry bloomed into frustration. What the hell was Zach talking

about? “From history class?” he asked. “The guy who wrote *Wealth of Nations*?”

Zach snorted. “Never heard of it. I mean the high-priced hit man who called himself the Happy Reaper.”

Charlene and Tyler shared a look that said, “Here he goes.”

“Last I heard,” Charlene said, “he was doing life in maximum security.”

“True, but—stay with me on this—what if we reincarnated his business model? We,” he waved his arm to include all three of them, “become the Happy Reaper. Charlene takes the finder’s fee. The new Happy Reaper does the job, and we split two-seventy-five three ways. That’s ninety-one thousand, six hundred, sixty-six dollars and sixty-six cents. Two cents left, we can draw straws for them.”

Holy shit. This was getting real. The crap about becoming the Happy Reaper was bullshit, but Zach was in. Tyler was in. Was Charlene? Or were they supposed to convince her to forget it? Ever since he had first met Charlene in Mrs. Popovich’s third grade class, he’d known she had a dark side. It was ironic that she’d become the cop because she’d been the one who in sixth grade took revenge on that girl spreading lies. While cutting off hanks of the girl’s hair, she’d ‘accidentally’ sliced her cheek. Tyler got suspended for a month for holding the kid down. What was her name?—Molly something. Totally worth it. No one spread rumors targeting Charlene again. Or messed with him.

She’d had the idea in high school to screw with her cheating boyfriend’s car. He’d suggested keying the car. Instead, Zach had fried the electronics. That had cost the guy a shit-ton more than buffing out some scratches.

Charlene may not yet know she’s planning to take down this miscreant, but she will. He tuned back in to what Zach was saying.

“. . . portal, and we can duplicate the cards he left with each victim. They had a Celtic Cross on one side—green and blue colors. On the other is his tagline: Results Guaranteed. We’d set up our own payment system. The bitcoin—”

Charlene leaped to her feet, knocking over her empty beer bottle that rattled on the wooden floor. “Stop.”

Now’s the time to give her a little shove across the finish line. He walked to her, stooped, and put an arm around her shoulder. “You want to do this. We’re with you. I’ve been practicing at the range. I’m solid to a thousand yards. Happy to help.” He thought, don’t oversell, and watched her intently.

Charlene hadn't interrupted or objected. Zach wasn't fantasizing. He was definitely in. Charlene's face transformed from thundercloud at what she probably thought was Zach yanking her chain to the faintest curling of her lips. Tyler knew that look. It was the same one she'd had in tenth grade before stripping and accepting the dare to leap naked from the cliff into the water-filled quarry.

Tyler said, "We're made for this. You can even the scales of justice. Zach gets to run the Happy Reaper's websites and set up a payment portal to accept bitcoin. I get to use the sniper skills the Army taught me. And we get paid."

Charlene broke from his hug. "I will not take a penny."

They discussed various scenarios over two more rounds of beer and progressed to specifics during dinner. Tyler still wasn't sure about Charlene's commitment until she suggested they draw straws to determine who would do the hit. He felt destined to win first dibs and suffered a huge letdown when Charlene pulled the winner.

Zach was content to set up all the computer shit. That left Tyler helping Charlene do recon and practicing long-distance kill shots at the range.

It wasn't that \$137,500 would make him rich, but it would change his life. And he was confident this was not a one and done.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2022

THE HAPPY REAPER

HIS THIRD FULL DAY ON the lam, and the Happy Reaper figured his luck was holding. He was driving a RAV-4 with a Florida license plate he had lifted from a vehicle of the same make, model, and color, and only a year older. “In God We Trust” the plate said. Maybe, but everyone else was out for themselves, including those he’d hired for \$2.5 million to engineer his escape. Which was why by the time anyone official realized he was gone, he’d driven across Massachusetts and traded the “safe” car his liberators had provided him for the RAV-4 he stole from Economy Lot E of the Albany International Airport. That was one dude who should think twice before using a magnetic key holder box again.

He had avoided the interstate system with its toll booths and license plate readers and bypassed cities with their ubiquitous cameras. What with the extra miles, lower speeds, and the frequent stops required to fight his exhaustion, he had doubled normal driving times to reach his storage area north of Chicago. Every stop gave him the willies. One curious cop tapping on the window while he slept in his car could spoil everything.

Phase one—getting here—done. Now came phase two—the hunt.

He punched his password into the keypad. The lock disengaged with an electronic whir. He entered the unit, noted the stale air, and locked the door behind him. Everything was as he had left it, ignoring six years of dust that tickled his nose.

He packed the RAV-4 with more guns and ammunition than an average right-wingnut prepper possessed. All IDs and credit cards had expired during his six-year absence except the Harland Walter Gottkind passport. No credit cards meant he’d continue to use cash. He stuffed his glove box with enough C-notes to last a couple of months. He didn’t want to waste time finding the right person to create new IDs before dealing with Seamus McCree. So, he was Gottkind, should anyone ask.

His phone app claimed he would arrive at McCree's place on Shank Lake by two p.m. He drove exactly three miles above the speed limit. With breaks to stretch his legs and grab lunch, he figured three o'clock was more like it.

From then on, he'd improvise based on whether Seamus was home. Either immediately, or once Seamus showed up, they'd have the promised *mano a mano* contest. Wouldn't exactly be sporting because Seamus never carried a gun, but that was on McCree. They both knew what would happen.

Should he say anything or spare Seamus the few seconds of knowing he would die and just do it? He had five hours to decide.

SEAMUS

THE FANFARE OF A TRUMPETER swan family that had taken up residence on Shank Lake woke me that mid-October day. I opened my eyes to the gray of predawn light filtered through the trees. With no reason to rise with the swans, I lay on the bed and stretched: my toes curling down and my arms reaching up. At sixty-one—to be exact, sixty-one years, six months, and two days—my spine lengthened the same way a freight train does, its engine pulling forward, extending tension to the couplings. My spine was quieter than a train starting up, providing only one audible pop. That made me confident that standing, my height would still be its full seventy-four inches.

Three distinct swan voices came from the lake. The calling adult pair resembled loud trumpets with mutes in place that deadened the sound. Their nearly full-grown cygnet's bleats could have come from a toy trumpet like the one I had given my granddaughter, Megan, for her last birthday.

Her parents, especially my stay-at-home son, Paddy, were not thrilled with my gift. I smiled, remembering the back-and-forth-negotiations between Megan and her father that resulted in Megan selling the toy to him for three times what it had cost me. Once the money and trumpet changed hands, I told Megan that nothing in the deal with her father prevented her from buying another one and selling him that one, too. Paddy became apoplectic. Hey, every nine-year-old should learn practical economics and to understand the fine print in contracts; who better to teach her than her grandfather?

The cacophony on the lake escalated in a prelude to the swans taking off. Trumpeter swans can't leap into the air like most ducks. They use their wings to propel themselves, running on the water to reach takeoff speed. Their calls cease during their liftoff—I figure they're concentrating on getting airborne. Instead, their wingtips smack the surface, producing rifle-shot percussive slaps. I closed my eyes and counted the wing beats until liftoff. Fifteen. Once airborne, they celebrated with more calls that echoed around the lake as they sped toward nearby feeding grounds.

I let my ears continue birding. A late flock of robins was the loudest, but I also ticked my mental checklist for several other species. An overnight

weather front had triggered millions of migrating birds to ride the favorable winds on their journey south. Those I was hearing were some of the later migrants to land around my neck of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. They required rest and food to restore their fat stores for the next leg of their trip—hopefully before the snows flew.

I had already prepared for my nonmigratory winter: plenty of stacked seasoned firewood to warm the house, trails cleared and ready for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, plow attachment on my Bobcat skidsteer to keep the driveway and roads open.

Best, I had only two projects to complete before I could settle in for a long, contented winter. Plus, a nagging voice in my head reminded, one criminal trial to win. That assumed the damn prosecutor still insisted on bringing the case to trial. Everyone told him he had no chance of convincing a jury to convict me and my sister Colleen Carpetti, even though we were guilty as hell. The trial would waste time and money. Unlike Colleen, I had plenty of both.

Life, I thought, does not get much better than this.

From the foot of the lake a pair of resident barred owls hooted, asking, "Who. Who. Who cooks for y'all?" Since Colleen wouldn't return until Saturday and today was only Monday, if I wanted a hot breakfast, the answer to the owls' question was obvious. With light streaming onto the porch, I had no excuse not to get up. I converted my porch bed into a rustic settee, filled my bird feeders, and scattered seed on the ground.

The day's weather sounded perfect to spend searching for elusive spruce grouse on land held in trust for Megan. My immediate project was to complete a proposal to the USDA to fund habitat improvements on that land. All that remained was to finish mapping every place I spotted spruce grouse. Between today and tomorrow, I figured I could cover all the remaining territories. That left me more than a month to file the application.

With miles of hiking planned for the day, I cooked and ate a thousand calories of buckwheat flapjacks drowned in maple syrup made from my sugar maple trees. Figuring I'd have a late dinner, I filled my day pack with two full water bottles, a twenty-ounce diet Dr Pepper, a brick of cheese, and a baggie filled with gorp.

What else? I included binocs, a GPS device to record the precise location of each sighting, and two spare pairs of socks for the inevitable soakers I'd

get trekking through the spruce wetlands the grouse loved. Before heading out, I did a slow spin to make sure I had everything. Sure enough, I couldn't take notes on my cell phone if I left it plugged into the wall socket.

I ATV'd to the farthest site I still needed to map. That area was a bust, but in the second location, I spotted a covey of four spruce grouse feeding high in the trees. While I recorded the details, my phone chirped. I had a message from Colleen. *We need to talk. Now!*

I had hoped my second project would not interfere with today's outing. Arrangements were under control for the party I was throwing in less than three weeks to celebrate my mother turning eighty-five. Colleen lived near Mom in metro Boston and had agreed to handle the invitations. Colleen wanted everything buttoned down, and Mom was . . . flexible.

I checked the phone's signal: enough to text, but not enough for voice.

Me: *What did Mom do?*

Colleen: *Wants a darts competition to raise money for charity*

Me: *OK. It's her party.*

Colleen: *There will be betting. Will Kavanaugh's Tavern allow?*

I hooted, startling the grouse into flight. Their rapid wingbeats pulsed the air. Colleen, who is my half-sister, didn't grow up in Boston and didn't know Kavanaugh's, an Irish cop's bar. After my father's murder in the line of duty, my Uncle Mike had taken me there for my first, decidedly underage, drink. It was where I had held Uncle Mike's wake six years ago. I'd bet they had a bookie *on staff*.

Me: *It's an Irish pub. Bartender will hold the money.*

After a moment's reflection, I added, *What's really bothering you?*

Colleen: *She keeps inviting more people*

I considered repeating "*It's her party*" but decided that was not helpful. We had the entire bar for the afternoon. I had arranged for a couple of off-duty Boston City cops to check invites. My instructions allowed invitees to bring a guest—no party crashers, though. And everyone must be twenty-one or have a bona fide parent in tow.

Me: *Don't worry about \$\$\$. It's all good.*

Before she replied, I added: *Will be in the woods all day. I'll respond this evening.*

My phone dinged another message. I placed the phone into "Airplane Mode" and enjoyed the rest of the day.

By the time I returned home, my sports watch recorded I had walked

14.74 miles in eight hours and six minutes. I had used both pairs of spare socks, needed a third, and didn't care. My sightings included twenty-seven spruce grouse, forty-three other bird species, a moose cow with twins, a bobcat, and a bear with triplets—the first time I had ever seen triplet bear cubs.

And, blessedly, not a single human.

That luck did not hold.

CHARLENE

CHARLENE BUZZED ZACH IN. ONCE he'd swapped dirty shoes for slippers, she handed him a Sam Adams. "Tyler beat you here by a few minutes." On their way to the living room, she showed him receipts for the Powerball tickets she had bought the threesome. "Had to, with the expected prize being more than a quarter-billion."

Zach squinted an eye, like he was doing a calculation in his head. "We win, I'm buying a house on Beacon Hill. I'll stand on my balcony and look down my nose at everyone. What about youse guys?"

Charlene clinked bottles with Zach and pointed him to the lounge he preferred. She flopped onto the beanbag on the floor. "You want to live on snooty Beacon Hill? Even with the money, I'd still want to be a cop and take down the bad guys. I'd buy this house from the owner and rent the other two units to pay for the taxes and upkeep."

The thud of something hitting the floor in the apartment above rattled the walls and yanked their attention to the ceiling. "Change that. I would evict that guy and move up to the third floor." She waved at Tyler to let him know it was his turn.

"Me? Dividing the prize three ways we'd each have eighty million before taxes. Plenty to live on, which would be a gigantic relief because this afternoon I told my boss to shove it. I'm officially working full time on our little enterprise."

Zach gave him a high-five.

Interesting. Charlene munched a handful of peanuts, felt a tingle in her right cheek as salt found the spot she had bitten earlier in the day. Didn't stop her from eating more—she loved the taste of salt. She half-listened to the guys talking hypotheticals about winning the lottery while considering how she could move the conversation to the real issue that worried her.

She'd known Tyler since third grade. Even then, he had wanted to achieve results his way. He liked rules, especially if he made them up, and took great offense if someone didn't play by them. He hated in others what he was majorly guilty of doing himself, a flaw he shared with those closeted-gay legislators who were the loudest LGBT-bashers.

The dude did not suffer fools gladly or silently. Bosses included.

Insubordination got him in trouble in the Army—that, and landing a right hook on the chin of a major who refused to see Tyler’s point. Less than three months after his graduation from the sniper course, the Army expelled him with a less than honorable discharge. The chip on Tyler’s shoulder was the size of Nantucket. The jobs he could get without an honorable discharge were crap. And paid crap.

But he didn’t learn from that. His intolerance and big mouth had caused him to quit or be fired from several jobs. He was no longer welcome at the LARP events that still occupied many of their friend Zach’s weekends. Tyler had loved the live-action role-playing, and some of his costumes were outrageously good. But at any minor infraction, he went ballistic on the guilty party and insisted on informing the guys in charge *exactly* how they should do their job.

Zach may have introduced the idea of taking on the Happy Reaper persona, but Tyler molded the role to fit his style. He fancied himself the personification of Barry Eisler’s fictional hired assassin John Rain. He wanted rules like Rain: target principals only, no family members to “send a message.” And if someone hired him, they couldn’t hire anyone else for the same job. But he fancied himself a modern man. While Rain wouldn’t kill women or children, Tyler figured women’s rights had earned them the honor of being targets. No kids, though. And no pets. Not that she or Zach had ever suggested targeting kids or pets. Why would they?

Yep, appropriating the role of the Happy Reaper with his principled promise of “Results Guaranteed” fit Tyler like a glove. And now that he had quit his job, he’d push to accept more paying work.

Had Charlene created her own Frankenstein?

Even with all Tyler’s faults, she had never had a more loyal friend. He’d had her back, even if she didn’t need it. He’d supported her justice platform from the get go—provided they had a plan.

Zach was geekdom at its finest. He still lived in his parents’ basement even though he was earning decent six figures doing whatever he did with gaming code. But, like a butterfly in a field of flowers, he flitted from one interest to another. To Zach, this was another LARP event, except the violence was real. Eventually, he’d lose interest in the Happy Reaper and justice killings and throw himself at some new lust.

She shook her head, remembering how he’d approached his first “assignment.” He’d devoted all his spare time to hacking into the Happy

Reaper's enterprise. That done, he devoured literature on whether killing in real life was as good as killing in online games. Surprise: he liked it even better, and now he just wanted to kill stuff.

With an eighty-million-dollar Powerball win, she wouldn't need Zach's dark-web pages designed to attract people willing to pay big bucks to have someone killed. She could pay the two guys herself—or just Tyler, once Zach lost interest. But who could blame them for dreaming big? She'd been the one who bought the tickets.

Thing was, they had to stop dreaming and deal with reality. This Happy Reaper thing had been the tail on her dog. Now it was the lead, pulling the dog in a new direction.

With a slug of beer, she rinsed her mouth of peanut debris, waited for a conversational lull. “Guys, let's focus. Before we each provide our assignment updates, there's something else we need to discuss. Adam Smith, the original Happy Reaper, escaped three days ago.”

That got their attention.

“They transferred him to a hospital. He was suffering shortness of breath and chest pains. The next morning, a nurse went to wake him. Instead of Smith, she discovered a dead patient their system showed had been transferred to a local funeral home. Someone had rigged the machines to report the corpse had a regular heartbeat, was breathing, the whole nine yards.” She looked at Zach. “That something you could do?”

“Sure, if I knew how the machines worked.” He accessed his cellphone. “Probably a heart-rate monitor. Let me—”

Squirrel! “Later, Zach. My sources say they have no clue what happened. The security cameras showed nothing. The question is, does the real Happy Reaper being on the loose change anything for us?”

Tyler shook his head, sending his wavy hair flopping from side to side. “An old, dying man? He'll find someplace nice to breathe his last. At least nicer than dying in prison.”

Charlene said, “Do we know how sick he is? And he's not that old, roughly our parents' age. Do you think it will bother him that we appropriated his website and Zach left that ‘Results Guaranteed’ card in Alabama? Should we postpone our planned action against McCree? You know, in case Smith plans to do something himself? And what about Tyler's Silicon Valley angel?”

SEAMUS

IT WAS NEARLY FIVE BY the time I returned home. I planned to hydrate, take a shower, and, after dinner, pop onto the lake in a kayak for a sunset paddle. The jukebox occupying my brain kicked in “April is in my mistress’ face,” an English madrigal by Thomas Morley I had sung years ago. No longer remembering all the words, I hummed some combination of the bass part and the soprano while bass was tacet. *April is in my mistress’ face; July in her eyes hath place; September in her bosom, but December in her heart.*

Before going into the house, I diverted to the garage to dispose of my garbage. The garage door stuck, as it often did ever since the beginning of summer when my Bobcat had tangled with a rope. It had pulled the door off its track and bent the bottom panel. A neighbor and I had repaired the door—well, to be fair, the neighbor did the repairs; I was his go-fer.

I gave the obstreperous door a solid thwack, feeling the reverb in my elbow, jerked the door open, and froze at cold metal pressing my neck.

A voice I recognized from years ago said, “What is it with you and garage doors?”

My mouth dried in an instant. My scrotum clenched. I closed my eyes and expected to see a highlight reel of my life flash by. Instead, the Happy Reaper’s words returned me to fifteen years earlier. He had surprised me at a sticky garage door at my then Cincinnati house. He’d spared my life. Nine years later, with tables turned, I had let him live. But I had not let him go, even after his iron voice promised that if I did not, he would feel duty-bound to kill all the McCrees.

Later, I saved his life in prison, and he had magnanimously offered to exact revenge on only me, *mano a mano*. The threat had been hollow. He’d been in a maximum-security prison serving consecutive life sentences. Either he had reincarnated multiple times or he’d escaped.

His sour breath tickled the raised hairs on my neck. If I had my friend Niki’s skills, I could disarm him. I visualized a reverse leg sweep, tensed my muscles, and a new thought iced me. Without her skills, I wouldn’t succeed. I’d change his aim and instead of killing me, he’d leave me a vegetable.

Don't put that thought out there. Relaxing my muscles, I recognized the hollow feeling in my chest as deep regret for things left undone. Leaving Colleen in the lurch and ruining Mom's party. Not finishing the spruce grouse study for Megan. Oh Megan, I so much wanted to see how you would change the world. For—what was he waiting for?

Was he a cat playing with Seamus, the mouse? I licked my top lip, brushing my mustache with my tongue. "You planning to gloat? Tell me how you've always been better than me?"

He stepped back, pulling away the metal I assumed was a gun. "Amazing how people handle fear. Some pee their pants. Others grovel. I compress mine into a miniature black hole and don't allow it to see the light of day. You do snarky and impatient. Drop the stuff and turn around. I have a proposition."

I considered reminding him that the physics of his fear-eating black hole meant it would consume him from the inside. He may know that and not care. Not the time for a physics lesson. I opened my hands and let gravity take the diet Dr Pepper bottle and plastic wrap that had protected the cheese block.

I faced the Happy Reaper for the first time since I'd saved his life that day a fellow inmate had slit his throat.

No April in *his* face, which was bloated and preternaturally shiny, like someone on prednisone. His gray eyes radiated with the fierceness of July's sun. I did not know what was in his bosom, but December certainly still inhabited his heart. I shivered. "You look like shit. A proposition?"

"Heart failure. A genetic gift from my father, who died at forty-seven. Thanks for asking. If it wouldn't be too much trouble to get a glass of water and sit on your deck? You're smart. You know what happens if you try anything. Thing is, I have a problem. Help me solve it, I'll call us even."