

DIRTY LITTLE ANGELS

a novel by Chris Tusa

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for Pamela

Chapter One

The baby was a white fist of flesh. Mama had placed the ultrasound photo atop her dresser in a sterling silver frame. That night, when the pain bent her over in the kitchen, I imagined that same white fist punching her insides black-and-blue. When Daddy called from the hospital to tell us she'd lost the baby, my brother Cyrus said I shouldn't worry. He said the baby didn't feel any pain, that at nine weeks it wasn't anything but a ball of meat squirming in Mama's stomach. He said it hadn't even sprouted arms or legs yet, that it still had a fish brain and gills growing in its neck.

That night, I dreamed of Mama's flesh creaking as the doctor unstitched the trapdoor in her stomach. Her insides looked like crushed red velvet, and the baby's skin was blue as a robin's egg. I imagined the stitches in her stomach, tiny black mouths puckering between the folds of her belly. I remember wondering where the baby's cries had gone, if they had stayed inside Mama's body after the doctors stitched the trapdoor shut.

Nearly six months later, I was sitting in front of Ben Franklin High in my yellow flower dress, studying for my Science test, thinking about the baby again, my fingers tracing the pink gills of a fish in my Biology textbook. As I stared at the fish, I heard the crackle of gravel and what sounded like the faint moan of a car horn. I looked over my shoulder and saw a rusted blue Hyundai with a dented fender idling in the parking lot behind me. It was my brother Cyrus.

As I walked up to the car, Cyrus revved the engine. The inside of the car smelled like bug spray. Ever since I could remember, Cyrus had always been a hypochondriac. He was always reading some medical encyclopedia, convinced he had suddenly come down with some dreadful disease. A few weeks back, he'd seen some story on the news about the West Nile Virus, and ever since then, he'd been spraying himself down with bug spray before he left the house.

As I climbed into the passenger's side, he turned up the car stereo, and Mystikal's "Tarantula" crackled through the speakers. I closed the door and

buckled my seat belt, and Cyrus rammed the car into drive and spun the tires, until a cloud of brown dust swallowed the car.

Cyrus was wearing a New Orleans Hornets jersey and a black Reebok skullcap. He had a thin line of brown hair for a beard, and he'd shaved little lines into his eyebrows. Two years ago, Daddy had helped him buy the old Hyundai from a junk yard in Independence. He'd spent the whole summer souping it up. It had red racing stripes, bald, rotten tires and silver spoked rims. He'd covered the seats with leopard-skin seat covers, and he had a mini eight ball hanging from the rearview mirror.

"You going to Verma's?" Cyrus asked.

"Yep. Why didn't Daddy pick me up?"

"He's down at the pool hall." Cyrus took a drag and blew the smoke out his nose. "Man stays down there much longer, they gonna start charging him rent."

Since before I was born, Daddy had worked down at the meat packing company on Julia Street as an Assistant Supervisor, that is, until last December, when he'd gotten laid off. For the last few months, he'd been collecting unemployment checks. He spent most days down at Spider's Pool Hall nursing cocktails or at the Fair Grounds betting on horses.

"Hey, can you give me a ride to Meridian's tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow." Cyrus took two quick drags and flicked the Lucky Strike into the wind. "Gotta go downtown and meet my parole officer."

Cyrus had been arrested three times, once for stealing chrome rims from a warehouse in New Orleans East, and another time for snatching car stereos from the parking lot of a gun show. This time, he'd got caught selling a quarter bag of weed to a boy over on Almonaster Street. Mama agreed to bail him out, but only if he promised to join the church and get saved. Mama said Cyrus's soul was blacker than mud, and that only the preacher's water could raise up his dead soul. Cyrus agreed to get saved. Mama and I even went down to the church that day to watch Brother Icks dunk Cyrus in the baptismal pool. When I asked Cyrus what it was like, he said it felt more like being drowned than being saved. Mama was convinced that the water had cleansed his soul, though, because two days after he was saved, Cyrus went down to Ink Dreams and had a line from Revelation tattooed on his bicep that said: "He Shall Rule them with an Iron Rod." Wherever he went, he kept a pair of brass knuckles in his back pocket. On Saturday nights, he and his friends rode up and down Paris Road in their rickety cars looking for boys to fight. Other nights, they hung out in an old abandoned bank down on Elysian Fields.

"So," I asked Cyrus. "When are you going to take me down to the old bank with you?"

"You're too young to go down there."

I grabbed my lipstick from my purse and pulled down the visor mirror. "Meridian wants to go too," I told him, puckering in the mirror as I spoke. "She

thinks you're cute." I knew Cyrus had the hots for Meridian. He always said she had hips that could make a glass eye wink. I'd even found a picture of Meridian in his wallet one time. He'd actually cut out her picture from the Ben Franklin Yearbook and stuck it in his wallet like some kind of creepy stalker or something.

Cyrus grinned as he pulled into the parking lot of Verma's apartment complex. "I'll think about it." He put the Hyundai in neutral, and I climbed out. As he pulled off, I noticed Verma in her pink robe, in the courtyard of the apartment complex, sitting in a lawn chair near the edge of a green swimming pool, smiling. She was a skinny black woman with mossy gray hair, and she had a gold tooth with a star etched into it. Glaucoma had swallowed her right eye in a filmy white shroud, and diabetes had eaten up the veins in her feet. Mama and Daddy had known Verma for years, and I'd known her practically all my life. Since before I was born, she'd lived in the same ratty apartment complex on Pelopidas Street. Most days, after school, I went to her apartment to help her wash clothes, dishes, whatever she needed really. Every day, before I left, she gave me a five dollar bill that smelled like perfume.

"Where's that brother of yours off to?"

"I think he's going back to work," I said. "Then down to The Lakefront for the races."

"Has the devil burrowed into that boy's skull?" Verma wheezed, a glass of Pepsi sweating at her feet. "If he don't watch it, he's gonna end up like that boy with the paper bag face."

Verma had worked for a woman whose son's Dodge Neon fishtailed through a field while racing down at the Lakefront. She said the gas tank on the Neon had burst into flames, that the boy had been swallowed in an orange ring of fire, and that after the accident, when she visited the boy in the hospital, his face looked like a brown paper bag with two holes ripped out for eyes.

"Where's your momma? Over at the house?"

"Don't know. Think she's cooking dinner." Mama wasn't cooking dinner. She hadn't cooked dinner one time since the miscarriage. Daddy said she was dead to the world.

"What about your daddy?"

"He's down at the pool hall."

"Already?" she asked, pressing the glass of Pepsi against her forehead as she spoke. "He come home last night?"

"I don't think so."

"I'm gonna have to have a talk with that father of yours again," she said, rattling the glass of Pepsi. "Somebody needs to light a fire under that man's ass. He's been outta work for almost three months now."

"I think it's been more like five."

Verma reached into her apron pocket for a Chesterfield. As she lit the cigarette, I motioned to her for a drag. "What you want a cigarette for, Hailey? So you can get hooked like me? You too young to start killing yourself."

I motioned to her again and she handed the Chesterfield to me. "All right, dammit. Just one quick one though. And make it fast. Your momma and daddy gonna skin me alive they see me sneaking you drags."

I sucked the smoke deep into my lungs.

"Your Uncle Errol been by the house again?" Verma asked.

"Yep." I handed the Chesterfield back to her. "He came by Thursday."

"Old rotten-toothed slug." Verma scratched an itch deep in the clump of her grey hair, took a drag off her Chesterfield. "He still on your daddy to sell the house, huh?" She flicked her ashes into a folded paper napkin in her lap and took another drag. The tip of the cigarette glowed bright orange. "Well, don't go worrying yourself over it, Hailey. That sneaky-ass uncle of yours ain't gonna get his grimy hands on your momma and daddy's house. Not if I got anything to say about it."

A few years back, Verma had gotten an insurance settlement from Sears after she'd slipped and broken her hip while shopping there. Daddy said she had more money than the Pope, and he couldn't believe that with all the money she had, she still lived in the same ratty apartment complex. Mama said it was because Verma actually saved her money, rather than living off credit cards and pay-day loans like most people he knew. Daddy even suggested that we borrow money from Verma, but Mama wouldn't have it.

"I got a friend," Verma said, "down at Wal Mart. Says he can get your daddy a job."

"Really? Doing what?"

"It ain't nothing special. Just a cashier job. But it'll tide y'all over. 'Till your daddy can get back on his feet."

"I hate to say it, but I doubt he'll go."

"I'll dress your daddy up and haul his ass down there myself if I have to."

Verma took another drag off her cigarette and snuffed it out with her green slipper. I helped her out of the lawn chair and we went inside.

For the rest of the afternoon, I helped her stuff artichokes and peel shrimp for stew. Before I left, she gave me a five dollar bill. The word "five" had been colored green with a ball point pen, and Lincoln's eyes had been cut out.

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When I got home, I was surprised to notice that Mama's Saturn was gone. The yard was littered with Daddy's clothes, jeans and work shirts, shoes like empty mouths. A pair of his leather gloves was dangling from the branches of the

crepe myrtle. They were brand new, still stitched at the wrists, and they looked like two black hands joined in some kind of upside-down prayer.

When I got inside, I could hear Mama calling to me from her room.

“Hailey? That you? Would you make me some tea? And could you get me an aspirin for my head?”

I boiled some water for tea. When it was done, I headed toward her room, grabbing an aspirin bottle from the bathroom cabinet on the way.

Mama’s room was dark, and she was buried to her neck in a white afghan, her face glowing in the blue light of the television. Daddy’s side of the bed was empty. A few weeks back, he’d started sleeping on the sofa. Mama said he snored too loud, and that when he was in bed with her, she couldn’t get any sleep. I told her about those nose strips that all the football players wear, but she said nothing ever worked the way it was supposed to. I’d seen Daddy sleeping a thousand times, and I’d never heard him snore. Not once.

As I walked into the room, I noticed the framed certificate Mama had gotten for being Nurse of the Year. It said, “To Lena Troslcair, LPN, in Recognition of Your Outstanding Work.” The only pictures in the room were the ultrasound of the dead baby on Mama’s dresser and two paintings of Jesus, one of him hanging on a cross, staring down with those terrible blue eyes, a golden halo atop his head, and another of him holding up his left hand, a bright crimson heart glowing in his chest. There were no photographs of me, no pictures of me holding an ice cream cone, chocolate dripping down my arm. Not one of me in my purple dress, the purple ribbon Verma gave me fluttering in my hair. Only Jesus and the dead baby. In my family, it was as if you had to be dead to get noticed.

Mama was chubby with a bun of yellow hair. Her arms looked like two white loaves of bread, and she had a crooked nose planted between two round cheeks that looked like perfect scoops of mashed potatoes. When I got to her bed, I put the cup of tea on the nightstand, opened the aspirin bottle, and pulled the cotton ball out. Mama opened her mouth and closed her eyes, and I placed the aspirin on her tongue. “What’s wrong?” I asked, handing her the cup of tea.

She brought the cup to her lips, blowing on the tea as she spoke. “The finance company came by and took my Saturn today. Said your daddy was late on the payments again, so they took it.”

“Is that why Daddy’s clothes are all over the lawn?”

“Do you know how humiliating that is? Having some stranger drive up and take your car ‘cause you’re too broke to pay the bill?” Mama took a sip of tea. “I had to wait two years for your father to get that promotion before I could get that car. Finally, I get one, and look what happens.”

“I’m sure he can get you another car.”

“You know how long it’ll take before he can afford another car like that?”

Mama had come from a wealthy family, and when her and Daddy decided to get married, against my grandma’s wishes, Grandma disowned her and cut her

out of the will. Ever since I could remember, Daddy had always worked overtime at the meat packing company, trying to make enough money to buy Mama all the stuff she wanted, but for some reason, Mama always seemed like the money he made was never enough.

“Anyway, it’s not just the car. Your Uncle Errol keeps coming around, looking for his money. Says if we don’t pay, he’s gonna take the house. Hell, we can barely even pay the bills with all the loans we got. I even had to stop getting those massages I was getting. Course, your daddy thinks they’re some kind of luxury, but the doctor told me himself that weekly massages are important, especially if you want your back to heal properly.”

A few months before she’d gotten pregnant, Mama had thrown her back out moving a patient from one bed to another while working a graveyard shift at Mercy Hospital. Daddy said it was hard to believe that someone could throw their back out just from moving a patient from one bed to another. Mama said Daddy didn’t have a clue how difficult being a nurse was.

“I just wish I could go back to work. All I do now is sit up in this bed and rot.” Mama put the cup of tea on the nightstand and grabbed a nail file from the top drawer. “And when I’m not worrying about money, all I’m thinking about is that dead baby. I keep praying,” she said, filing the nail on her pinkie until the white tip was a perfect half moon. “Hoping God’ll come along and save us from all this mess.”

Sometimes, at night, I’d hear Mama saying her prayers, asking God to save our family, asking him to watch over me and Cyrus and Daddy. I’d even tried to pray a few times myself. I’d get on my knees and cup my hands, waiting to hear God’s voice roll over me like a black wave, but nothing ever happened. I wanted him to save our family the way he’d saved other families, but every time I got on my knees and spoke to him, it seemed like no one was listening.

Since Mama couldn’t sleep, we decided to watch TV for a while. On the news, there was a story about a talking fish. The newscaster said a 20-pound carp in New York that was packed in ice suddenly flipped out of a delivery crate and started speaking in Hebrew, shouting all these apocalyptic warnings, saying he was the soul of some preacher who’d died a few days before. The people they interviewed claimed it was a miracle, and that the talking fish was proof that God really did exist. I laughed at first, because the story reminded me of that *Sopranos* episode when Pussy got reincarnated into a fish. But as we watched the newscaster interview some lady with big hoop earrings, I started to hope that God would send me some kind of sign, that somehow he’d fly down to Earth and perform some miracle that would cure my whole family.

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That night, the moon looked like Verma's cataract, and the sky, black and cluttered with clouds, was crying little drops of rain. Around two a.m., I woke to the sound of Daddy's Nova growling down the rutted clam-shell driveway. I could hear his keys jingling in his pocket as he walked along the porch, the splintered floorboards creaking beneath him. As I fell asleep, I listened to the rain-filled gutter outside my window, the slow drip of water like a wristwatch ticking in my ear.

Chapter Two

For the last few months, I'd noticed that sometimes my thoughts would get scrambled, so much that the thoughts themselves felt like roaches crawling around in my head. It had all started after the miscarriage, after Mama and Daddy started talking about getting a divorce. Ever since the baby had died, Mama and Daddy hadn't spoken to each other as much, and when they did, it was like they were staring through each other, as if they didn't recognize each other anymore.

The roaches were crawling in my head again, so I decided to skip school. I sat in my room for a while and read. I looked up mental disorders on the Internet. It showed schizophrenia and depression, and it said that people's mental states were controlled by electrical currents in their brain. I wondered if the wires in my brain were broken, like the brains I saw on the Internet.

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That night, Cyrus and I picked up Meridian and headed down to the old bank. Cyrus had agreed to bring me to meet his friends, as long as I brought Meridian. The old bank was on Elysian Fields, between the EZ Check Cashing building and an old run-down crack house. The large, glass drive-up window of the old bank had been spray painted black, and some of the letters of the name "Gentilly Commerce Bank and Trust" had fallen down. The T was missing so that the word TRUST now spelled RUST, and a large black letter C dangled from the side of the building like a broken halo.

Cyrus said his friend Moses Watkins was renting the place, and that he was planning on making it some kind of drive-through church, but it still looked like a bank to me. The lobby was empty, except for a few lawn chairs and a stained mattress with rusted springs sticking out the side. The walls were covered with posters, mostly of half-naked girls in string bikinis, rappers with muscles carved into their chests sporting gold chains and fists full of money. Across the room, a girl in a pink half-shirt was passed out on the mattress, a half-drunk bottle of Purple Haze in her hand.

Moses was sitting in the corner in a green lawn chair, a tin can of sardines in his lap. He was a wiry black man with a pot belly, and he had one gold tooth surrounded by a row of yellow teeth and a large afro with a blue comb sticking out the side. His eyes were tiny and round, like drill holes in a casket, and he was wearing a black and yellow 8 Ball jacket with the arms cut off and black jeans

with missing knees. I'd heard that he'd been hit by a car while crossing St. Anthony Street a few years back. The rumor must have been true because he had a thick purple scar the shape of a question mark on his head where his afro wouldn't grow.

After Cyrus introduced me to Moses, he and Meridian wandered over to the corner of the room, where a few other kids were shooting dice. Moses introduced himself and grabbed a lawn chair that was leaning against the cracked, yellow wall. I introduced myself, asked him how long he'd lived in New Orleans, and he said that he'd come here a few years back, after working as a preacher and as a Ferris wheel operator for a traveling carnival. He said he'd started working for the carnival just after he'd been released from Angola Prison, and that since he didn't have any preacher skills, he stole most of his sermons from a man named Billy Sunday. He said that Billy Sunday was a famous evangelical preacher who used to travel the country spreading Jesus's word. Moses's favorite Billy Sunday saying was about sin. He'd said he was against sin, that he'd kick it as long as he had a foot, that he'd fight it as long as he had a fist, that he'd butt it as long as he had a head, that he'd bite it as long as he had a tooth. And when he was old and fistless and footless and toothless, he'd gum it till he went home to Glory. Moses said he must have preached those words a thousand times. When I asked him if anybody ever found out that he was using another preacher's sermon, he just smiled, picking a piece of sardine from his dirty teeth. He said that all the people really wanted was Jesus, and that every night he served Jesus up, like a pretty little leg of lamb, for the sinners to sink their teeth into.

He told me about how he was planning to turn the bank into a drive-through church, that he'd gotten the idea while he was in prison, and that with work and raising kids, people just didn't have time to go to church anymore. He thought a drive-through church would be a good idea, and he said that once he got the place cleaned up, he planned to open it up to the public every Sunday and use the bank's drive-up window to hand out a weekly scripture. He said if people wanted a hamburger and fries, they could drive right up to a window and get it, and that salvation shouldn't be any different. He even talked about eventually sending scriptures as text messages directly to people's cell phones.

After we finished talking, I hung out with Cyrus and the other boys for a while. From talking to them, you'd think Moses was a celebrity. Most of them seemed obsessed with his violent past. Rumor had it that Moses had killed a man while he was in Angola, and it seemed like the boys were attracted to this, as if they somehow got a rush from hanging around someone with a reputation for being dangerous. Most of the boys worshipped the rappers they watched on TV, and to them, Moses was just an older version of Ludacris or Fifty Cent. They also seemed to like the fact that Moses had connections with a bunch of local drug dealers. They even said that Moses got them free drugs whenever they wanted, and that a few weeks back, Moses had brought them a whole batch of acid.

Cyrus said it was the coolest acid he'd ever seen, and that each hit had a little red cross on it.

Later, when we were leaving, Moses walked us out. His car was parked next to Cyrus's. It was a ratty green Omni with bald whitewalls and a broken taillight. It had yellow racing stripes, silver hubcaps, and diamond studded mud flaps. The driver's side fender was dented, caked with grey Bondo, and the windshield was a spider web of cracks, coated with white clumps of bird shit. SATAN SUCKS was spelled out across the back window in gold letters, and a yellow bumper sticker read: IF GOD DIDN'T WANT US TO EAT ANIMALS, HE WOULDN'T HAVE MADE THEM OUT OF MEAT.

On the dashboard was a statue of Mary clutching a bright red heart. In the backseat was a black and white pitbull with a spiked collar around his neck. He had a dry red scab on his head and a scar that curved around his nose. As I looked through the window at him, he opened his mouth, panting at me with his big pink tongue. A silver tag was dangling from the collar. It said HITLER.

When we got to Cyrus's car, Moses told Cyrus they needed to get some statues to make the bank look religious. Moses pulled the blue comb from his afro and began yanking it through the black hairs of his mustache. "When I'm done," he smiled. "The place'll look like a goddamn cathedral."

Chapter Three

The Dead Goat was a cluster of old, abandoned warehouses off Jefferson Highway where lots of high school kids hung out. At some point, the owners had left it to rot, and over the years, people had started dumping trash there. The whole area was littered with gutted cars, piles of junked boards, clumps of concrete and drywall, even the rusted skeletons of old washing machines and refrigerators. Originally, the area had been called Cold Storage Road, but people started calling it The Dead Goat after the police got a phone call one Halloween that a group of Satan worshipers had done a sacrifice there. Rumor had it, the police found a pentagram of gasoline burning in one of the warehouses and a dead goat dangling from a telephone pole. The goat had been gutted, and its eyes had been plucked out.

Meridian and I had gone to The Dead Goat to meet our friend Jay. Me, Meridian, and Jay were in the tenth grade at Ben Franklin High. Jay had brought his cousin Chase Haydel with him, an older-looking guy with slick black hair that looked like it had been painted onto his skull. He looked like he'd rubbed tanning cream all over his body because his skin was the color of candied yams. He had

a small red mouth that looked like a doll's mouth, and his eyes were the color of a hearse. You could tell he was older by the way he dressed. He was wearing Oakley sunglasses, a blue silk shirt and white pants. With the dark skin and the silky clothes, he reminded you of Al Pacino in *Scarface*, without the Cuban drawl and the machine gun, of course. Jay said that Chase had gone to school at Holy Cross, but that he'd dropped out in the tenth grade. He'd been to jail twice, once for beating up a boy at the A&P and another time for smashing the windshield of his girlfriend's pink Corvette with a lead pipe.

As I sat on the dented hood of Meridian's father's Buick, I watched Meridian pull a lipstick from her purse. Like me, she'd spent her whole life in New Orleans, and her family was as crazy and lopsided as mine. Maybe that's why I liked hanging out with her. At first glance, she was the kind of girl whose eyes you wanted to scratch out. But over time she grew on you, like a tumor, like a bloody scab you didn't dare pick at.

"Here," Meridian said, smiling with her fat collagen lips as she handed a tube of lipstick to Chase. "Put your number where I won't lose it." She had a noose of dirty blonde hair dangling down her back, and her Calvins were cut so low you could see the top of the purple thong she was wearing. She climbed onto the Buick, leaned back on the hood and lifted her blouse until you could see the edge of her black lace bra, the silver skull and cross bones pendant that hung from her waist chain flickering in the sun.

A few months back, Meridian's dad had taken out a Pay Day loan to buy her a boob job. I watched Chase's eyes drift over Meridian's boobs. They were obviously fake, but Chase didn't seem to care. I watched him circle a chocolate brown mole on her hipbone with a number zero, watched him draw a red number three that curved around her bellybutton. As he did this, he glanced over at me.

"Your brother ain't Cyrus Trosclair, by chance, is he?"

"Yep, that's my brother," I said, sitting up.

"He hangs out down at the old bank with Moses Watkins and them, right?"

"Yep."

"Man, he's a legend." Chase smiled at me.

Meridian grabbed the lipstick from Chase and stuck it in the back pocket of her Calvins. "You got a cigarette for me?" she asked, her sandled feet dangling, the black polish on her toenails chipped away.

Chase took a drag from his cigarette, pulled a pack of Pall Malls from his shirt pocket and handed one to Meridian.

"How'd you two do on that algebra test?" Jay asked.

"Thibodeaux's a witch," Meridian wheezed, her voice like the soft swarm of bees. "She never even covered that crap in class."

"You see her husband? At the pep rally?"

"He was there?" I asked. "Which one was he?"

“The one in the dark blue suit with the yellow tie,” Jay said. “With the black hair. And the glasses.”

“The *retard* that followed her around like a dog the whole time,” Meridian snapped. She took a drag off the cigarette and rolled her eyes. “Woman makes me wanna puke.”

“Man.” Chase glanced over at Meridian, his mouth twisted into a smile. “You must really have it in for this woman, huh?”

“Meridian’s got it in for everybody,” Jay said, smiling as he took a swig of beer. “Her daddy calls her the Black Plague on Two Legs, says instead of blood, she’s got septic water running through her veins.”

Meridian glared at Jay as if she wanted to strangle him with the purple Victoria’s Secret thong she had on. “Shut up, you walking miscarriage. Shouldn’t you be at work by now anyhow?”

“Shit,” Jay yelled. “Shit. Shit. I gotta go, Chase. Right now.” Jay tossed the Zima bottle into a patch of weeds. “I mean it. I gotta go.”

“Jesus Christ, Jay.” Chase hissed. “I just opened my goddamn beer.”

“I mean it. If I’m late again, Lois is gonna fire my ass.”

Chase flashed a pissed-off look at Jay, then walked over to Meridian and took the cigarette from between her fingers. He took a drag, blew the smoke out the corner of his mouth. “So tell me, Meridian. What’s a girl like you looking for in a guy?”

Meridian smiled with those fake collagen lips of hers. “Me? I like the dumb, slab-of-meat, brain-dead kind.” She fondled the tail of his shirt, looking up at Chase as she spoke. “The kind so muscle-heavy they might just suffocate me when they pin me down.”

Chase smiled back at her. “Well shit . . . we’re a match made in Heaven.” He took another drag off the cigarette and handed it back to Meridian. “Don’t you forget to call me now.”

Chase and Jay walked over to the weedy edge of the canal where Chase’s car was parked. It was a fully-restored, black 1968 Firebird with silver mag rims. He had a silver fish emblem on his rear fender, like the one you see on all the Christians’ cars, except this fish had legs.

“Nice, huh?” Meridian asked me.

“Yeah. He’s yummy.”

“I’m talking about the car, Hailey.” Meridian took a drag, bit her lip, then blew the smoke out the corner of her mouth. “He’s ugly as dirt,” she smirked. “Gotta nice ass, though.” She took another drag and smiled. “Maybe I could teach him to walk backwards.”

I laughed and took the cigarette from Meridian, staring at it before I took a drag. There was a long grey curled ash on the end, and a red ring of lipstick around the filter where Meridian had slobbered all over it.

As Chase pulled off, Meridian was staring at a blackbird perched on the hood of a rusted Cadillac. It looked like a black flag fluttering in the wind. Meridian raised her right hand as if it were a gun, took a drag from her cigarette and pointed the tip of her finger at the blackbird, her left eye squinted. I leaned back on the hood of the Buick as sunlight ricocheted off heaps of sheet metal.

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That night, I went with Cyrus and Moses to Krispy Kreme. While we were eating, Cyrus saw this kid named Seth Connors who'd jumped him a few years back. Seth had moved away after senior year, and nobody had seen him since then. Cyrus told Moses the whole story, and Moses said we needed to teach him a lesson.

When Seth was done eating, we followed him out to his car. I rode with Moses, while Moses and Cyrus followed Seth to wherever he was going. On the way, I told Moses how Mama had prayed to God, hoping he'd save our family, how for some reason, God had never answered her prayers. He said that sometimes people had to suffer before they could be saved. He told me about his father, how when Moses was little, his daddy used to ask him questions about the Bible. Moses said that if he didn't answer a question correctly, his father would beat him with an extension cord. He even showed me some of the scars on his back where his father had beaten him. They looked like black worms slithering under his skin.

We followed Seth for twenty minutes, all the way to Fat City. By the time we pulled into the parking lot of Seth's apartment complex, it was starting to rain, and the air was black, as if all the stars had fallen out of the sky. Moses pulled in behind Seth and killed the engine. By the time Seth got out of his car, Cyrus was walking toward him. Seth was wearing a Black Sabbath shirt, and he had a carton of Camels under his arm. He smiled when he saw Cyrus, his mouth like a red scab, his long wiry hair tucked behind his ear. "Didn't I kick your ass already, Eminem?"

Cyrus smiled back at him, and before he even knew it, Cyrus had socked him in the face with his pair of brass knuckles. As Seth stumbled to his knees, Moses stepped out the Omni and walked over to him, rubbing an apple against his shirt, a switchblade flickering in his other hand. He cut a piece of apple, holding the sliver of apple against the blade of the knife with his thumb as he brought it to his mouth, sucking the piece of apple from the blade, then tossing what was left of the apple into a muddy ditch, his eyes like fireflies blinking in a clump of dead weeds. He stepped toward Seth, grabbed him by the hair and put the knife to Seth's throat. "You ready to get saved, Boy?" Moses hissed, but Seth didn't answer. He punched Seth in the ribs, then Cyrus moved in, socking him in the gut with the brass knuckles. As Cyrus slugged Seth in the stomach, Moses kicked

him in the ribs. In a twisted way, it was kind of exciting, knowing that the boy had jumped Cyrus a few months back, and that he'd finally gotten what he deserved.

When Seth finally stopped moving, Moses and Cyrus scurried back to their cars. Moses climbed into the Omni, breathing hard. He cranked the engine and turned the car around, then followed Cyrus back to Orleans Parish.

* * *

When we got back to the bank, Cyrus and Moses smoked a joint and talked for a while. Later, on the way home, Cyrus stopped off at the Circle K for a can of potted meat. I told him I was worried that Mama and Daddy might get a divorce, and that sometimes my thoughts got so scattered they felt like roaches crawling around in my head.

He said he thought it was normal to feel like that from time to time, and that he didn't know what to do when Mama and Daddy started talking about divorcing each other. He said for a while he felt depressed, like he had a hole in his heart and his insides were empty, but that after a while, the depression turned into anger. He said he used to get Daddy's punching bag out of the garage and sock it for hours, but that after a while, he got tired of socking the bag, and that soon he started to wanna sock a real person. I told him that was probably why he liked fighting so much, and that even though I usually thought fighting was stupid, I felt like Seth deserved what he'd got. I laughed under my breath, telling him how Mama would've probably asked him to pray for Seth rather than sock him.

"She's such a damn hypocrite," he said, licking pink bits of potted meat off his finger. "I swear, it's like she went to the bathroom one day to have a bowel movement, and when she came back, she'd suddenly found religion." He scooped a pink lump of potted meat from the can with his finger. "Anyway, even if she did believe in all the crap she's always ramming down our throat, what's the point? She spent the last six months throwing money in the tithe jar every Sunday, waiting for some angel to land on her shoulder and cure the whole family. And where's it gotten her?"

"So you don't believe all the stuff she's always talking about? That Jesus is coming back? To save you from your sins?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not even sure he exists. And even if he did exist, why would he wanna come back? He already flew down to Earth once. And look how much good that did him. Don't get me wrong, I like reading the Bible. And I love the stories, especially in the Old Testament. God didn't take any shit back then. He'd turn your ass into a pile of red dust if you didn't do what he said, strike you dead with a lightning bolt. But as far as God and Jesus being real? I dunno. They just never seemed like believable characters to me."

"Why'd you get saved? Just because Mama wanted you to?"

"Yeah. I guess. I figured if getting baptized'll get her off my back, then so be it."

“You didn’t feel anything when they baptized you?”

“Whatcha mean?”

“I dunno. Mama claims you can feel the spirit washing over you when you get baptized. You didn’t feel anything?”

“Nope.” Cyrus pulled a pack of Lucky Strikes from his shirt pocket and shook one from the pack, speaking out the side of his mouth as he lit it. “Unless you count that stupid preacher’s fingernails digging into my neck as he dunked me.”

“So you’re an atheist?”

“I dunno. I thought about being an atheist, but the whole idea of somebody’s *belief* being that they don’t *believe* in anything doesn’t make much sense.”

“You could always be an agnostic.”

“What do they believe?”

“My History teacher said it comes from the word *knowledge* in Greek, and that Agnostic means ‘no knowledge’. Basically, agnostics think that human beings don’t have enough knowledge to know the answers.”

“Sounds like a fancy word for dumbass to me. I don’t mind not knowing for sure, but I don’t wanna be some kind of dumbass.”

I laughed. “What about Judaism?”

“I don’t think I’d like being a Jew. It seems like someone’s always out to kill you. First Jesus, then that whole mess with Hitler. I think I’d feel like I was walking around with a bull’s eye on my back all the time.”

“Yeah, but that’s no reason to avoid a whole religion. Anyway, my teacher says every religious group gets persecuted at some time or another. He says it’s part of being religious.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ve had enough persecution for one life.”

A few minutes later, Cyrus turned up “Cupid’s Chokehold” by Gym Class Heroes on the CD Player. I watched him smiling, tapping the steering wheel to the beat of the music, all the while thinking of Chase, imagining his little red doll’s mouth, his candied yam skin, as I stared out the car window, stars blinking through black walls of pine, the silver breeze crawling through my hair.

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