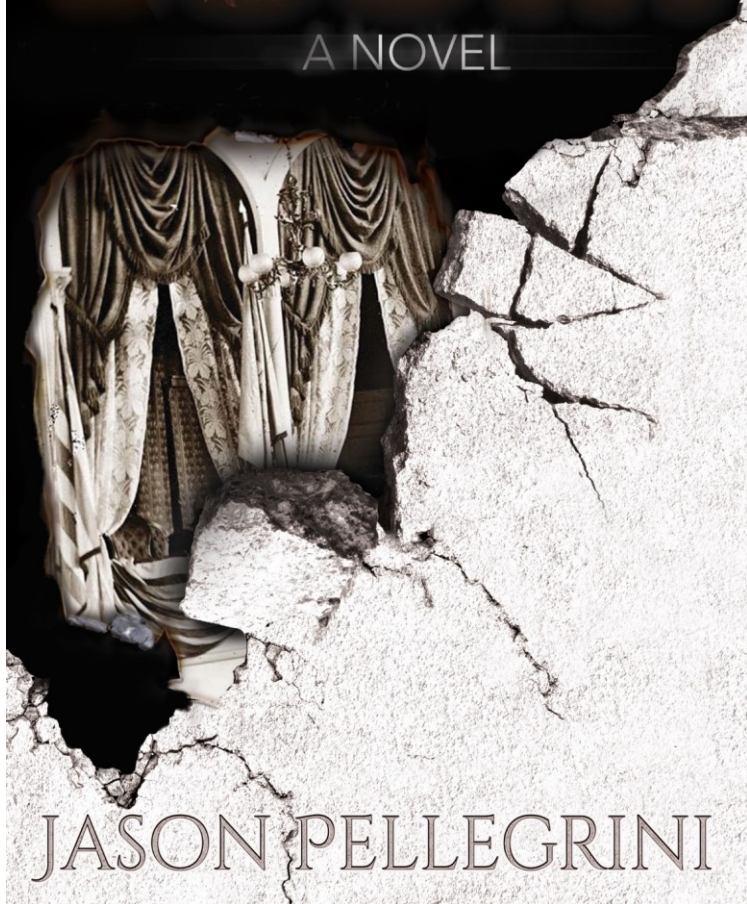


BOOTH

A NOVEL



BOOTH

THE NEW NOVEL BY JASON PELLEGRINI

At dawn, on the day of his execution, Joseph Bateman finds himself reflecting on his life, one filled with poor decisions and evil people. Even his lifelong best friend played a pivotal role in earning Joseph his seat on death row.

A phenomenon occurs as the electricity meant to kill Joseph is sent through him, and his essence is ripped from the body he has known his entire life and thrown into a new one. Only the body he now inhabits isn't new at all; it is the body of a person who lived over a hundred years before Joseph's birth.

Now living in an unfamiliar era of history and trapped inside a foreign body, Joseph learns he has been sent back for a reason: to earn redemption for his damned soul and to find a sense of peace he has never known. All he needs to do to get there is to prevent one of history's most infamous murders.

11.22.16

PART I

REFLECTION

April 26, 1995

The Last Hour Begins

One hour was all that remained in the life of Joseph William Bateman. Sixty short minutes—thirty-six hundred seconds—counting down until his heart beat no longer.

Joseph, age twenty-six, was scheduled to be executed at dawn by the state of Florida for murder in the first degree. Until then, he sat on his small bed, leaned against the wall of his cell, and ate jellybeans.

When asked what he wanted for his last meal, he could've chosen anything. There were plenty of dishes he would've loved to have had one last time. In the end, Joseph chose jellybeans.

“And don't be cheap about it,” he told his corrections officer. “I want one of those big ass bags.”

He hadn't had a single craving for jellybeans—or any sort of sweets, for that matter—in almost nineteen years. Not since his seventh birthday. On the eve of his execution, however, he had a sudden hankering for the explosion of

sugary goodness one experiences from crushing those tiny balls between their teeth.

He shoved his hand into the bag, which had lasted him the night, and was now three-quarters empty. He popped a jellybean into his mouth and ran his tongue against the candy's sugary coating. This was crucial, as he needed to detect which flavor he was about to bite down into. His taste buds picked up the faint hint of liquorish, and he immediately spat it out onto the floor. There, it joined the rest of the black jellybeans from the bag.

He had always hated the black ones. Liquorish was disgusting, and he wasn't about to let the vile taste of it ruin his last meal. Plus, he was leaving a fantastic little mess for the guards or custodial staff to clean up once he was no longer an occupant of the cell. The thought of someone cleaning up after him was pleasing. It was his last little way of sticking it to The Man. In the final minutes before death, every little victory counted.

He dove back into the party-sized bag. This time around, the end result was far more satisfying. Joseph bit down into the candy, and an explosion of orange flavoring erupted in his mouth.

Joey Beans, he thought as he chewed on and swallowed the artificially flavored delight.

It had been a long time since he had thought about that nickname. It was one his mother had given him when he was little.

Joey Beans.

He didn't actually remember getting the nickname. He was too young when his mother first gave it to him. When he was older, however, she told him stories about how he was an absolute nightmare to bring to the movies because he would fidget in his seat and talk nonstop while the film was playing. He was constantly getting on the nerves of his mother, not to mention everyone else in the theater. No

matter what methods she tried, his mother could not get her son to just sit still and be quiet.

That was until she discovered his love for jellybeans.

All she had to do was put a bag in his hands, and Joseph would sit still, and remain silent until the end credits rolled. It wasn't long before Joseph earned his cute nickname.

Joey Beans.

Looking back on it now, as his life wound down to its abrupt yet well-deserved ending, it amazed Joseph how his mother was capable of finding a single happy memory in the entire mess that was her adult life. He had always wondered how she was able to endure all that she had. Even if it hadn't been for their children, most would reach an inevitable breaking point. Not his mother, though. She may have been bent, twisted, and mangled, but she never broke. It must have been those small moments she held onto that kept her sane and strong enough for as long as she needed.

Joseph hadn't inherited that trait. When he thought back on his life, all he could remember was the hatred and suffering that made him the man he was today.

As dawn approached, and he continued his quest to polish off the industrial sized bag, Joseph reflected on the night he'd just had. It had been his last night on Earth, and even though his options were limited, he had been determined to make it a good one. The end result was a feeling of accomplishment.

He had requested a priest. He wasn't a religious man, by any means, and had zero interest in the Lord's forgiveness, but it was one of the few rights Joseph had left, and he planned on taking full advantage of it. He felt he deserved to have a little fun before his death.

Joseph had been throwing down jellybeans—black ones to the floor, all others into his mouth—one after the other when the priest arrived.

“Hello, Joseph,” the priest said. He was a frail looking man, who was probably nearing the end of days himself. “How are you tonight?”

“Oh, you know...” Joseph responded. He put the bag of jellybeans down beside him, and looked the priest in the eyes with a false mask of solemnness on his face. “Could be better, Father.”

As their conversation began, the thought entered Joseph’s mind that, if he wanted to, he could kill the old man right where he stood. Before anyone could react, the priest’s pencil neck would be broken, and he’d be finding out firsthand if there actually was a Kingdom waiting on the other side, or if he had spent his life serving some grand fabrication. It would also earn Joseph a stay of execution, which would prolong the days he had left on Earth.

Joseph had no interest in that, though.

Besides, he wasn’t going to kill someone just because he could. He wasn’t some heartless monster, after all. Still, the knowledge that he had that sort of power was intoxicating. Especially when the judicial system had stripped away every right he had, including his right to live.

“You must be scared,” the priest said.

“I am, Father. I’m afraid of what waits for me on the other side.”

“Well, that’s natural. The possibility of eternal damnation can be overwhelmingly frightening.”

“It is, Father...It is.”

Externally, Joseph had added fearfulness to the mask he wore. Inside, however, he laughed hysterically at this man of the cloth’s expense.

Joseph didn’t fear the unknown. He could not care less whether he burned in eternity for his sins, or if there was absolutely nothing once his heart stopped pumping life through his body.

“Shall we pray, then?” the priest asked. “Shall we ask God for his forgiveness?”

“Do you think he’ll forgive me?”

“The Lord is forgiving of all his children if they are truly willing to repent for their sins.”

“Okay, I’m willing to give it a try. I mean... If God is willing to forgive me for what I’ve done, then there’s no reason I should be afraid to ask Him for that forgiveness.”

“Exactly,” the priest said. “Now, let us pray.”

Joseph had started to get down on his knees to begin his prayer when he burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry...” he said, as he pantomimed wiping tears away from his face. “You just sound so goddamn ridiculous.”

“Son, it is a sin to use the Lord’s name in vain,” the priest shot back. There was no longer compassion in his voice. The con was up.

“Well I’ll be God-damned!” Joseph responded. He was still fully embracing his fit of hilarity. “I didn’t even know that.”

“I see now that this has been a waste of both of our time,” the priest said, and made a movement to leave.

“No, no, no...” Joseph said, attempting to suppress his obnoxious laughter. “I’m sorry, Father. I really am. It’s just that you sound so damn hilarious.” He burst out laughing again. “Do you actually believe what’s coming out of your mouth?”

“I do. The Lord has been very good to me.”

“Well, he hasn’t been very kind to me.”

Joseph flipped a switch, and all the humor drained from his face. He got up from the bed, and walked towards the priest. The old man shrank away as Joseph approached. Undoubtedly, he realized, as Joseph had only moments before, that this young man, who had killed before, could snap his neck like a decayed twig.

“Let down your guard, Father,” Joseph said. “I have no interest in hurting you, but I also have no interest in your campfire stories. I don’t believe in your almighty God sitting on a throne up in the clouds.”

“Then why did you ask for a priest?”

“Boredom, really. I think I deserve to have a little fun before they send me off and bury me in the ground.”

“Your fun should not be at the expense of our good Lord. Despite what you believe, He is very much real, and He is with you in your darkest hour. I pray that in the end you realize that, and ask for His forgiveness.”

“I don’t need your prayers, Father. Tell you what, though... I don’t exactly remember how all this works, whether it’s you or the nuns who speak to the Lord...”

“The Lord speaks to us... not the other way around,” the holy man corrected.

“Well, if He’s around to talk, then He’s around to listen. You let Him know that if He has forgiveness for me, I’m not interested in it. He can choke on it, for all I care.”

Satisfied that he had said all he needed to say, Joseph returned to his cot and his jellybeans.

“May God have mercy on your soul,” was all the priest had to say before leaving.

“I told you,” Joseph yelled as the door to his cell slammed shut, “I’m not interested. Tell Him to take His holiness somewhere else!”

Lights out had come a few hours after his visit with the priest had abruptly ended. Joseph lay there in the dark, unable to find sleep. He didn’t have long to live, and desired to hold on to every last moment he had while he was still alive. He did not consider sleep to be a smart use of his time.

Boredom arrived quickly, and Joseph decided he needed to keep himself entertained. He had yet to discover his technique for identifying jellybean flavors in the dark, so continuing his quest to finish the bag before dawn was out

of the question. If he accidentally bit into one of the black ones, the taste of liquorish would surely cause him to heave, and despite the satisfaction of making a bigger, nastier mess all over his cell, vomiting was not something Joseph felt like doing on the last night of his life.

Instead, what he did was think of Jennifer Aniston.

In the fall of that previous year, a new television show debuted called *Friends*, a comedy about six friends living in Manhattan. However, that wasn't the appeal of the show for a prison full of men. What made the sitcom so desirable to inmates in Joseph's cell block were the three beautiful young women who starred in it. Come Thursday nights before lights out, there was only one thing that every man in the prison wanted to do, and that was watch *Friends*.

Now, as he lay there in the dark, Joseph's mind drifted to one specific moment during an episode that aired earlier that year.

Jennifer Aniston's character, Rachel—the stuck up, prissy bitch, who had that fucking loser, Ross, harping over her constantly—had just come out of the shower. She was using the towel that had been covering the upper half of her body to dry her hair. What she failed to notice was that Chandler, her likely-gay friend who lived across the hall, was in the kitchen getting a beverage from the fridge. When he finally lifted his head, he saw Rachel in all her glory. They both screamed, and she quickly grabbed an afghan to cover herself up.

The exact shot that Joseph was envisioning was Aniston in the foreground facing away from the camera towards Chandler, who was standing in the background. Her tan bare back was completely exposed for the audience to see. This garnered quite the positive reaction from all of the inmates watching that night. So much so that the guards had to threaten to turn off the show if they didn't quiet down.

As he thought about her sexy back, he also tried to imagine how nice her ass, which was out of the frame, might be. He felt his penis begin to harden, and figured since this was going to be his last opportunity to do so, he might as well take advantage of it.

He reached down, gripped his penis, and began to rub it. It wouldn't be long before his thoughts shifted away from the actress who played Rachel Green to someone else entirely.

Fitting, Joseph thought as Aniston's replacement took form. *She was the person I fantasized about the first time I jerked off. She might as well be the person I think about the last time, too.*

Alexandra Casings.

He thought about her touch. The feel of her lips against his. He imagined what it would be like to be inside her one last time. Climbing on top of her, getting between her smooth legs, and sliding into her, like he had so many times before.

As he relived those moments with her, he could feel his orgasm drawing nearer. Then his thoughts began to shift, yet again. Joseph went from thinking about the woman she had once been, to envisioning the woman she had become. He hated that woman. She was nothing but a selfish whore.

He imagined his hands slipping around her neck as he was inside her. Of course, she'd just think he was being playful at first, but as his grip began to tighten, she'd become alarmed.

Orgasm drew even nearer as he imagined her neck in his grasp as he applied pressure to her windpipe. She'd try to tell him to stop, but there'd be no air passing through to produce the words. Still, he'd know what she was trying to say, and it would only make him squeeze harder. She'd become frantic at the realization that her life was in peril. The mental image of the all-encompassing terror plaguing her eyes almost made him come right there and then. He

managed to calm himself down, and prolong his orgasm... for now.

He wasn't ready for his fun to be over just yet.

She'd grab at his wrist, and attempt to pull his hands free from her neck. She'd fight to get the air she desperately needed back into her lungs. Her struggles would prove useless, though. He was far too determined, and his grip was far too powerful. She'd scratch and claw. She'd even manage to draw blood, but her fighting would prove futile. He'd squeeze harder, and then harder. He'd watch her eyes as he did so. He'd stare deeply into them, as he did so long ago when they were lovers. They were so full of life back then, but now he planned on watching them go blank.

The strong sensation of his impending orgasm returned, and Joseph knew there'd be no stopping it this time. He began to masturbate faster and, as he did, he imagined seeing the life drain from those eyes. Like sand slowly passed through a sieve, so would her existence from this world.

In her final moment, he'd see one last look of desperate hope, a hope that maybe he'd have a sudden change of heart, and release her from his grip right in the nick of time. There would be no change of heart, though, and she would realize that as she died.

As he saw the blank stare of her dead eyes, Joseph let out a pleasurable moan. This was followed by the feel of warm semen on his penis and pooling between his thumb and pointer finger.

Alexandra Casings.

The only woman he had ever loved.

Joseph removed his hand from his penis, and let his ejaculate collect in his palm. He then took the bodily fluid he had collected, and smeared it across the wall next to him. Yet another delightful surprise for whomever was put in charge of cleaning his cell.

As he lay there, recovering from what might have been the single greatest orgasm he had ever experienced, Joseph felt euphoric. Despite his current set of circumstances, he was content. He wasn't thinking of his impending death. Instead, he decided to savor the small things that would give him one last feeling of satisfaction before his life ended, like jellybeans, or masturbating while fantasizing about fucking and killing the woman you had murdered for.

One of those small things that made Joseph especially happy was the fact that he'd be sharing his death day with John Wilkes Booth—Joseph was also the same age as America's most infamous presidential assassin had been when he died outside of a farmhouse in 1865, but he wouldn't realize that until later on... After the walls came crumbling down.

Joseph wasn't exactly a model student, but one thing he loved was history. The one event he knew more about than any other was the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865. However, it wasn't Lincoln who drew Joseph's attention to this specific event in American history.

It was Booth.

John Wilkes Booth, one of history's greatest villains, was Joseph Bateman's hero. He had unlimited respect for the man, because he had stood up for what he believed in, and did what no other dared to do.

He took down a tyrant and killed a nigger-lover.

Lincoln's love for a race that was meant to serve the white man would cause an entire nation to nearly crumble, and would lead to a civil war that resulted in the loss of a million American lives. Still, somehow he was praised as a hero, and history remembered him as just that.

Joseph knew the truth, though, and he knew who the real hero had been. It was the man who put a bullet in the back of the nigger-loving tyrant's head.

It was a true honor to die on the same date as your hero. Not many people got to experience that proud feeling, but Joseph Bateman did.

Eventually, like waves on a beach during high tide, sleep crept up on Joseph. He had thought the sandman would not be visiting him on his last night on Earth, but he was wrong. Apparently, all it took was a mind-blowing orgasm to open the gates and let sleep in.

As he lay there in the dark, slumber slowly taking him, Joseph ran his fingers carefully over his chest. He was tracing the outline of the letters that made up his tattoo. However, it wasn't the words inked onto his chest, an infamous historical quote, that he was thinking about.

His mind fixated on his hands.

As the moments passed and his eyelids grew heavier, he thought about his hands. A single word passed through his mind, over and over. The word repeated like a compact-disc with a scratch in it, causing it to skip. That word was *useless*. He brought his hands up to his face, and although his cell was dark, Joseph could vaguely make out their outline.

Useless... he thought as he stared at them. *Useless...*

Joseph couldn't figure out why in that exact moment he thought his hands were useless. That wasn't what bothered him, though. What had him entranced was the unsettling feeling of déjà vu that swept over him as he stared at his extremities. It was so vivid that Joseph was convinced he had gone through the exact experience once before. However, before Joseph could pinpoint the significance of that single word in relevance to his hands, his eyes closed, and he drifted towards sleep.

Useless... he repeated in his mind as his eyes closed and he faded away. *Useless...*

He had only slept for two hours. His cell was as dark as it had been when he fell asleep. For all he knew, he could've been asleep for minutes or hours. It didn't matter,

though, because come dawn he'd be dead, and the amount of sleep he had gotten the night before would be a moot point.

The things that had been on his mind before his descent into sleep were no longer prominent. Neither his hands, nor the word *useless* (*useless*) were any concern. Instead, what Joseph felt was the strong urge to satisfy his sweet tooth. He picked up his bag of jellybeans, and it was there that he discovered he could test the flavor of the treat by running his tongue over it.

Joseph decided to spend the final hour of his life reminiscing. Although reminiscing wouldn't have been the word he would have used to describe what he was doing. Reminiscing sounded like you were fondly reliving all the joyous memories of your life. That was not what he was doing. There were no fond memories of Joseph Bateman's life. Even the ones that should have been happy memories, like his mother's adorable nickname for him or memories of Alexandra Casings, were all tainted, and now spoiled.

No, Joseph was not reminiscing.

He was reflecting.

Murdering one man did not get him to where he was in life (although he'd soon learn he was actually very wrong about that). A long series of unfortunate events had landed him on Death Row.

So Joseph Bateman, in the closing hour of his life, chose to reflect.

June 22, 1974

Joey Bean's Escape

Some monsters are born evil while others are created. Many people would believe, given the life he had lived, that Joseph Bateman was a victim of circumstance and environment. Joseph would learn later on, once the walls came down, that he was destined from the day he was born to walk a path that would lead him right into the electric chair.

For the average person, their first memory may involve being tucked tightly into bed while having a bedtime story read to them by a parent. They might remember visits to their grandparents' house for Sunday dinner, or perhaps they'd recall playing tag with their first childhood friend. While most people got to enjoy fond memories of their childhoods, Joseph's earliest memory was of lying awake in bed at night, terrified at the sounds of his father's pickup truck making its way up the dirt driveway.

For any young child, the sound of their father returning home from a long day would be enough to send them from their beds, running full speed towards the door so that they could greet their dad with a warm hug. This was not the

case for Joseph. Instead, the sound of tires rolling over loose dirt and rocks detonated an explosion of fear throughout his little body.

Hank Bateman, the father of Joseph William Bateman, did not know his own biological father, and the man who had sired him wasn't even aware of his son's existence. Truth be told, Hank's mother wasn't sure if her son's father was even alive. Shortly after their one night together, her suitor was shipped overseas to fight the Nazis on behalf of Uncle Sam. All she knew of him was his name, and she wasn't entirely sure she had correctly remembered it. Regardless, it was the name she gave her son, so that he did not have to have his mother's, and be labeled a bastard by society.

Despite not ever having known his biological father, Hank Bateman had a stepfather who he knew well. Isaiah Matthews was the pastor in a small town in Connecticut, and even though he delivered sermons every Sunday on behalf of God, Isaiah Matthews was not a good man.

He never failed to remind Hank's mother exactly what she had been before she met him, a sinning whore. He had saved her from a filthy life of carrying the children of men with whom she had sinned, and had given her a purpose: to carry the pastor's own children. He had reproduced six times with Hank's mother, and all six of his children were female.

As Hank grew up, he learned very quickly that the girls wanted nothing to do with their half-brother, a title they refused to acknowledge. To them, he was just a product of their mother's sins, and not worthy of their love or attention. More importantly, Hank Bateman avoided interactions with his half-sisters at all costs, because he knew what would happen if his stepfather caught him so much as glancing in their direction.

Growing up, Hank Bateman constantly found himself on the receiving end of a thrashing via Isaiah Matthew's

belt. The majority of the whippings were because Isaiah had caught his stepson staring at his daughters with eyes he had considered to be full of sinful desire. Other times, Isaiah Matthews would find whatever excuse he could to whip the tar out of Hank. His justification was that he was beating the sin out of his stepson. Unfortunately, being a product of sin, at least in Isaiah's mind, Hank could never fully be ridded of the dirtiness that plagued him, which gave Isaiah Matthews a constant excuse to whip his stepson until the boy's back was welted and bloodied.

His mother did nothing.

Hank Bateman received his last thrashing at the age of thirteen. This was because it would be the last time he ever saw Isaiah Matthews, or anyone else he was supposed to call his family, ever again.

One spring day, while the girls were playing outside on their bikes, one of Hank's half-sisters took a pretty bad spill. While she lay there on the concrete, scraped up and hysterical, Hank decided to be a good big brother and save the day.

He helped his injured sister up, and told her he would help her back inside the house. He wouldn't get very far, though, because the moment Hank walked through the front door, he felt the familiar explosion of pain as leather met flesh. He had been accustomed to that dreadful sensation across his back, but this time Isaiah Matthew's belt had connected with his face, and with this brand new point of impact came a whole new kind of pain.

Hank collapsed to the ground and tears spilled from his eyes. He instinctively covered his face, which was still stinging and already throbbing. This would prove to be a terrible mistake.

Over the years, Hank had learned that the key to surviving an Isaiah Matthews beating was to just take it. The moment he resisted, or tried to cower and cover up, was the moment the beating intensified. He therefore

received a hard boot to the gut for attempting to protect himself. Hank's hands went from his face to his stomach. With his stepson's face exposed, Isaiah Matthews brought the belt down once again. This time it wasn't the hard leather that made contact.

The metal belt buckle smashed Hank in the dead center of his face. He felt another explosion of excruciating pain, and an instant buildup of pressure in his nose. Within seconds, he could feel and taste the blood that was pouring from his nostrils. His nose was broken; any doctor would've told him that had Hank ever decided to seek medical attention for his injuries.

Hank had been too distracted by the awful pain that he didn't notice his stepfather walk away from him. One moment Isaiah Matthews was standing over his stepson with a leather belt in his hands and, the next, he had returned with a double-barrel shotgun which he pointed right at Hank's face.

Hank felt the warmth seep down his legs as his bladder failed him, and he began to cry as he looked into the black eyes of the shotgun.

"You keep your filthy sinning hands off of my daughter, you hear?" Isaiah Matthews told Hank. "I won't let you dirty her or any of my girls. Murder is a sin, and I am a man of the Lord, but if I ever see you near this house again, I will kill you. I have no doubt the Lord will forgive me, because He will know I did what I had to do to protect my family from those who desire to lead them towards a life of sin and filth."

He gave Hank one more hard kick to the gut for good measure, and a warning.

"You have five minutes, boy," Isaiah Matthews said as he left the room. "Otherwise, you'll be meeting your Maker, and there's no room in Heaven for bastard products of sinning whores."

Hank Bateman didn't need five minutes. He fought to get to his feet, and stumbled towards the front door. He took one last look at the house he had grown up in. In the corner he saw his mother. The woman who had carried him for nine months and birthed him had been attempting to remain hidden out of sight during her righteous husband's violent fit. The two—mother and son—stared at each other across the distance of the small living room. Hank saw sadness in her eyes, but it meant nothing to him. He hated her for bringing this life upon him, and doing nothing to stop it. He wished she had drowned him or left him in the frigid winter cold to die after he had been born. Even that would have been more humane than what she allowed him to be put through his entire life.

Hank stared at his mother for a few moments, and hoped his hatred was getting through to her. He spat a mixture of phlegm and blood in her direction, and left the home of Isaiah Matthews forever.

In the years that followed, Hank Bateman would find himself living on the streets when he wasn't in and out of shelters. It was during those years that Hank found his most loyal friend.

The bottle.

Unable to cope with his present or find closure for his past, Hank found solace in alcohol. Like so many without a place to call home, he chose to drown his sorrows.

He spent years as a vagabond. He traveled up and down the road and from town to town. He'd usually have to leave a town after an alcohol-fueled violent altercation in which he was lucky if he didn't find himself in jail, the hospital, or worse.

After five years on the road, Hank found himself back in that small Connecticut town where he had grown up, and had been treated less than human.

Looking back, Hank could not recall the circumstances which brought him back to the one place he considered the

closest thing to Hell. What he did remember was the feeling of dread which consumed him at the possibility of coming face-to-face with Isaiah Matthews. The last thing on Earth he had wanted was to see the man who had ruined his life. However, Hank's fears would be put to rest not long after his arrival in town as he learned his stepfather, mother, and half-sisters were no longer members of the small community.

They were all dead.

Even though it had been over a year since the tragedy when Hank arrived in town, the death of Pastor Isaiah Matthews and his family was still a hot topic amongst the small Connecticut community. As the story went, one of Pastor Matthews' daughters got herself good and pregnant outside of wedlock. This spelled certain doom for a young woman when it came to finding a potential spouse, but, more importantly, it was a sin against God. Isaiah Matthews was a man of the Lord, and the fact that one of his daughters had gotten pregnant infuriated him. He placed the blame on the girl's mother, convinced that the same wickedness that had once plagued his wife now consumed his daughter, and was lying dormant in all of his girls.

"They found a note," one of the locals explained as the story was told. "The Pastor blamed himself. He said he shouldn't have been foolish enough to procreate with a sinner and a whore. He never took into consideration that the sin would be passed on to his daughters. He believed his family would be safe from sin, because they were protected by the Lord."

Isaiah Matthews thanked his wife for passing down her sinning traits to their children by stabbing her repeatedly in the stomach. He wasn't through, though. He locked his house up, went room by room, and slit each of his daughter's throats as they slept. According to the note that was found, Isaiah Matthews couldn't let sinners live who

shared his wife's blood, whether they had sinned already, or were doomed to do so.

Once his entire family was dead, he piled their bodies into his pickup truck under the cover of night, and drove them to the church he presided over. He dragged each body into the church, doused them in gasoline, and lit them on fire. There was no explanation for this act in his note, but some people speculated that perhaps he believed that burning their bodies in the Lord's house would help with their entry into Heaven. Of course, no one knew if there was any truth to this, but it quickly became the popular theory amongst the community.

What burning those bodies did do, though, was set the entire church ablaze. That night it completely burned to the ground. At the time of Hank's visit, there had been no plans to rebuild it.

Once the bodies were burning, Isaiah Matthews returned home. There, he wrote the infamous note that explained most of his actions. In it, he also asked his peers and, more importantly, God to forgive him for the sins he had committed that night. He then took one of the pistols he owned and sinned one last time by blowing his brains out. It has been told and believed by most that a single drop of blood from the pastor's exploding head landed on a statue of the Virgin Mary he kept near his bed. The crimson droplet landed just under her eye, and looked hauntingly like she was shedding a single tear for the pastor. This was obviously nothing more than a legend that made for a haunting detail in a tragic story.

The knowledge of the demise of the man who had ruined his life did little to quell Hank Bateman's need for alcohol. Once in its grips, the bottle scarcely lets one walk away so easily. In the years that followed his visit to the town where he grew up, Hank's drinking only worsened and, along with it, his anger.

Still, through all of it, he managed to get his life in some semblance of order. He settled down in the small town of Wayne County, Pennsylvania, and got himself a job and a place to live. There, he even met the woman who would soon become Missus Emily Bateman.

“When I met your father, he was already a damaged man with a lot of anger inside of him.” Emily Bateman told Joseph one September night as she tried to make her son understand why his father was the way he was.

The mother-son conversation had taken place a few nights after the only violent altercation between Joseph and his father. Sitting with his mother was difficult enough after what had happened—he couldn’t even make eye contact with her—but hearing her try to justify the man’s actions was sickening.

“Still,” she would continue. “He had a kindness inside him. It was just buried under so much hatred. I got to see that side of your father. The man who allowed love into his heart. He even quit drinking when we got engaged. He got shipped off to the war, though. Like a lot of young men who went overseas to fight for their country, your father came back a different man from when he left.”

Emily Bateman spoke the truth about her husband. He had given up the bottle in favor of an attempt for a better life. Eight months after he and Emily said ‘I do’, Hank found himself being shipped off to Vietnam to help his country in the fight against communism. There, he got a bullet to the leg, which became badly infected and was nearly amputated. Luckily, doctors were able to save his life and his leg. Once he was healthy enough, Hank was granted a medical discharge and sent home. He returned to his wife in the fall of 1968. That following spring, Hank and Emily welcomed the first addition to their family: their son, Joseph William Bateman.

However, the man Emily Bateman fell in love with and married was not the man who came back from the war. He

had seen and gone through things that no one should have to in their lifetime. On top of that, Hank Bateman did not respond well to fatherhood. In order to escape the constant noises of his household, not to mention the deafening sounds in his own head of people dying right before his feet in a jungle halfway across the world, Hank Bateman found refuge at a local bar. There, he was reunited with his long lost friend, the bottle. Following his fall from the wagon, Hank's life took a turn for the worse, and his family would now be along for the ride.

That was the story of Hank Bateman, and why he was the man his son had come to know.

Despite his mother's hopes to resolve the issue between father and son before it escalated and reached a dire level, Joseph found his mother's excuses for her husband's behavior pathetic. They did nothing to change Joseph's perception of the man he was supposed to call his father. He hated Hank Bateman, and it was only a matter of time before the two reached the level his mother feared they would. They might never have reached that explosive level had it not been for the accident that occurred two months following Joseph's conversation with his mother.

That would all go down in 1981, though.

In June of 1974, Joseph Bateman was only five years old, and he didn't yet fully understand the kind of man his father was. The only thing he knew at that young age was that when he heard the sounds of his father's pickup truck coming up their dirt driveway, he should be afraid.

On the nights Hank Bateman managed to get home—he was infamous for spending nights in the drunk tank or on bar floors—he'd come crashing through the front door. Sometimes he'd knock into something, and send it flying to the floor. Other times, he'd just send himself crashing into a wall. No matter what, he was always angry and cursing through his drunken slurs. On occasion, he'd stumble into the kitchen, and raid the fridge of what little

food the Batemans had while treating himself to another beer. Most of the time, however, he went right upstairs to the bedroom, where his wife would always be waiting for him.

As he grew up and became more aware of what was happening in his home, Joseph couldn't believe his mother just sat there and waited for his father. She was fully aware of what was in store for her, yet she still sat in their bedroom, waiting. Later on in life, as he reflected on his past, Joseph realized the reason his mother waited was because she knew it would be so much worse for her if she didn't.

Joseph's room was adjacent to his parents'. At age five, he would have to lie there in the darkness of his room, and listen to the two loud thumps of his father's boots hitting the floor as he fumbled to remove them. This was followed by a few moments of silence. When he was old enough to grasp what was happening in his parents' bedroom, Joseph considered these moments the calm before the storm.

What Hank Bateman was doing was stripping down so he could rape his wife.

Magnified by the silence that had just come before it, what came next was the deafening sound of the headboard of his parents' bed rhythmically thumping against the wall. For some children, this sound might send them wandering into their parents' bedroom to investigate, thus creating an awkward moment parents pray their children forget. For Joseph, the sound coming from his parents' bedroom sent fear throughout his entire body.

Through the thin wall that separated the two rooms, he could hear the grunts and moans coming from his father. This would never last long. The sounds of that headboard against the wall would quicken, and Hank Bateman would let out one last moan as he reached climax.

Emily Bateman never made a single sound.

If Joseph and his mother were lucky, what followed would be the sounds of his father's loud drunken snores. More times than not, though, Hank wasn't through with his wife once he was done raping her.

If sleep didn't take him, anger did. The man who had lived with anger his entire life, chose to embrace it as an adult, instead of trying to control it. Emily Bateman served as the lightning rod to her husband's wrath. Joseph would hear his father start to curse. At first, it was low and barely audible, but as his anger grew, Hank Bateman would end up yelling at the top of his lungs. Though saturated by a night's worth of heavy drinking, the hatred in his words was always clear. *Dumb Cunt* and *Worthless Bitch* were some of Hank Bateman's favorite names to call his wife.

It wasn't the verbal abuse that was the most damaging to Emily Bateman, though.

It was the physical.

Emily Bateman may have been able to remain silent during her evening rapings, but this was not the case whenever her husband decided to beat her mercilessly. Her painful cries could be heard throughout the entire house whenever Hank Bateman landed a fist or foot on various parts of her body.

Joseph couldn't bear the sounds of his mother's painful cries as she was beaten by the man she chose to marry. He loved his mother so much, and he wanted nothing more than for the sounds of her suffering to end. He knew to never to leave his room, though. If he did, he knew things would be bad for him and worse for his mother, and he didn't want to make things worse than they already were. Still, the sounds of her being kicked, punched, and slapped around were too much for a five year old Joseph Bateman to tolerate. He needed to find a distraction.

On June 22, 1974, he found it.

Joseph listened to the sounds of his mother's beating. That night Emily Bateman's thrashing had been especially

brutal. There are many tragic things in this world, but a child being able to gage the level of brutality of his mother's beating nears the top of that list. Her feeble whimpers were replaced by agonizing cries as Hank Bateman's curses and fury rained down on her.

"You..."

Painful cry.

"dumb..."

Pathetic whimper.

"fucking..."

Another cry.

"CUNT!"

As an emphasis on his final word, Hank must have added more to his final blow than he had the others. Following it, Emily Bateman actually began to plead for her husband to stop. She would always cry out whenever she was hit, but never would she speak during her nightly beatings. Joseph knew a beating was especially bad when his mother actually begged for it to end.

Emily Bateman's pleas fell on deaf ears.

Unable to bear the sounds of his mother's suffering, Joseph decided he would run away. In his childish mind, it was the only logical thing to do. There was evil inside his home, and he needed to get away from it. He got out of bed, walked over to the window, and slid it open. He crawled through the window and onto the roof. His plan was to crawl to the edge, leap down to the ground below, and run away to safety, wherever that was.

Anywhere has to be safer than here, he thought as he quickly formulated his plan.

However, his plans were thwarted when he got to the edge of the roof, and realized he was too afraid to jump down to the ground. Too afraid to go forward and too afraid to head back, Joseph just sat on his roof.

That was when he noticed the Moon.

He had always been aware of the Earth's satellite up in the night sky. He thought it was so pretty with its different phases, and his mother had even attempted to explain it to him once or twice. On that night, however, it served a whole new purpose to Joseph.

On that night, the Moon became a distraction.

He stared up at that bright object in the night sky, and imagined it as something else entirely. From that night forward, Joseph Bateman would see the Moon not as the Earth's sole satellite, but as a cosmic-sized jellybean. Each night, as he was defenseless against what was happening to his mom, he'd sneak out his window and onto his roof, where he'd stare up at the night sky. He'd then allow himself to be taken somewhere else. It was a place where there was no hatred or pain. He didn't feel useless and scared there. On those nights atop his roof when he was a small child, Joseph Bateman escaped his reality, and entered the distraction of his imagination.

Each night, he'd envision what flavor the Moon would be. It could be whatever flavor anyone wanted it to be, because the Moon was magical, and magic was boundless. As the Moon went through its usual phases, and slowly disappeared each night, Joseph imagined a giant space worm up in the heavens taking a bite out of that delicious celestial treat. When the Moon was new and couldn't be seen in the night sky it was because the space worm had finally finished its snack. That was okay, though. Soon, the Moon would reappear in the sky, and it wouldn't be long before the friendly creature floating up in space got its moon-sized jellybean back.

Throughout that summer, Joseph used the Moon and his imagination as a much needed distraction from what he felt useless to stop. When winter arrived and the cold became unbearable, he would wrap a blanket around his body, and sit as close to the window as he could. From there, he'd watch the Moon be devoured by creatures only he could

see. It was how he managed to stay sane and survive his early life. Creatures from outer space, and a very sugary sweet Moon.

May 10, 1976

Joseph's Birthday

“Haaaaappy Biiiiiirthdaayyy, my sweet Joey Beans,” Emily Bateman sang on the evening of her son’s seventh birthday. “Happy Biiiiiithdayyy to youuuu...”

Joseph Bateman leaned over the table, and blew out the single candle that stood atop the cake his mother spent the afternoon crafting. It was a pathetic looking confection—lopsided, dry, and thinly iced—but that didn’t matter. The amount of times any sort of food other than the essentials were present in the Bateman household were few and far between, so it really didn’t matter to anyone how aesthetically pleasing their evening dessert was. Plus, Joseph loved his mama; therefore he loved his cake.

After cake, Emily Bateman put on some of her favorite Elvis Presley records. She, her birthday boy, and her youngest daughter, Liz, danced around the living room to some of the king of rock ‘n roll’s biggest hits. Once everybody in the whole cell block was through dancing to the jailhouse rock, Joseph and his little sister were brought up to their rooms and tucked into bed. There, Joseph was told by his mother to have sweet dreams. However, he

knew there'd be no such thing. Despite feeling like he had a home for a rare few hours that night, Joseph knew that Hank Bateman would eventually return. He'd be his usual mixture of drunk and angry, and once he stepped foot through the door, the Bateman household would revert back to its usual hell.

"Mama..." Joseph said as Emily Bateman was exiting his bedroom. "You can throw out the rest of the cake. I won't mind."

"Why would I do that, Joey Beans?" She asked. She walked back over to the bed, where she took a seat, and started to rub her son's little feet. "Was it not yummy?"

"Oh, no!" Joseph argued. "It was super delicious." He paused momentarily so he could concoct what he believed would be substantial reasoning for his mother to toss away the leftover cake. "It's just too many sweets gives you cavities! The dentist is very expensive, mama."

"Well that's very thoughtful of you, but I think you and your sister will be alright if you have yourselves a little bit more cake tomorrow night."

It wasn't him or his sister who Joseph was worried about.

"Are you sure?"

Yes. I'm sure, silly," Emily assured her son. She got up, and leaned over to kiss her son's forehead. "Now get some sleep."

It would be a while before Joseph heeded his mother's advice to get some sleep. Instead, he lay there in the dark, and considered things no seven year old should ever have to think about. Like, if his mom, as she sat there assuring him there was no need to throw away the extra birthday cake, was fearful of the same things he was. There were risks of not cleaning up the scene thoroughly and disposing of all the evidence, and Emily Bateman knew what was in

store for her if the cake was discovered. Still, she insisted they keep it, so that her two children could enjoy dessert two nights in a row.

The night dragged on and, as it did, Joseph heard no sounds of tires rolling over dirt. He waited, anticipating the inevitable, but the sound of Hank Bateman's pickup truck never came. He let out a sigh of relief, and allowed himself to begin to relax, like he did every time his father was too drunk to make it home.

Joseph finally drifted off and, as he slept, he dreamt of a monster slowly crawling up his dirt driveway. It wasn't one of the kind monsters he imagined floating around outer space. Instead, this monster was ugly, foul, and angry. He snarled and growled as he dug his dirty long claws into the ground, and pulled himself towards Joseph's home. He wasn't interested in celestial goodies to munch on. He was coming for Joseph's family, and he was coming to cause them pain and suffering.

Joseph woke from his nightmare abruptly. Outside his window, he heard the monster he feared slowly crawling up his driveway. Only this monster was behind the wheel of a busted up pickup truck, and he was drunk off alcohol and a lifetime of endless rage.

Hank Bateman had returned home, after all.

Hank came crashing through the front door, as per usual, and Joseph could hear him drunkenly sauntering around the living room. Joseph prayed and pleaded with God to steer his father away from the kitchen. If the man went straight upstairs, it would be bad, but if Hank Bateman stopped in the kitchen and went in the fridge, it would be far worse for Joseph's mother.

Joseph lay in his bed. He was frozen with fear, and could barely get the breath he needed to live into his lungs. An unbearable anxiety was growing within him as he waited

to hear his father's footsteps either ascending the stairs, or making their way across the kitchen for another beer from the refrigerator. When he finally heard the sound of his father stumbling into the kitchen table, the dense ball of anxiety that had been growing by the second finally exploded and consumed him.

He heard the sounds of the glass jars and bottles on the refrigerator door clanging together as his father opened the fridge. They emanated throughout the house like church bells in a small town. They rang a warning to the residence of the Bateman home to beware of the hell that was about to be unleashed upon them. There was nothing but terrifying silence, at first. Then Hank spoke, and Joseph knew his father had found the leftover cake.

"What the fuck is this?" Hank Bateman asked the empty downstairs living area. His words were painted with slurs from a night's worth of booze.

Joseph heard his parents' bedroom door creak as it eased open. He knew his mother was waiting in the doorway to be summoned. In a few moments, she'd have to go downstairs to face her husband's fury, but not before he called for her. If she went down there before Hank Bateman was ready for her, he'd somehow find a way for her inevitable fate to be worse than it was already destined to be.

"What the fuck is this?!" was heard again from down the stairs. "Get the fuck down here, you useless cunt!"

And like she had done every time before and would do every instance that followed, Emily Bateman obeyed her husband's commands.

"Explain this to me, bitch," Hank demanded once his wife reached the bottom of the stairs.

"It's a cake, Hank," Emily started to explain.

“I know what it is. I’m not a useless idiot, like you. Why is it here?”

“It’s Joey’s birthday cake. It’s your son’s birthday...”

The fact that it was his firstborn’s birthday meant nothing to Hank Bateman. In his eyes, spending his earnings on frivolous things, such as cake and presents for any kind of special occasion, only meant you were taking money away from the few things in life he truly cared about, and those were his vices.

“You think I got any fucking cake when it was my birthday?” Hank asked his wife. “I was lucky enough to not get an ass-whipping from my stepfather on my birthday. That was his present to me, and I didn’t always get that. So tell me, why are you spending my fucking hard earned money on this shit?”

“I thought it would be nice...”

“What’s nice is that I don’t whip the boy’s ass every night.”

“I know, Hank, but I thought it would be nice if the kid had something sweet... just this once”

“I’m sure you want some too, then.”

Joseph then heard his mother let out a gasp that was a mixture of both shock and agony. This was followed by the sound of the cake’s serving dish hitting the ground and shattering.

“Have some fucking cake, you dumb whore! Here... EAT IT!!”

Emily Bateman attempted to cry out, but her moans were distorted and muffled. Joseph knew this was because his father was attempting to shove the leftover cake down his mother’s throat.

“Choke on it, for all I care,” Hank Bateman shouted.

Next came the sound of Emily Bateman crashing into the side of the kitchen table. This was probably due to a

hard slap to the side of her head that knocked her off balance. There was a groan that accompanied her collision, likely caused by her ribs meeting the edge of the table. One would never want to think it possible that the sounds of domestic abuse would be so easily recognizable to a child of seven years of age. Sadly, Joseph Bateman knew them all too well.

“Get the fuck upstairs, you bitch! Or I’ll just fucking drag you up to the bedroom, myself.”

Joseph heard his mom crawling up the stairs, followed by his father’s heavy footfalls. He’d hear his mother occasionally yelp as she ascended, which Joseph knew was his father planting his booted foot in the base of Emily’s spine. He threw the blankets over his head, and tried to drown out the sounds coming from outside his door. This proved pointless, though. He heard each agonizing strike as his mother crawled on her hands and knees past his bedroom. When he heard his parents’ bedroom door close, Joseph threw the blankets off, and leapt out of his bed. He was more eager than usual to get outside the house and deploy his usual methods to escape from reality.

His foot got caught in the blanket and he tripped, falling to the floor. The impact was utterly painless, but the moment he hit the ground, tears came pouring from his eyes.

This is all my fault, he told himself as he wept. This is happening because of me.

He was startled back to reality by the sound of a tremendous thud of his mother being slammed against the wall. Unable to listen to the suffering he had brought upon her, Joseph got to his feet and ran to his window.

The May weather was nice enough for Joseph to escape the confines of his home, and get as far away as possible from what was going on within its walls. He crawled to the

edge of the roof and tried to clear his mind. As he was getting his imagination warmed up to envision various friendly creatures in the heavens, he noticed something run across his backyard. The object was faint, as the only source of light in his yard was moonlight, but he could make out clearly that it was a human being.

A small human being.

A child.

His sister.

Joseph's first instinct was to yell for Liz to come back to the house, but wisely ruled that option out. His father had never laid a finger on either of them, but if they were discovered outside of the house so late, and not to mention disrupting his nightly ritual, a beating was surely in store for both Bateman children. Joseph would have to go with Plan B, which was to go down there and get his sister.

He wasn't about to risk going through the house and getting caught by his father, so he would slide down the drain pipe that ran along the side the house, instead. He grabbed hold of the rusty pipe, threw his legs over the edge of the roof, and slowly slid to ground. The instant his feet touched earth, Joseph took off across the yard to find his sister.

The Bateman's owned a vast piece of property. Their backyard would have been the perfect place for two children to play in while growing up. Only it was far too dangerous for two rambunctious children to be running around in. Hank Bateman may have lacked many qualities that people saw as redeeming, but the one thing that could not be taken away from the man was that he was a damn good mechanic. In fact, he was the best. There wasn't an automobile problem he couldn't diagnose and then fix with ease. There wasn't an engine he couldn't take apart, piece by piece, and then successfully put back together. It always

seemed like a great idea when the desire hit to buy a broken down car and fix it up. He could resell them for a profit and the work would keep him occupied.

Sadly, addictions proved more powerful than ambition, and Hank Bateman never managed to get his business venture off the ground. That didn't stop him from acquiring broken down cars, and various engine parts, though. Over the years, the Bateman's backyard resembled more of a junkyard than it did a place where a family could barbecue or play ball during the summer months.

Joseph maneuvered through the maze of cars and engine parts that had been laid to rust away on the bare dead ground. When he got far enough away from the house, and was sure to be out of the earshot of his father, he began to call for his sister by her name. Even then, he refused to raise his voice to a decibel over that of a whisper.

A wooded area lined the back property of the Bateman house. Hank had put up barbed wire around the perimeter to keep animals from coming on his property. He hadn't really taken into consideration—nor did he care—that he had two young children, who could fall into the fence, and get seriously injured. Joseph began to fear that his sister ran straight for the woods, and got herself caught up in the barbed wire.

He headed towards the fence, whispering Liz's name. At first, he got no response, which led him to believe he'd find his sister tangled up and either choking to death or bleeding. However, through the night air, he was able to pick up the faint sounds of a toddler crying. He followed the sounds of whimpers, which luckily weren't coming from the rear of the property and the barbed wire fence. Instead, they led Joseph to the skeleton of one of the broken down cars, where he found his sister tucked away inside.

“Lizzy-girl,” Joseph said as he cautiously approached his sister. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m scared, Joe-Joe,” she said. “I’m scared of pa.”

Joseph climbed into the hollowed-out car, and the instant he did, his sister was in his arms. She began to cry as any petrified child would. There was nothing Joseph could but to hug his baby sister and attempt to reassure her.

“He’s not going to hurt you, Lizzy-girl.”

“I don’t want him to hurt mama anymore.”

Unfortunately, that was something Joseph couldn’t promise his little sister wouldn’t happen.

“I just get so scared when he’s hurting mama,” Liz continued. “Why did he get so mad at mama for making us a cake?”

“I don’t know.”

It was all Joseph could say as he caressed his sister’s hair in an attempt calm her. He wished he had an answer for her, but he didn’t

“I’m too scared to go back inside, Joe-Joe. Can’t me, you, and mama just run away? That way daddy can’t hurt her.”

“No, Lizzy-girl. We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because, we just can’t.”

It was another thing he had wondered, and it broke his heart to hear his baby sister now wondering the same thing. Hank Bateman’s poison was now affecting his daughter’s happiness. Joseph felt sadness building up in his throat, but he swallowed it and fought off his tears. He wanted to protect his sister, so that she didn’t have to experience what he felt on a nightly basis. He may be helpless to protect his mother, but he could try to shield Liz from the ugliness their father brought home with him every night.

“I’ll tell you what, though,” Joseph said. “Anytime you get scared, Lizzy-girl, you quietly sneak across the hall to my room and I’ll protect you.”

“Do you promise?”

“I do. I promise. Anytime you’re scared, you come to me, and I’ll make it okay. Never try to run away again. Can you promise me that?”

“I promise.” Liz hugged her big brother tightly. “I love you, Joe-Joe.”

“I love you, too, Lizzy-girl.”

Liz lay her head on her big brother’s shoulder, and fell asleep immediately. Joseph was aware that they needed to get back inside of the house, but he also knew that Liz wouldn’t be able to climb the pipe he had slid down earlier. He wasn’t even sure he could. They’d have to wait so they could go in through the back door. Liz was light enough for Joseph to be able to carry, so when he felt it was safe and their father had slipped into alcohol-induced unconsciousness for the night, he would carry her inside, and place her in her bed.

While he waited for the perfect time to reenter their home, Joseph dozed off. He was jolted awake by the sounds of a loud whispering voice echoing throughout the backyard. The voice was calling for the two of them.

It was their mother.

He wasn’t sure how long he had been asleep, but their father must have finished administering his beating, and decided it was time to slip into his slumber. Being that the night’s abuse had been especially loud and violent, Emily Bateman must’ve gone to check on her children and found them missing. Instead of jumping right into a panic, she must have drawn a conclusion as to what had happened, and decided to search for them herself before having to make a phone call to law enforcement. If the cops were

called and involved, she might have to provide a reason why her children would both attempt to leave their house in the middle of the night. After searching the house and realizing they weren't anywhere inside, she'd then turn her search towards the backyard.

"I'm over here, mama," Joseph called out towards his mother. He slid his sister's head gently from his lap, and stood up.

"Is your sister with you?" his mother asked as she walked towards the sound of his voice. She wasn't mad, as most parents would be had their children snuck out into the yard in the middle of the night.

"Yes. She's asleep."

Emily Bateman walked over to the car where her two children had been hiding out. She bent down to one knee, and gave her son a hug and a kiss on his cheek. There was no lecture from her. She was just happy she found the two of them safe and sound. Emily Bateman slid her sleeping daughter out from the wrecked car, and carried her back to the house with her son by her side.

When they entered the backdoor into the lighted kitchen, Joseph found himself frozen with shock. There was a broken serving plate, and pieces of his destroyed birthday cake all over the floor. That wasn't the main cause for his stunned reaction, though.

It was the sight of his mother that caused Joseph's eyes to widen in disbelief.

Emily Bateman had learned throughout the years the best ways to conceal the signs of spousal abuse from both the public and her children. Still, there were nights just like the one of Joseph Bateman's seventh birthday, where the aftermath would be impossible to cover up, even days after the fact. Joseph was now getting to see the results of his father's handiwork minutes afterwards. His mother had no

time to clean herself up, and the sight of her right after a thrashing stained Joseph's memory for the remainder of his life.

Her eye, which would've been properly iced by the time the kids woke up, was swollen and red. The blood from her split lip, which would have been cleaned up, still stained her chin and nightgown. In addition to the blood, her son's birthday cake was smeared across her nightgown and in her hair from when it was forcefully shoved down her throat.

"What's the matter, Joey Beans?" his mother asked. She took a step towards her son, and that's when he noticed his mother's fresh limp.

"Nothing," Joseph responded almost too quickly. "I just want to go to bed."

Before his mother could say anymore, Joseph ran past her. He climbed the stairs, and entered his bedroom.

He slammed the door behind him, and collapsed into his bed. He thought maybe his mother would follow, and try to pry from him what was bothering him. She never came, though. Emily Bateman knew exactly what had bothered her son so much, and there were no words of comfort or reasoning that could explain her cuts and bruises.

Joseph lay there in the dark. He expected tears to come, but they didn't, and he wasn't surprised. It wasn't sadness Joseph was feeling, after all.

It was anger.

After seeing his mother that way, the fear Joseph usually felt was gone. What replaced it was a feeling of malice.

At only seven years of age, Joseph Bateman felt hatred for the first time in his life.

October 8, 1977

Shoes in the Tree

He felt the force of contact as the set of hands connected with his back. The next thing he felt was his face smacking against the ground. Joseph didn't need to look up to know who had been cruel enough to sneak up from behind him and push him down to the ground.

Joseph Bateman never got bullied by his father, but fate was kind enough to deliver him a replacement: Mark Whitmore, the fourth grader who bullied the other kids for no reason other than just being a bad apple. He was bigger than all his peers, and he knew that meant he was stronger than them as well. He singled out kids who were much smaller than him and made their lives hell until he got bored and moved on. Over the summer of 1977, he set his sights on Joseph who soon became his main target. This carried well into the new school year.

Joseph heard the other kids, who followed Whitmore around, laughing at him as he lay face down in the grass.

“Awe, shucks,” Mark said. “Did poor little Masturbateman”—a clever nickname, if there ever was one—“fall down, and get hurt?”

Another burst of laughter came rolling in from the peanut gallery. It was either directed at their leader’s clever-coming-from-a-fourth-grader’s-brain nickname, or at his uncanny ability to point out the obvious.

“Nice shoes!” Mark said, continuing his torment.

Joseph felt his shoes being tugged at and immediately started thrashing back and forth in an attempt to fight the inevitable.

“Hold still, Masturbateman! You’re not making this any easier for yourself!”

Joseph did not heed his bully's advice, and refused to hold still as his shoes were being tugged from his feet, but his resistance did him no good. Joseph felt his shoes slide off his feet and into the possession of Mark Whitmore.

"Oh, gross!" Whitmore exclaimed as he held the shoes in front of his face, pinching his nostrils shut for emphasis. "These shoes stink! Don't you know you're supposed to get new shoes at the beginning of every school year, Masturbateman? Do these even fit you?"

The truth was Joseph's shoes didn't fit him any longer. Every morning he had to fight to squeeze into them, and once they were on, his toes were all squished. It was a very uncomfortable feeling, but he'd have to put up with it until the shoes became so worn out, they split.

"They probably don't," Mark continued. "Your family can't have new stuff because your dad is a deadbeat and doesn't make enough money to afford them."

"That's not true!" Joseph shot back at Mark Whitmore's lie.

Hank Bateman made good money working as an auto mechanic. There were just things he felt were more important to spend his earnings on than his family. Joseph's mother was lucky enough to get the money she needed to pay their bills every month, and even that was a difficult task. The Batemans were constantly getting hit with late fees. They had even lost their heat

during the coldest months of the winter that year, and it had taken a full two weeks, and a handful of worse-than-usual beatings from her husband, for Emily Bateman to get the money she needed for a delivery of oil.

As far as clothing went, the Bateman children would have to ride out what they currently owned until the bitter end. For two growing children, this became quite the dilemma. Shirts became too tight. Pants became too short in the legs or tight around the waist, and would often be patched up if a hole developed and got too big. Socks would get so worn down, there'd be holes in the heel and toe; completely negating their purpose. This caused the foul stench Mark Whitmore was currently smelling. Joseph's sister, from the time she was born until she was enrolled in school, wore hand-me-downs from her big brother. A little girl, who should have been done up in dresses, tutus, and all things pink, instead wore the overalls, jeans, and green and blue shirts that her brother had once worn when he was her age.

Despite every effort to avoid asking for money, Emily Bateman would find her children in need of clothing, and would ask her husband for the funds to buy replacements. She'd then quietly and patiently take her beatings until Hank Bateman felt she had been punished enough. Then and only then would he give her enough money for her to go out and buy her children—they were always *her* children and never *their*

children whenever Hank Bateman referred to Joseph and Elizabeth—the bare minimum of what they needed and never a single penny more.

“Oh, that’s right,” Mark Whitmore continued as he stood over a shoeless Joseph Bateman. “Your daddy can’t buy you new clothes, because he spends all his money on beer.”

To that point, Joseph couldn’t argue.

Whitmore started to tie the shoes together by the laces that had once upon a time been white, and Joseph knew exactly what this bully was up to. He tried to get up to save his shoes, but was pushed back down to the ground by Whitmore’s lackeys.

“What’s the matter, Masturbateman?” Whitmore asked. “You afraid if you don’t have these shoes anymore that your daddy won’t have the money to replace them, and you’ll have to walk around barefoot or with bags on your feet?”

This got another laugh from the Mark Whitmore Fan Club. However, it wasn’t the fact that he was about to lose his shoes that upset Joseph. It was the beating that awaited his mother when she had to ask her husband for money that bothered him.

“Say goodbye, Masturbateman,” Mark Whitmore said, and without hesitation, he launched the pair of shoes towards the nearest tree, where they wrapped around a branch and dangled there.

There was an explosion of laughter from the group of boys that followed. Joseph wondered if they would still think what had just transpired was so hilarious had they known the consequences. There had been whispers for years about what happened in the Bateman household late at night. However, the talks had remained amongst adults and never touched the ears of children.

“The way I see it,” said Mark Whitmore as he and Joseph stared up the shoes swaying back and forth from the tree branch up above, “I did you a huge favor. You can wear plastic bags on your feet now and those will still be an improvement from those nasty shoes.”

There was one last burst of hilarity from the fan club at Joseph’s expense. They continued the obnoxious laughter as they walked away, and left Joseph there, barefooted.

Now that there was no one around to push him back down to the ground, Joseph got to his feet. He stared up at the branch above. His shoes swayed there, out of his reach. There was no way to get them down unless he scaled the tree, and retrieved them. That was exactly what Joseph planned to do, but there was one problem with Joseph’s plan. After climbing the tree and reclaiming the shoes, he would have to climb down. The inevitable descent left Joseph frozen with fear.

Ever since the night of his seventh birthday, when he had climbed down from his roof to chase after his sister, Joseph developed a paralyzing fear of heights. Had he taken the time later on in his life to clock in some minutes on a psychologist's couch, he might have learned his sudden onset case of acrophobia, along with his sudden detest for anything sweet—sadly, even jellybeans—was caused by that particularly traumatizing event. At eight years old, though, he hadn't been able to figure out the reason for his fear. All he knew was that if he climbed up that tree, he'd be unable to come down.

"Are you going to climb up there and get those?" Joseph heard a girl's voice ask as he stared up at his shoes. "Or do you think if you stare hard enough, the shoes will just jump off the branch and land on the ground?"

Joseph turned his attention away from the dangling shoes, and saw Alexandra Casings, his fellow classmate, standing next to him. He wasn't sure how long she had been standing beside him, but he could tell it had been long enough for her to figure out he was having trepidations over the idea of scaling the tree.

"I'm going to," Joseph answered, defiantly. "I don't need to rush, though."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," and without another word, Alexandra Casings was scaling the tree.

"What are you doing?" Joseph hollered.

“What you’re too scared to do,” she answered as she grabbed onto branches above her and pulled herself up.

She reached the thick branch where Joseph’s shoes hung, lay flat across it, and pulled herself on her stomach towards them. As he watched Alexandra Casings inch her way towards her goal, Joseph felt his heart pounding in his throat. Just the idea of being up there was giving him anxiety. He didn’t even see her reach her target. The next thing he knew, the shoes thumped to the ground, and lay at his feet. Moments later, Alexandra Casings was back on the ground.

“TA-DA!” she said, her arms up in the air and a huge smile stretched across her face.

“I was just about to climb up there,” Joseph argued.

“I think what you’re supposed to say is ‘thank you.’”

“Thank you,” Joseph said obediently, and then added, “That was very nice of you, but I really was about to get them down.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Really, I was!”

“I bet,” Alexandra Casings said, and added a playful punch to Joseph’s shoulder. “You’re Joseph Bateman.”

“Yeah, and you’re Alexandra Casings,” Joseph responded matter-of-factly. He knew exactly who she was.

Many of their classmates would consider Alexandra Casings to be Joseph's female counterpart. That was because they were both, as second graders so eloquently put it...losers. They were both considered loners, and there had been whispers amongst adults regarding both children's families.

"I prefer being called Alex," Alexandra Casings informed Joseph.

"Isn't Alex a boy's name?"

"Well...your name is Joseph, and, if you ask me, that sounds a lot like Josephine, and that's a girl's name."

Joseph thought her argument was a bit of a stretch.

"Besides," Alex continued. "I'd rather be one of the boys. The girls around here are stupid!"

The truth was Alexandra Casings really would have fit in more with the boys than the girls. In addition to her ability to gracefully scale trees and shimmy across branches high up above the ground without showing an ounce of fear, her lack of desirable bust and curvy hips that the hormones of adolescence would give her in the years to follow, gave her the stature of a male. Her wardrobe choice only accentuated her tomboyish look. While the other girls in her grade dressed their best to look the part of a mature woman, like their mothers, Alex wore baggy jeans, sneakers, and her father's flannel shirts. One time, the school had called home, and

informed her father that his daughter could no longer come in wearing his shirts because they were too baggy for a girl her age to wear. Alex forced her father to go to the store, and pick up similar flannel shirts in her size to match his. She always wore her naturally pin-straight brown hair in a single ponytail, and the blue eyes that should have been mesmerizing, even at her young age, somehow seemed mundane on her pale, freckled face.

In the years that followed her and Joseph's first meeting, Alexandra Casings would develop into a beautiful woman, and she'd fully embrace it in the process. At age eight, though, Alex was certainly a more fitting name to her looks and personality than Alexandra.

"So, you going to put those on," Alex asked, looking down at Joseph's shoes. "Or did I risk my life climbing that tree for nothing?"

Joseph knelt down and slid his foot in to his worn out shoe. He was hoping he'd be able to wait until Alex was gone before doing this, so she wouldn't witness him struggling to put on a shoe that clearly no longer fit him properly. His cheeks burned up with embarrassment, and he buried his face as much as he could without tipping over to avoid making eye contact. Despite the additional efforts he needed to take to put on his shoes, Alex never pointed out that he desperately needed a new pair.

“Now that you have your shoes on, you can walk me home,” Alex said once Joseph was finished.

“Huh?” was all Joseph could manage to say in response.

His face shot up and he could feel the O his mouth was forming, yet he couldn’t lift his jaw from its dropped position. He may have been eight, but he knew how the world worked. If a girl asked you to walk her home, she wanted to be girlfriend and boyfriend.

Oh, the joys of being young.

“I helped get your shoes out of the tree. It wouldn’t be very nice of you to not walk me home after I did that for you,” Alex pointed out. “Don’t worry, Masturbateman...I don’t want to be your girlfriend.”

“Please don’t call me that,” Joseph asked, obviously hurt by her use of his stupid nickname.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to see how it felt saying it. That troll, Mark Whitmore, loves calling you that. I thought maybe there was a reason. Don’t worry. I hated it. It’s a stupid nickname, if you ask me. No wonder why Mark likes saying it so much. He’s the biggest dummy in the entire state!”

This got a laugh from Joseph. He definitely agreed with Alex’s analysis of Mark Whitmore.

“So, you going to walk me home?” she asked again.

“Yeah,” Joseph said. “I can do that.”

That was the moment Joseph Bateman and Alexandra Casings' friendship began, just one more step on the path that would lead Joseph to death row.

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