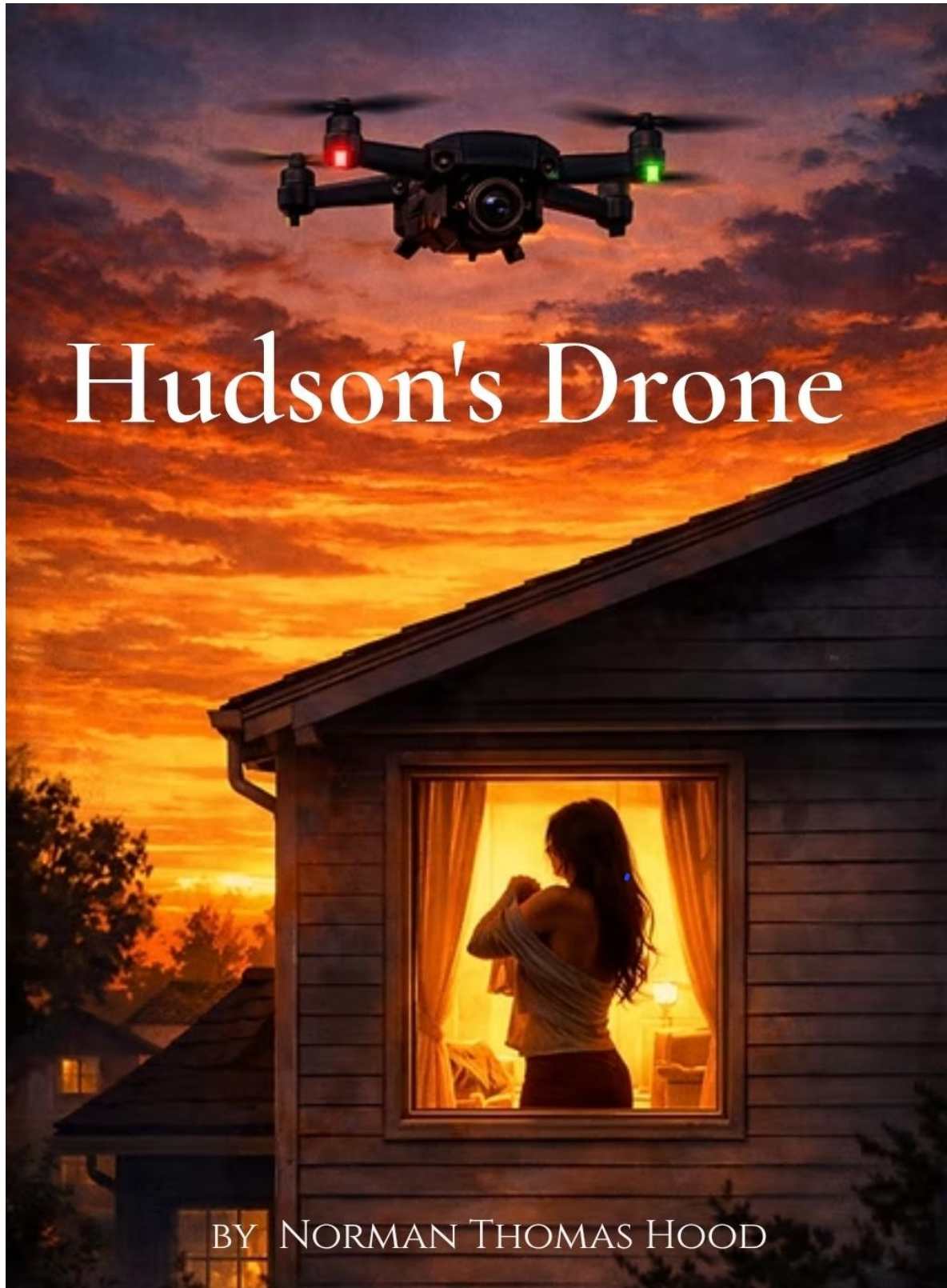




Hudson's Drone

By Norman Thomas Hood

The phone almost fell from his hands as he tried holding it closer to the floor. With his other hand, he pressed the small button on his stylus to take the picture. He'd done this many times before, but today he forgot to make sure his flash was off. The burst of light caught another high school student's eyes.

"What the hell, Hudson? Did you just take a picture of Cassie's ass?" Jake asked. The entire class turned and looked in Hudson's direction. He quickly put his phone away.

"What's going on back there?" Mr. Thompson asked, stopping class.

"Hudson just straight up took a picture of Cassie's... uh, butt, Mr. Thompson!" Cassie turned around and stared at Hudson, her mouth open. Hudson vehemently shook his head 'no'.

"Did you do that, Hudson? Was your phone out in my class?" Thompson asked in front of a room of whispering high school students.

"No! It wasn't out! I mean, it *fell* out of my hoodie pocket, but that's all!" Hudson argued.

"That's some bullsh—... I mean, that's a lie, Mr. Thompson! I saw him do it. He was holding the phone near his feet, right under Cassie's butt! I even saw the flash go off!" Jake said.

"Did you really just take a picture of me?" Cassie asked Hudson. The classroom quickly became silent, waiting for his response.

"No! I swear! It dropped out of my pocket! I was trying to grab it before it hit the floor, that's all."

"Why'd a flash go off then, Hudson?" Mr. Thompson asked, standing over him now. "Come on, hand me the cell phone." Hudson reluctantly planted the phone into Mr. Thompson's hand, still pleading his case.

"I didn't take any pictures. Not on purpose, anyway! It dropped out of my hoodie pocket! The light Jake saw was probably just a reflection off the screen."

A poorly muffled "Bullshit!" came from the other side of the room. The entire history class erupted in laughter.

"Alright! That's enough, everyone! Hudson, we'll deal with this after class," Thompson said, returning to the chalkboard.

Jake leaned over to Hudson and whispered, "Justin's gonna kick your ass for this, A-V boy. You just got your face smashed!"

Hudson cowered down in his seat. His hands fidgeted until everyone's eyes eventually returned to their teacher.

When class had ended, Mr. Thompson had Hudson stay behind.

"Okay, this is the deal, Mr. Bennett. Either you open your phone and show me that picture or I'll have to call Principal Henderson down here to ask you himself."

"But I don't even know if it really *took* a picture, Mr. Thompson. The phone legit fell out of my pocket!"

"Good. Then we can verify that together right now, and I'll be happy to announce that fact in class tomorrow. But I'd think carefully about refusing. Taking a picture like that qualifies as sexual harassment. I wouldn't doubt for a minute that Principal Henderson would have your phone confiscated by the police to have it opened."

"But what if it *did* take a picture... while I was trying to grab it? It's set up to take a photo by only pushing one button."

"Regardless. You either open it now, with me... or I get Mr. Henderson involved." He put the phone down in front of Hudson and waited for his answer.

Hudson didn't budge. Mr. Thompson looked at his watch and leaned forward.

"C'mon, open your phone, Hudson. Just get it over with. If you're telling me the truth, you'll be fine and we can get all this straightened out."

Hudson reluctantly unlocked his phone and opened the photo gallery. He spun the phone around to face Thompson, who opened the latest image. It was blurry, but definitely showed Cassie's jeans. Only part of her rear was pictured, though. The other half of the photo showed the metal frame of her chair and some of the ceiling above.

"See? I told you, Mr. Thompson. That's an accidental pic! No *way* I could take a picture *that* bad. And why would I use a flash in here, anyway? It's daytime. It went off by itself."

"I thought you said it was a reflection," Thompson said.

"Well, whatever it was. I just know *I* didn't do it... not on purpose, anyway."

"I'm going to be honest with you, Hudson. It looks to me like this was an intentional photo, even though it could go either way, depending on who looked at it. Listen... I know what it's like to be young and make dumb decisions. That's what I'm thinking *this* was... just a dumb decision. It's lucky for you it's a poorly taken photo. You can have your phone back, but I'm not telling the class it was a fluke, because I honestly don't think it was. Instead, I won't say anything about it. But, *whatever* happened today, don't let it happen again, okay? If you think it might, leave your phone in your locker. You know I don't allow phones to be out in my class anyway."

"Yeah, I know. Okay... yeah. It fell out, but I'll make sure nothing like this happens again. Thanks, Mr. Thompson." He grabbed his phone from the desk and hurried out of the room.

Four hours later, the last bell of the day rang. Hudson walked over to a side exit of Harley High instead of leaving through the front door, like everyone else. He hoped to avoid Justin and the beatdown everyone had heard about.

Before stepping outside, Hudson decided to duck into an empty classroom at the end of the hall to delay his exit for a few minutes. He sat down and pretended to be looking through his backpack. When no one came in after a minute or so, he shut the door and sat down in the back of the room. Ten minutes later, a teacher walked in holding a cup of coffee.

"What are you doing in here? Did you shut this door?"

Hudson didn't answer.

"You're not one of my students, are you?" she asked, trying to place him.

“No, ma’am. Sorry. I was just waiting to talk to someone. They didn’t show up, though... so I’m going.” He slung his backpack over his shoulder and left the room before she had time to question him more.

When he got outside, the Colorado heat hit him square in the face. The only students he saw were on the soccer team, getting ready for practice. He flipped the top of his hoodie over his head and quietly made his way to his car, walking around the outside of the parking lot. He could see the crowd of people still gathered near the front of the school.

“C’mon, J... let’s just go,” Cassie pleaded. “It wasn’t that big a deal. Besides, if he comes to school with a black eye tomorrow, you’ll be suspended.” Justin spit on the ground and threw his hat into his truck.

“The little bitch snuck out somehow... or left early!” He said it loud enough for the onlookers to hear. “That’s fine, though... Monday’s comin’, and so’s his ass-beating!”

“We don’t really know for sure what happened, Justin. Maybe he really *did* drop his phone. I’ve taken accidental pictures before. It’s not worth you getting yourself in trouble!” she said.

“He didn’t drop shit! He was straight up filming your ass! Jake told me so. I ain’t letting this go!” He waited until she got in the truck and threw it in drive, leaving ten feet of tire tracks in the parking lot. Soon after, the large group of disappointed onlookers had driven away as well.

Hudson pulled into his mom’s driveway and shut his car off. He went straight to his room, turned his computer on and opened a folder labeled ‘C’. A second later, his screen was inundated with random pictures of Cassie Grayson. Most were taken while walking closely behind her in the hall. Some were shot outside the cafeteria during lunch. He chose one of her picking up her backpack from the ground, then got up to lock his door.

Using an AI program to alter the photo, he had it remove her clothes. After some more adjustments, he saved the photo to a hidden drive on his computer. As he looked for another photo to work on, he heard his doorknob jiggle.

"Mom! I'm changing clothes!" he said, startled.

"What'd I tell you about locking your door? Valerie asked. "Either leave it unlocked or that computer goes away... your choice!"

"I'm just changing my clothes! Why do you always assume the worst?"

"Well, change in the bathroom next time! I'm not playing around after seeing what I saw on that computer last week." She took a needed breath before continuing. "Listen, I came up here to tell you I'm going to Cindy's for drinks. You'll have to fix yourself a frozen dinner," she said.

"If dad still lived here I'm sure we'd be eating *real* food," he said.

"Yeah, Hudson... and if your dad still lived here we'd have two incomes and could *afford* some real food! But I can't do anything about that now, can I? Can you?"

Hudson didn't answer immediately, but waited until she walked back downstairs.

"Maybe you shouldn't have kicked him out then, bitch. Or smoke two packs of cigarettes every day!" he said under his breath.

He closed the gallery and uploaded the photo he'd taken in class to his computer. He edited it, zooming in and cropping until Cassie's jeans weren't in the photo any longer. Then he added some lens flare to the image and distorted the photo to make it look like the phone was falling when the photo was taken. When he finished editing, he saved the new version, deleted the original and went downstairs to microwave some food.

Cassie finished her homework and went to the kitchen for something to eat. Her dad was at work and her mom wasn't home yet. She opened the fridge and pulled out some lunchmeat to make a sandwich. When she turned around, her little brother was standing between her and the kitchen island. Startled, she jumped backwards.

"Is it true? Did you get in trouble for giving someone naked pictures of yourself in school?"

"What? No! Who said that? And why would *you* know anything about it, Taylor? You're in middle school!"

"Jenny's sister told me... after lunch. Everyone in school heard about it!"

"Uggghhhhhh! No, that's *not* what happened. Someone in class thought they saw a guy taking a picture of my butt, that's all. I didn't *give* anyone any pictures... of anything."

"Dang. That's not what they said in *my* school. That sucks! Sorry, Cass. They said Justin beat the guy up so bad that they put him in jail for it. Did he really beat him up?"

"No, he didn't. That's what's wrong with people in this town!" she said, smashing the potato chips into her sandwich. "No one ever gets anything right!"

"Well, at least people are *talking* about you. No one knows I'm even *alive* at my school."

"Oh, yeah? Then you're lucky!" She ate her sandwich quickly, her nerves thoroughly rattled.

Hudson spent the evening hoping the chatter about his still-happening beatdown would die down before the next day. It hadn't. Everyone in first and second period stared at him and whispered their predictions for the fight amongst themselves. His nerves soon got the best of him and he left class for the nurse's office. After being told she wouldn't sign off on an early dismissal, he sulked his way to history class. He was a few seconds later than the tardy bell.

A student used the phrase "dead man walking!" as Hudson made his way to his seat.

"Quiet, Matt. We're not having any of that crap in here today," Thompson announced. "Keep messing around and you'll find yourself in principal Henderson's office."

Hudson sat down, feeling all eyes were on him. He was right. After a few minutes, though, things began to return to normal in class, including Hudson's constant fantasizing about the curvy brunette who sat directly in front of him.

When class had ended, he quickly reached around Cassie to show her the picture he'd doctored the night before.

"See, Cassie? My phone dropped, just like I said. This is the last photo taken on my phone, and you're not even in it."

"So, you *did* take a picture?" she asked.

"Not on purpose. It happened just the way I said."

Cassie looked it over carefully. She saw part of her shoe, an out of focus chair leg, then mostly ceiling. The lens flare and distortion Hudson added made it impossible to make anything else out. She turned around and smiled softly at him.

"Thanks. This makes me feel a lot better, Hudson. I was really freaked out thinking you would take that kind of picture of me."

"No problem. Can you let people know it was a mistake? Everyone thinks I'm some kind of sex pervert now, all because a freakin' phone fell out of my hoodie."

"I will... starting with Justin. Can I take a picture of your phone with the photo showing? I'd tell you to just send it to me, but Justin wouldn't want you having my number. You understand, right?" Hudson nodded and handed his phone to her. She put it on her desk and took a clear picture of his screen.

"This will work fine. Justin won't bother you now, I'll make sure of it. Look, I'm sorry you took so much crap over this." She handed his phone back. When their hands touched, the warmth of her skin sent chills down his spine.

"It's okay. It's not your fault... and so far I'm still alive, so it's cool. Seeya."

Hudson grabbed his backpack and left for fourth period. Mr. Thompson had the conversation and looked puzzled.

"Is everything okay, Cassie? Was Hudson bothering you again?" he asked.

"No, he showed me the picture from yesterday. You couldn't see very much detail. I think it was just an accident, like he said.

"You do?" Thompson asked, confused about her certainty.

"Yeah, I do. I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt. I'm going to tell Justin... and hopefully save Hudson's life."

"Good luck with that," he said as she left the room.

Justin leaned against his locker and stared intently at Cassie's phone screen.

"You got too many reflections on this. I can't see shit!"

"No I don't, Justin. Those weird reflections were in *his* photo, too. I'm telling you, he really just dropped his phone! This looks *exactly* like the picture on his phone. I can ask him to show it to you if you want. It's obvious the phone was falling and took a picture while he was trying to catch it. See? I'm not even *in* it. He was just trying to grab his phone, like he said. And now, everyone at school thinks he's a pervert."

"Who says he isn't? I don't care if it *was* an accident or not. I don't want him showing me shit... *or* talking to you, or even *looking* at you anymore. Got it? And you better not be talking to him, either! The guy is weird... gives me the creeps."

"I'm *not* talking to him! He just showed me the photo... that's all! I didn't even ask him to send it to my phone because I knew you'd get pissed if he had my number."

"Yeah, cause he's a fucking weirdo! I don't like him. He's in the A/V club, too. That tells you right there he's a strange, little fuck!"

"Yeah, he's different from most people, I agree... but the *point* is that yesterday was just an accident. And now, everyone thinks he's even weirder than they did before. How would you like it if it were you, and people thought that?"

"Well, I *am* a perv, babe... for you!" he said, grabbing her butt. She pushed away from him.

"Quit it! I'm serious, J. Can you *please* just tell everyone it was a mistake?"

"Fuck that! It's bad enough I don't get to beat his ass now! Some people might think I chickened out if I tell them it was all a mistake."

"Not if you tell them you saw the photo, and it was all just a misunderstanding."

"Whatever... I don't know, Cass. I gotta get to math!" He brushed past her and headed to class, leaving her without an answer. Unbeknownst to her, their conversation had been recorded from across the hallway.

Cassie checked her phone. It was 3:35pm. School had let out ten minutes ago. She leaned against Justin's truck and called his phone again. No answer. A moment

later, her screen lit up. There was a text message saying, 'hold on'. Soon after, she saw him approaching with Jordan and Todd following.

"Hey babe! We're going to Walmart for a while. Todd needs a new battery for his Jeep."

"I have to call my mom first."

"What for? You're almost eighteen now. We graduate in two months! C'mon... get in. We're going!"

"I have to watch Taylor until mom gets home, and Dad's never home before six. You know this."

"Well, call her ass, then!" He smacked the door of his truck. "Dammit! It's like I'm dating a freshman! We can never go *any* damn where!"

Cassie dialed her mom. It went straight to voicemail. She quickly dialed the number again. As her embarrassment grew, Cassie's phone suddenly rang.

"Hey, Mom. You didn't get off early today, did you? ----- Oh... well, Justin and I need to go to Walmart for a few minutes. A friend of his needs a battery for his car. ----- Yeah, I know... yes, okay. Okay, I heard you! ----- Okay! Nothing... they're just waiting for me to tell them yes or no. Can I just talk to you later?"

Justin shook his head. "Well, I could tell how *that* went! So... now I gotta take *you* home and then come *back* to this side of town to go to Walmart?"

"Or, I could just walk home," she said, stepping away from the truck.

"No... just get in the damn truck, already! I'm not gonna make my girlfriend walk."

Cassie got in the passenger seat while Jordan and Todd climbed in the back. Five minutes later, they pulled up to her house. She walked around the truck to give Justin a kiss, but he drove out of her driveway just before she could, spinning his tires to show his frustration. As his truck disappeared around the corner, Cassie was left feeling like she often did with Justin; like she didn't matter. She wiped the welling tears from her eyes and unlocked the front door to her house.

Hudson threw his backpack on the bed and booted up his computer. He checked outside his window to make sure his mom's car hadn't pulled in yet, then locked his bedroom door.

He downloaded a video from a porn site and opened up his AI program. He captured Cassie's face from a recent photo and used it in place of the girl's face in the video. When he'd finished editing her skin tone, it was difficult to see it was a doctored video. Proud of his work, he looked out his window again, closed his blinds and lay down on his bed.

"Taylor! I said *now*, Taylor!" Cassie yelled from downstairs.

"When it's over! You're *not* my Mom!" he yelled back. Cassie dropped her half-filled laundry basket and sat down on the couch. She was soon joined by their Golden Retriever. He draped his elderly head over her lap, aware of her stress. She rubbed his soft ears.

"Would you go bite Taylor on his ass, please?" Baxter looked up at her, confused by her directive. "Yeah, the little shit that lives upstairs... *that* one!" She pointed to the steps and said "go get him!" The aged canine let out a small whine, hinting he might have understood her words better than she thought. As Cassie picked up the TV remote, a bag of dirty clothes hit her in the back of the head. It opened on impact, sending a deluge of Taylor's dirty socks and underwear across her and the family room.

"Are you happy now?" he yelled. "You got me killed in my game again, loser!" He ran back upstairs, knowing she'd be quick on his heels. By the time he managed to close and lock his bedroom door, Cassie was already on the other side of it, pounding it with her fists.

"You're dead when I get my hands on you, buttwipe!" she yelled through the door.

"Go away or I'll call Mom!" he threatened in return.

"Good! Go ahead and call her. Let her come home and find your underwear all over the family room... 'cause I'm not touching it!"

"Well, quit messing up my games!" He turned up his TV's volume to drown out any reply she might have.

Cassie stomped down the stairs and lay on the couch again, more aggravated than ever now. Eventually, she fell asleep. When she woke, she found her brother's clothes picked up and back in the bag. It was sitting near her feet, tied neatly at the top.

"Smart move, you little shit," she mumbled. She checked her phone for any missed calls. There were none, and Justin hadn't texted her, either. She started to send him a message, but backspaced everything she wrote. She pulled up her copy of Hudson's distorted photo and looked it over again before deleting it. She thought about all the trouble it had caused him.

"Pretty sad situation for both of us," she said into the air. "You wouldn't know it, Hudson, but I'm probably just as lonely and miserable than *you* are right now."

Hudson heard his mom's car pulling in the driveway. He immediately buttoned his pants, turned off his computer and unlocked his door. It was 7pm. On his way downstairs, he heard the familiar sound of cardboard landing on the kitchen table.

"Pizza!" his mom called out. "Sorry so late, hun. I had a meeting after work."

"It's fine... I was asleep anyway. Have you thought any more about my drone? I know you said for graduation, but I really need it for a project I'm doing in class. Nick needs his, too, so I can't borrow his. I won't be able to do my project unless I get it soon."

"Yeah... I really don't think so, Hudson. I went to that link you sent me. It's over \$2,000! So I called that shop in the mall to hear what *they* had. He took down the model number of the one you wanted and he said he could get us one that does most of the same things for under \$800."

"Shit, Mom! I know kids who are getting cars and vacays for graduation! I'm not asking for stuff like that. But I don't want some piece of shit that I'll be replacing in three months, either. That place in the mall doesn't have anything *close* to the one I sent you. They basically carry overpriced toys! I've kept my grades up, just like you asked. I *need* the one I showed you. The others are junk

compared to it. I could use it to film aerial footage for realtors in town. You know that's what I want to do after graduation!"

"Okay, okay! Just let me... let's see if your grandmother will go in on it with me. But really, I don't know... I'm not promising anything, Hudson. \$2,000 may not seem like much money to you, but it's a lot for me *and* keeping this house paid for each month. You know we need to replace the hot water heater, and our air-conditioning unit is almost 25 years old."

Hudson sat down in a kitchen chair, sulking.

"Look, I'll call Mom after she gets out of church Sunday. Maybe she'll be in a gracious mood. That would be the only way I could afford it."

"It's a year-end project, Mom... one fourth of my grade. Most people have already started on theirs. I need it soon! It has the best motors and control software.... it's super quiet, so I won't get complaints while using it. Plus, I can work on it myself if I ever need—"

"Dammit, I *know*, Hudson! Shit! You're stressing me out, okay? Just eat your pizza. You've told me all of this before. I said I'd call Nana Sunday, and I will." She grabbed an empty glass and an open bottle of wine before leaving the kitchen for the patio. Hudson flipped open the pizza box and choked down his dinner.

As promised by Justin, the next morning he told no one of Hudson's apparently innocent photo. Cassie let her friends know, though, and soon, the chatter about the upcoming fight between Justin and Hudson disappeared. The relieved photographer found himself laughing about the situation in AV class with his friend Luke.

"Yeah, like I could ever *take* a shot that bad! Even Mr. Thompson laughed about it when he saw it. Stupid Justin got pissed off over nothing. He'd fight his own mother over a stack of burnt pancakes."

"Think you would have won, though? He's pretty big," Luke said.

"He's a poser... a douche. Doesn't even *deserve* Cassie! Treats her like total dog shit. Yeah, he might have won, but I'd get him back some other way if he did. He's luckier than me that it got called off."

“Yeah, he doesn’t seem very smart,” Luke added. “All of his friends are stupid rednecks, too.”

“Exactly. After graduation, he’ll enjoy a long career of digging ditches or pressing out license plates.” The room joined in laughter over Hudson’s prediction. After things quieted down, Hudson began to worry whether the things he’d said might get back to Justin.

Audio and Video Production Technology (AVPT) had become Hudson’s safe place. He’d been the active president of the club for two years. Other than him, there was only one other senior in the club. The rest were mainly freshmen and sophomores. He found it easy to be the bigshot in class. The younger students looked up to him. Especially Luke, a freshman, and his protege.

“Mr. Bennett. I need to talk to you,” Mr. Long asked, waving him over.

“Yes, sir,” Hudson said, approaching the teacher’s desk.

“Are you okay, son? I heard rumors of an altercation coming your way. Over a certain photograph you took?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine now. My cell slipped out of my hoodie pocket in Mr. Thompson’s class the other day. I tried to grab it... keep it from hitting the floor. Accidentally took a picture of Cassie’s chair and the ceiling. Stupid Jake Tennill thought I was trying to take a picture of her butt. I showed Cassie the picture, though. She could tell it was just a mistake. She wasn’t even in the photo! Her boyfriend is a neanderthal. He wanted to fight me over it! I was ready to, but Cassie set everyone straight before we could.”

“Wow, that’s a lot to unpack. I’m glad it didn’t come to blows, though.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t wanna get suspended this close to graduation.” Hudson turned to go to his seat, but the teacher stopped him.

“About your project. How’s it coming? You get the drone you wanted?”

“Real soon. Mom’s a little worried about the money, but I’ll get it.”

“Well, even if you have to pick a cheaper model, I’d encourage you to get started as soon as possible. This is 20% of your grade, remember?”

“Got it. It’s under control.”

Saturday came quickly. Hudson had been following Cassie's Facebook posts and knew exactly where she'd be that afternoon; out with her girl friends, shopping at the mall. After driving there, he sat in the common area for almost two hours waiting for her to pass by. He was close to giving up when he spotted her and her besties getting something to drink at an Orange Julius shop a few yards down from him. He lowered his cap to make sure he wasn't recognizable. The girls sipped their drinks for a few minutes and eventually made their way into a clothing store across the hall. He scanned the area, looking for a guy about his age, but had no luck. The mall was packed with women, but no men except for some regretful husbands waiting outside the shops for their wives to finish shopping. Finally, he saw someone who looked to be about his age walking towards him. He checked his cap and cut the boy off as he passed by.

"Hey, John.... John!" Hudson said as he approached the boy.

"What? Hey man, I'm not John."

"Shit! Sorry man! I thought you were a friend of mine. He was supposed to meet me here to make a quick \$50. I guess he's not coming. Woulda only took him a minute."

"Yeah, no problem. So, you were gonna pay him \$50 for one minute's work? What is it? Delivering something I shouldn't?"

"Naw, nothing like that. It's something else. I got this... girl. She broke up with me a few weeks ago. Said I didn't care enough about her... didn't spend enough time with her. She's a sweet piece of ass and I gotta get her back. I saw her here a few minutes ago with some other girls. I was gonna have my guy come up and say some disrespectful shit to her. Then I'd step in."

"Oh, yeah? Were you gonna sweep in and defend her?"

"Something like that. Hey, if you wanna do it, it's a quick \$50. My friend must not have been able to get a ride over here."

"We gotta fight or anything?"

"No, maybe I could push you a couple times... then you just walk away with my \$50 and I get my girl back."

"Shit, man... okay, I'll do it. As long as it doesn't get me in trouble. I work at the sports shop on the other end. Was just coming to the food court for lunch."

"Perfect. They're walking around over there, in that store. They should be out in a minute or two."

“Better be... I’m on a thirty minute lunch.”

“Here’s the \$50. Just hang out over there for a few minutes, near the store. When they pass you, hit her up... talk about her ass or something. Make her feel really uncomfortable. She’s wearing a light blue shirt and has long, brown hair. Like I said, it’ll probably just be a couple minutes. Don’t take off with my money before, though.”

“You’re good... I already told you where I work. I got this.” He walked over to the store next door to the girls and stood near the entrance, scrolling through his phone. A few minutes later, the girls walked out of the store. Instead of continuing down the hall, though, they turned around and started walking back the way they came. Hudson looked at the guy, who just shrugged his shoulders. Hudson started walking towards him but the guy waved him off and jogged after the girls. He whipped around in front of them and approached Cassie, walking backwards. They tried to walk around him, but the guy stayed directly in front of them, his eyes fixed on Cassie. Hudson could hear him talking, then heard one of the other girls yelling. He walked across the hall, casually glancing at them when he passed.

“Cassie? That you?” He stopped walking, acting surprised.

“Hey man, keep going. I’m talking to her,” the other boy said.

Vanessa spoke up again. “He’s being a jerk to her, Hudson, talking about her body like a total pervert!”

“What’d you say to her?” Hudson said, stepping up to the boy.

“Nothing... it’s not your business, man,” he answered.

“What’s wrong with you? You just come up to random girls and start riffing off some shit about their bodies? You don’t even *know* her, man! Get the fuck outta here!”

With that, Hudson pushed the kid as hard as he could. The boy fell backwards, off his feet and onto his back. His head hit the floor, making a loud thud. Hudson immediately knew he’d gone too far. His heart started racing. He worried he’d end up fighting the guy for real.

Hudson stepped to his left some, placing himself firmly between the boy and Cassie now. The kid got up slowly and felt the back of his head. Hudson knew there was a good chance he’d tell the girls he was paid for the performance. But to

his relief, the boy just walked past them all, cussing under his breath as he stared Hudson down.

"Oh my God, Hudson! That was amazing!" Cassie said. The other girls squealed their agreement.

"It's cool," Hudson said. "Sorry he bothered you."

"Well, he won't *anymore*!" Vanessa said. "You see that guy's head bounce off the floor?" Hudson was still panicking inside, but tried his best to act cool in front of the girls.

"Listen, I gotta go," he said, looking at his phone. "I'm picking up a friend from their job on the other end. Seeya in class, Cassie."

"Okay... thanks again, Hudson! I don't know what to say. That's the first time anyone's ever defended me like that. See you in History class!"

The girls stood there, huddled in excited banter while Hudson disappeared around the corner.

"That's the guy you thought was taking pictures of your ass in Thompson's class?" Vanessa asked.

"I never said that. *Jake* thought he saw him doing that... but it turned out he wasn't. Yeah... that's him, though."

"I always thought that guy was a total nerdfest. Isn't he in the A/V club?"

"So, what's wrong with that, Tiffany? You're holding a piece of A/V equipment in your hand right now... we all are!" Cassie said, holding up her phone.

"Yeah, I guess so... I just didn't figure him to be the kind of guy to come to a girl's rescue. Are you going to tell Justin?"

"Hell, no! And *you* two aren't either. Got it? It'll just cause more shit between us."

Both girls nodded in agreement as they continued their exit from the mall.

Cassie's friends kept their word in not telling Justin what happened, but some of the friends they *did* tell showed no loyalty in keeping the news a secret.

Cassie had only been home half an hour before her phone rang. It was Justin.

"What the fuck happened, Cassie? Why was Bennett with you today?" Justin was talking so loudly that Cassie had to hold the phone away from her ear.

“He wasn’t! I mean, he *was* at the mall, but not with us!”

“Nobody goes to the fuckin’ mall anymore, Cassie!” Justin shouted.

“Especially guys! And you’re telling me he just *happened* to be there? I’m calling bullshit!”

“He said he was there picking up a friend from work. Wow, J! I think you’d be *glad* someone was there to take up for me! You’d rather some jerk disrespect me and talk about my ass right to my face?” She threw the store bag she was holding across her bed.

“You shoulda just walked away from the guy, then!” he answered.

“I didn’t have *time* to, J! The guy was right up on me! And I was scared!”

“Whatever! So, the guy who stares at your body like he’s wearing x-ray glasses just *happens* to be the one who saves you from some random dickhead? Like I said... I’m calling bullshit! He probably rigged the whole thing himself to make himself look good!”

“That’s just stupid, Justin! You know, it could have been *you* there defending me, remember? I asked you to go with me two days ago.”

“Like I’d go to that loser mall, anyway!”

“Yeah, to a *loser* mall with your *loser* girlfriend, right?” Cassie prodded.

“You said it, not me!” he said, satisfied with his answer. The next thing he heard from Cassie’s phone was a click. She’d ended the call.

Cassie paced her bedroom, throwing the new clothes she’d just bought against the wall.

“Piece of shit! Why do you have to be such a piece of shit?”

Moments later she heard a knock at her door.

“Cassie... you alright in there? What’s going on?”

She paused for a moment to calm down. There was a time she felt she could tell her dad anything, but this wasn’t one of them. Especially after the pregnancy test she’d taken ten minutes ago.

Hudson celebrated his success by stopping for a milkshake on the way home. He couldn’t believe he pulled off such a perfect fake-out in front of Cassie. As he drank his shake, he fantasized about fighting the boy for real. After he’d beaten

him, he imagined Cassie putting her arms around his neck and covering his face with wet kisses.

When the straw began to draw nothing but air, he came back to reality and drove the rest of the way home from his award-winning performance. Twelve steps up the stairs later found him scrolling through the voyeur shots he'd collected of her over the last three years. When he found one that suited the moment, he quietly locked his door and closed his blinds.

By third period Monday morning, news of his heroics had made its way through most of his classmates' ears. For the first time in his life, he was the talk of the school... in a *good* way. He sat through Thompson's class hoping Cassie would turn to talk to him. Maybe thank him again. She didn't. But after class ended, she hesitated for a moment after standing from her desk, which made him pause as well.

"I just wanted to say 'thank you' again, Hudson. You were great Saturday," she said with an unconvincing smile.

"Are you okay? You look upset," he said. She looked around to make sure no one else was listening.

"Justin and I broke up... because of Saturday. Last period... that's when we, well... *he* broke up with me." She looked as though she was fighting back tears.

"Because of me? I'm really sorry." He tried his best to appear upset, but inside, he was celebrating.

"Yeah, *apparently* I'm not worth defending unless *he's* the one doing it. He said it's over... too much bitch-drama to deal with."

"Damn. I'm sorry, Cassie. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

"You didn't. I mean, you *did*... but not like... on purpose."

"So, he's really jealous? Of me?"

"It's not jealousy, it's hatred. He hates anyone with a penis who comes around me. He's such an insecure asshole."

"Wow... so you can't have any friends that are guys, then?"

"Well, I can *now*... I guess," she laughed.

"Well, cool. Can I be the first, then?"

"After what happened Saturday, I guess you already *are* the first. Welcome to my exclusive one-member club."

"Well, I'm sure it'll grow. We can put an ad for you on Facebook. I'll be your admin for free," he said. She laughed at his humor.

"That's about what I can afford. Wow, Hudson. You *do* have a sense of humor! I never would have guessed that, having never seen you laugh or smile."

"I'm just a little shy... that's all."

"Well, you weren't shy Satur—" she stopped talking as the warning bell rang.

"Crap! One minute 'til fourth! Seeya later, Hudson. I gotta go!"

"Seeya!" He said, watching her exit.

"You'd better hurry as well, Romeo," Mr. Thompson said. "Looks like you've won her over, huh?"

"Just some stuff that happened Saturday, that's all," Hudson said.

"Oh, I heard all about it. That's some coincidence... you being there, huh?" Hudson suddenly became uncomfortable.

"Here, take this note with you," Thompson said. "It'll keep you from getting a late charge in fourth period." He scribbled out an excuse note and handed it to the young hero.

"Thanks, Mr. Thompson." Hudson left the room feeling his life had changed in a big way.

All this for \$50, he thought.

When Hudson pulled into his driveway, he noticed his mom was already home. He walked in the kitchen and found a large box sitting on the table.

"Is that..." he began.

"Well, I don't know," his mom said. "Maybe it's just a big box of cleaning rags," she said, fighting back a grin.

He dropped his bookbag and ran to the table.

"You really did it?" He was visibly excited.

"Not just me... Nana came through bigtime. She said to tell you not to expect anything else for graduation, though."

"I won't. This is awesome! Do I have to wait, or can I open it now?" he asked, looking for a knife.

"Well, you need it for your project, right? So now is fine."

He looked at the stairs over his left shoulder, then locked eyes with her again.

"Go ahead, take it upstairs. Just don't ever fly it in the house."

Hudson picked up the box and carried it up the stairs. An hour later, he was in the backyard conducting his first flight test. His mom came out with a box of pizza.

"Here ya go, sport. Try to eat a piece between flights, okay?"

"Thanks mom," he said. He flew the drone over to her. She jumped back, worried it might hit her.

"Mom, calm down. I can control this thing to within an inch. Watch!" He made several precise maneuvers in front of her, showing off his skills.

"That thing barely makes any noise, Hudson. It's almost eerie how quiet it is."

"That's why it costs so much. Best motors around. Best of everything, really. Cameras, batteries, hardware, software... everything! It's as good as most drones costing \$5000."

"Well, I hope you get an A on your project and can make some good money with it this summer. I still wish you'd start college in August, though... with your classmates. Delaying it will make it that much harder to get motivated next semester."

"I wanna make some cash first, like I told you. I have plenty of time to start school."

"Well, fine... you can earn some of the money it'll take. That'll make it easier on me." She walked back inside, leaving his pizza on the table.

After she left, Hudson flew the drone almost one hundred feet from his patio and hovered over his neighbor's yard. Using his phone app, he took several pictures of himself and of the pizza box. After he'd finished, he went upstairs to load the pictures into his photo program. Zooming in on the pizza box, Hudson could read most of the small printing on the side.

"Perfect," he said, looking at the drone. "You and I are gonna be best friends!"

Cassie had been tucked under her covers since Vanessa's mom dropped her off after school. Her phone had been on silent for almost three hours. Other than a couple of annoying visits from Taylor, she managed enough quiet time to help her grieve the recent breakup. Justin had a blonde sophomore hanging on his arm all day between classes. The spiteful presentation hurt Cassie's feelings, but also served to help her put the relationship behind her.

She turned up her phone and looked at her recent history. No calls, but she saw five texts. Her girlfriends. Four from Vanessa and one from Tiffany. She dialed Vanessa first, wondering what news she must have missed to cause four phone calls.

"About time you called me back, bitch! What's up with your phone?" Vanessa asked playfully.

"Nothing. I just needed some down time."

"Girl, I don't blame you. Justin was an asshole today, parading that ho around everywhere! She's lucky you didn't pull her down by her hair!"

"Yeah, that's just what he *wanted* me to do. No thanks. She can have him. See what she thinks when he dumps her in a week or two. He's only slumming with her to make me jealous. I hope she gives him an STD."

"Cassie, that girl's had everything the school nurse can identify. The boy's gonna need a gift card to the health clinic by Friday!" Cassie laughed at her joke.

"There ya go, Boo... first giggle I've heard from you in three days!"

"I know... I'm trying. It's just been hard, that's all. I need a vacay."

"Girl, you're not the only one! How warm is your pool? Tiff and I can come swim with you, you know. All you have to do is invite us."

"Too cold... the water, I mean. But we can tan. You'd just have to put up with Taylor staring at your tits again."

"Who cares? Last time I had the little shit serving me water and cantaloupe, remember?" Cassie laughed again.

"You know what? Let's do it. You tell Tiffany, okay? Tomorrow after school," Cassie suggested.

"Done! But I don't need to tell her. She's right next to me, listening to everything."

"Vanessa! You know I don't like that! What if I hadn't invited her?"

"Shit, Cass... you *know* I'd just come, anyway!" Tiffany said over the phone's speaker.

"Yeah, Cassie... we'll take some cute shots of you in that sexy bikini of yours. That'd get Justin jealous!" Vanessa said.

"Nope, he's not seeing *this* again. Not after slumming with that vacuum cleaner on legs. He's lost all access to me. I don't go backwards, bitches!"

"That's my girl!" Vanessa said. "He wasn't good enough for you, anyway. What kind of a future could you have with him... right? He'd never make enough to even plan a life with... let alone a family. You'd have to be the breadwinner!" Cassie thought of the positive pregnancy test hidden in her nightstand drawer. Her smile quickly disappeared.

"Yeah... right. Listen, my mom's calling me for dinner. I gotta go. Tomorrow... bring your suits with you to school."

"Will do. Bye girl!" Vanessa ended the call. Cassie sat on the bed with the phone still in her hand. She reached over and opened the drawer to her nightstand. Holding the stick up to the light, her lips began to quiver as she wondered what she was going to do. The line was faint, but it was there. And Cassie was positive her life was over now.

News got around school how finished Cassie was with Justin. It didn't come from Cassie, but from her two besties, who decided to help out in their own way. News of their tanning party got around as well, all the way to Hudson's ears. By the time the last bell rang, he was quick to his car with a mix of ideas fueled with fantasy.

"Thank God!" he said, pulling in his driveway. He had worried all afternoon that his mom might come home early from work. He ran upstairs and google-earthed Cassie's address. Zooming in and out from several angles, he picked a spot in a dense tree-lined area two blocks away from her to control the drone.

Perfect! he thought. *Road-test... now!*

He grabbed his gear bag and took off down the stairs. *2.3 miles... not bad*, he thought, driving toward Cassie's house. Once there, he circled the block, hoping

to catch a glimpse of her. She wasn't home yet. In his rearview mirror, he suddenly recognized Vanessa's car. He sped up and made a right turn as the other vehicle slowly pulled into Cassie's driveway.

"Stupid!" He hit himself several times on the side of his head in frustration. *Be smarter, Hudson! Be freakin' smarter!* He pulled around the block and parked on the side of the street across from an undeveloped patch of trees and overgrowth. It fronted several acres of dense woods. He opened the backseat of his car and pulled out his gearbag. As innocently as he could, he walked into the woods until he found a place he could work unseen. He cleared a spot on the ground and opened his gearbag. Once he had his drone prepared, he took off vertically through the tops of the trees. Clearing the highest branches, he switched to quiet flight mode and flew around Cassie's neighborhood, high enough not to be noticed. The optical zoom on the drone made it easy to see the houses below.

Crystal clear. You rock, buddy!

He continued flying over the neighborhood. Only two houses on Cassie's block had pools in their backyards. He flew over Cassie's home and dropped altitude until he was even with her roof. He was stunned to see her in an upstairs bedroom. He backed the drone off and zoomed in. She was changing out of her school clothes. He could feel his heart racing. She had already taken off her jeans and shirt, leaving her with only her panties and bra on. She stood in the center of the room, perfectly still, as if she was lost in thought or just busy staring at herself in a mirror. Hudson didn't dare move the drone. He left it hovering in the same spot before suddenly remembering to start recording video. He took a breath and carefully set his preferences. She turned to her left for a moment and placed her hand over her belly. He felt a trickle of sweat beading at the end of his nose.

"Whatcha doing, mister? Is that a movie?" Hudson almost fell backwards from his crouched position. He spun around to see a young boy standing over his shoulder.

"What? Nothing! What are you doing here?" Hudson looked to see if anyone else was around. No one was.

"I live here. Well... over there," the boy said, pointing to a street one over from Cassie's. "I play here sometimes. When my mom's busy on her phone. I'm not really allowed to, though."

“Yeah... you’re not allowed! No one’s supposed to be in here, kid! I work for the city, surveying. I’m plotting this area for development soon. You need to get out of here, now... before I have to call the police on you! What do you think your mom would think of that?”

The boy took off, running out of the thicket. Hudson watched him leave, then looked at his monitor again. Cassie was gone now. The room was empty.

“Dammit!” He looked around to make sure no one was watching, then flew the drone back to his car to pack it up.

Once home, he carried his bag to his room and reviewed his recording. He hadn’t missed a lot. Cassie had stood in front of a mirror for a minute, then walked across the room, out of sight. Seconds later, Hudson saw her crossing the room again, this time in shorts and a t-shirt. He backed the video up to the moment she was standing still in her underwear.

Perfect... you are perfect, Cassie... in every way! he thought. He backed up the video again and paused it as she began to turn to her left. The next few minutes were spent practicing his zooming abilities and memorizing every curve of her body.

“Cassie. You got a minute?” Justin scanned the hallway, as if he’d be embarrassed if seen talking to her.

“Not for you, I don’t! I’ve got zero to say to you, Justin.” She turned to walk away. He grabbed her arm, holding her in place. She spun around, freeing her arm.

“Don’t ever do that to me again!” she said, pulling away. “You *lost* that right... and should have never had it, anyway!”

“Jesus! Why do you have to be such a raging bitch all of a sudden? You on your period? I was just tryin’ to talk to you... maybe give you another chance. I broke up with Brandi this morning.”

“The fact that you think you can talk to or handle a woman any damn way you want just proves why I’m much better off without you. You should run back to your little blonde slut now, because you and I are history!” She said it loud enough to turn everyone’s heads, then walked away, deeply proud of herself.

News of Justin's dressing down got around fast, even to the AV class.

"Hudson! You hear about Cassie and Justin? She told him off in the hall earlier," Luke said.

"Yeah, I heard. She talked to me about it afterwards. Got herself a little worked up. I calmed her down and gave her a hug. "

"She probably wants to date *you*, bro! Especially since you trashed that guy at the mall the other day."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm pretty busy these days. Starting up my video company right now. But, yeah... cool."

"Can I come over and check out the drone sometime? I read the specs on it... sounds awesome!"

"Yeah, let me get caught up on things and I'll text you sometime."

"Cool! Thanks, Hudson!"

Hudson glanced around the class. All eyes were on him. He was going to miss the class after graduation. It was the only place he felt important. As the minutes passed, he counted down to the time for the last bell and Cassie's pool party.

"When?" Taylor asked, his eyes open wide.

"Like, in ten minutes," Cassie said. "Vanessa forgot her suit. They'll be back soon. And don't be hanging around like a lost puppy dog, either! You freaked them out last summer, drool-boy!"

"I can't help it! I'm a man, remember?"

"No... a middle school *boy*... remember? Don't let me catch you staring at my friends all afternoon!"

"I won't... *all afternoon*, I mean," he said laughing. Cassie left him in the kitchen to go upstairs and change clothes.

Hudson's mom pulled into their driveway with her son right on her bumper.

"What's your hurry, Hudson? You need the bathroom or something?" she asked.

"No, just meeting Luke to work on my drone project for class, that's all. I gotta hurry."

"Fine, but take the trash before you go, okay? It's running over again."

"Got it." Hudson scrambled upstairs and packed his drone. He was back out the door in two minutes and on the way to the woods across from Cassie's neighborhood. After parking, he looked to make sure the little boy wasn't around before getting out of the car. He set up a little deeper in the woods this time, hoping to avoid detection. When he felt secure no one was around, he flew his drone through the tree tops and sent it to Cassie's house again.

"Knock, knock sexy! Are you ready to get your sizzle on?" Vanessa had let herself in, Tiffany was following.

"Be down in a second. Looking for my oil," Cassie answered.

"Well, hurry up! Damn! Y'all keep your house too freakin' cold! My tits are freezing up!" Cassie came bouncing down the stairs, happy not to find Taylor standing behind her friends with his tongue hanging out.

"It's like 84 degrees outside," Cassie said, "and blue skies!" Teenage shrieks filled the kitchen on their way to the pool. Taylor remained in his seat on the couch, pretending to watch TV. He figured he'd wait a few minutes before visiting the girls.

Hudson's drone hovered almost 400 feet above Cassie's pool. He switched to silent flight and gradually lowered his altitude, being careful not to be spotted. He positioned the drone behind the girls, about 100 feet in the air. Switching from auto-focus to manual, he zoomed in on each girl, starting with Tiffany. He slowly panned across her body, then over Vanessa's. He ended up on Cassie's, carefully filming her body from head to toe. He framed her perfectly, able to see the sweat beading on the top of her breasts. He exhaled fully, his hands shaking from excitement as he was seeing more of her than he'd ever captured from any school-taken photos. To his enjoyment, she flipped over onto her stomach to tan her back. He started his pan of her again, this time in reverse. The experience was more than he could have ever hoped for.

"Damn, it feels like 100 degrees out here, girl!" Tiffany said, wiping sweat from her eyes.

"It's the oil... I told ya!" Vanessa said, "Cassie has the best shit!" Before Cassie could affirm her statement, she saw Taylor emerging from the kitchen. He was carrying a tray of three ice-waters with lemon. He stopped at each girl's side, handing them a drink. After he'd given one to Cassie, she used her finger to motion him closer.

"Pretty slick, Casanova. I'm not even mad at you," she whispered. He winked before returning to the house. The girls continued tanning for another hour before calling it quits.

"Now, if we're lucky, the oil's going to work its magic for the next hour or two, so don't wipe it off yet," Cassie said. "We want our skin to turn brown instead of staying red, remember? Hopefully, by tomorrow any redness will be long gone."

"That's why we trust you, Cass! You know your shit!" Vanessa said.

Hudson got home and locked his bedroom door before reviewing his footage of the girls. He was amazed at the clarity and quality of his recordings.

"Best money I never spent," he laughed. Hearing someone on the stairs, he quickly unlocked his door and opened a different program. His mom knocked once and opened the door.

"I made lasagna tonight, Hudson. Sound good?" she said as she opened the door.

"Perfect ending for a perfect day," he answered.

"Oh, yeah? The project's working out well, huh?" she asked.

"Better than you know," he said. "Way better."

The third period tardy bell rang. Hudson wondered if Cassie was absent from school. As the noise in the classroom began to die down, the door suddenly opened with Cassie rushing to her chair. The teacher was busy writing on the chalkboard, his back to the students.

"Doesn't look like Thompson saw you," Hudson whispered as she sat down.

"Thank God! Justin held me up again. I've got two tardies in here already, and we haven't even had prom yet."

"Yeah, prom... I'm not much for things like that. Dressing up just to get trashed at the end of the night," he said.

"Oh, come on, Hudson. You're not going? It's the last one before we graduate. You *have* to go. Besides, I think you'd look pretty good in a suit." He had to keep from blushing. He'd never had a girl tell him anything like that before.

"Um, you look different today. Been to the beach lately?" he laughed.

"Yeah, my backyard beach, I guess. Whatever works!"

"It looks good on you."

"Wow, Hudson... that was sweet. See? Some people actually know how to speak to a girl. It's nice for a change. That's why *you* need to go to the prom."

"I don't know," he said. "Most girls think I'm just a tech geek, and nothing more."

"Well, *I* don't. And remember what you did at the mall. I think if you asked a girl to the prom, she'd probably say yes." Hudson had no reply. He just nodded and sat back in his seat. The rest of class was a blur for him.

She wants me to ask her. Cassie Grayson just hinted for me to ask her to the prom!

Cassie skipped dinner that night. Her stomach hurt. As she lay in bed, she felt a familiar sensation.

"Oh, my God!" she said, running to the bathroom. Taylor was brushing his teeth.

"Out! Now!" she said, pulling him into the hallway.

"Hey!" he said through a mouthful of foam."

"Use Mom and Dad's! It's an emergency!" She closed the door behind her and pulled down her pants. As the blood trickled down her leg, two thoughts flooded her mind. Did she miscarry? Or was it her period? It felt like her period to her.

Was the test wrong? she wondered.

She cleaned herself up and ran downstairs to ask her mom if she could borrow the car.

"I'm out of my pads! Using the last one now. I gotta go to the store! Be back in a few minutes, okay?"

"I *have* pads, Cassie. Use one of mine until tomorrow. I'll get you some more during my lunch tomorrow."

"They don't feel right! I like mine better. Mom! I'll be right back. Please!" Her mom pointed to the keys and Cassie was out the door in three seconds. At the store, she bought a pack of pads she didn't need and a second birth control test.

A few days later, after what felt like a normal period, Cassie took the test. She knew the timing for it was not recommended, but she had to know. The test came back negative.

"Yes! Yes!" she yelled from the bathroom.

"You okay in there, babe?" her mother asked.

"I'm perfect, Mom... just perfect!"

"Uh, huh... it sounds like it."

Cassie ran to the bedroom and pulled out the first test. She could still see the faint, positive red line. Comparing the two tests side by side, there was no line at all on the new one. Now she could truly relax, knowing she'd been worried about nothing. The worry of having to deal with Justin for eighteen plus years quickly disappeared.

She'll be mine that night... I know it. He thought as he lay on his bed, thinking of Cassie. *She told me to ask her!*

He scrolled through his phone, looking at the many pictures he'd taken of her since their freshmen year. He fantasized about the moment he'd ask her to go. She'd blush, then take his hand, confessing she'd hoped he picked up on her hints from the other day and ask her to go. She'd look him directly in his eyes, lick her lips and lean forward, whispering 'yes' into his right ear, along with all the things she wanted him to do to her after the dance. He'd pull her closer and breathe in deeply, taking in the smell of her hair and perfume.

What day to ask her, though? Prom was coming soon, being just three weeks away now. If he waited too long, someone else might ask her. Would she wait for him?

Wednesday, he thought, *right in the middle of the week*. He'd stop her after class and ask her. Then he could tell his buddies in AV class about it before the end of the day.

"One minute, Cassie! That's all I'm askin' from you." Justin fidgeted in his jeans pocket. "I wrote it all down so I wouldn't leave anything out or mess it up."

"Fine, one minute... but that's all!" Cassie said, noticing several students in the hall were watching. He cleared his throat, then read aloud:

"Dear Cassie,

I know things have been crazy ever since we broke up. It was my fault, from how I was acting. I know that. Maybe it's because we're still young and about to graduate, I don't know. But I've been sick about it ever since. That has to mean something. I couldn't even have another relationship because I kept thinking of you. I want you back! You're the love of my life. Everything was my fault and I'm sorry."

Cassie didn't say anything for several seconds.

"Are you sure you wrote all that? She asked, taking the paper from this hand. She recognized his hand-writing. "Doesn't matter, though. I doubt much of it was true." She walked away, but added to her words, "You *should* be sorry, though. That part of the letter *was* true. You treated me like shit, Justin."

Wednesday finally arrived. Hudson was nervous, but ready. He'd practiced what he'd say to her the night before. The bell rang and Cassie was gathering her things

to go to fourth period. Hudson said her name softly as she stood to leave. She turned around.

“So, I was thinking about what you said to me last week. About a girl saying yes to going to the prom with me. I decided you’re right. I want to go, and want you to go with me.” He couldn’t believe he was able to say everything without messing it up.

Cassie smiled and made friendly eye contact. “Hudson, I’m really sorry, but I can’t. Justin asked me to go a few minutes ago. We got back together this morning. He wrote me a really sweet letter yesterday that I wasn’t ready to hear. But I thought about it all night. He seems like he really wants to change. And after all we’ve been through, I just felt I owed him another chance.”

Hudson stood there, stunned. To him it felt like the Earth stopped spinning. Then a switch in his head went off. Any understanding he may have had, or filter he may have used with her was gone now.

“Another chance? You *owed* him? He’s a redneck douche, Cassie! He treats you like dogshit! That asshole doesn’t deserve *any* girlfriend, especially you. So, you’re picking him over me? Great. I thought you were smarter than that. I was wrong. You’re both the same... stupid assholes!” Cassie’s face showed her shock.

The few kids still in the room froze in their tracks, their eyes glued to the couple. Hudson couldn’t believe the words he said either, but his mounting rage quickly wiped away any guilt.

“Hudson!” Mr. Thompson said loudly, “We’re not talking to people using that kind of speech! I suggest you take Cassie at her word and leave her alone. And without the insults.”

Cassie, still shocked by Hudson’s harsh words, tried her best to remain calm. She turned to him again and spoke quietly.

“Listen, I’m sorry if I gave you any mixed messages. I didn’t mean to. You’ve been a good friend to me, but I just don’t think of you like a boyfriend.”

Hudson ignored her statement and engaged his teacher instead. “So, you think I’m bothering her just by *talking* to her? Like I’m not good enough to? Nice, Mr Thompson. You’re on her side, too!”

“I’m not on *anyone’s* side, Hudson. I just don’t want this in my classroom, that’s all. It’s inappropriate.”

"Inappropriate? Don't worry, Mr. Thompson. I won't be saying much of *anything* to her redneck ass after today," Hudson said, stuffing his backpack.

Cassie wiped her eyes and sat down at her desk again.

"You know, I actually thought you were different from the rest, Hudson... but you're not. You're the exact same. Just in your own, pathetic way!" She stood and hurried out of the room, leaving him, Mr. Thompson and a few eavesdroppers in her wake.

Hudson zipped up his backpack and left as well, blood boiling. Nothing went the way he thought it would. In fact, he couldn't have imagined it going any worse.

The exchange between Cassie and Hudson got around school at lightning speed. By the time sixth period began, everyone was buzzing about Hudson having called Justin a "stupid, redneck douche".

"What are you gonna do, Hudson?" Luke asked. "They're saying Justin's going to wait for you in the parking lot again.

"Nothing. He knows where to find me. If he wants to, we'll fight. If not, I'll go home... same as any day."

"Wow! You're not scared at all. I hope you kick his ass, Hudson. He deserves it."

"I don't care what happens, really. Cassie had her chance with me but chose that asshole instead. He can have her. She's not worth my time anymore. She was sloppy seconds, anyway."

Hudson followed the same plan he'd used the first time he learned Justin wanted to fight him. He snuck to the side exit and tried to cross the soccer fields to his car again. This time, there was a crowd waiting just outside the corner of the building. Justin stood in the center, shirt off and ready to fight. Hudson turned and tried to walk around to the back of the school instead. He was met with three of Justin's friends blocking his path. He turned around to see Justin walking

toward him, the crowd following. For a second, he thought about running back inside the school, but his pride stopped him from moving.

"I figured this is how you avoided me last time, dickweed! There's no getting away from me now!" Justin picked up his pace.

Hudson's fear grew as he watched Justin's approach. He looked around for Cassie, hoping she would stop the fight before it started. She was nowhere to be found.

"Who ya lookin' for, dipshit? No one's talking me out of it this time! Your ass is mine!"

Two seconds later, Justin front kicked Hudson to the ground. All the air from his lungs escaped, leaving him unable to breathe. The next thing he felt was Justin's boot kicking his side.

"Get up, bitch!" Justin yelled, standing over him. Hudson still couldn't draw a breath and was too scared to fight back.

"Oh, you want it on the ground, huh? No problem!" Justin jumped onto Hudson, straddling his mid-section in full-mounted position. He rained hard punches down to Hudson's face and ears. After several brutal strikes, Hudson instinctively turned over to avoid the onslaught of blows.

"Oh, shit!" someone in the crowd shouted, "he's given up his back!"

Justin stayed on top of him, his heels dug into Hudson's sides. He punched his face and head unmercifully. The thud from each strike was upsettingly loud, causing several people in the crowd to start yelling for Justin to stop.

"Quit it, Justin! That's enough!" they said. "You're going to kill him! You'll go to jail!"

The mention of jail must have made its way through Justin's rage. He rose from his mount and kicked Hudson onto his back again. The crowd gasped when they saw the bloody mess Hudson's face had become. His nose was broken, the skin around both of his eye sockets was split and gushing blood. His mouth was already swelling and covered with so much blood and dirt that no one could tell if he'd lost any teeth or not. Fresh blood continued to pool in his mouth, causing him to jerk forward and projectile vomit. The crimson liquid sprayed onto everyone within ten feet in front of him. The crowd gasped and quickly backed up. Eventually, some horrified students approached him again. As they stood over his broken body, someone in the group shouted that the school's security

team was running towards them. Everyone there, including Justin, took off for the front parking lot, leaving Hudson lying in his own bloody mess. When the security team got there, he was unconscious. Within just minutes, Hudson was being placed on a gurney and rushed to the hospital by ambulance.

Three weeks passed from the day of Hudson's epic beatdown. It was a Saturday, the third week of April. Most seniors were dressing for their last prom as highschoolers. All, in fact, but Hudson. He'd been home for twelve days, having spent eight days in the hospital. Three cracked ribs, two missing teeth and a wired jaw left him unable to do much except watch TV. He didn't remember much of the beating, but one thing still remained front and center in his brain; Cassie.

Hudson wrestled with feelings of lust, hate and revenge towards her. His fantasies of her gradually returned, though, along with his health. Some fantasies culminated in sexual encounters, where she'd apologized for the trouble she'd caused and pledged her love to him at his bedside. There were other fantasies he entertained as well. Darker ones. Fantasies of abduction and torture, where she'd beg him for her life as he used a sharp knife across her naked body before raping her. The end result of those fantasies varied. In some, he'd wear a mask, letting her go just before daylight. In others, he'd uncover his face so she'd know who was doing this to her. Afterwards, he'd kill her and leave her body in the woods.

Day after day, the darker of his scenarios became more prevalent, leaving him planning on how to bring it about.

His mother took two weeks off to be with him while he recovered and to help care for him at home. When he was well enough she asked him about the fight, but Hudson refused to reveal much of anything except that he was jumped for standing up for another student. He refused to write down who beat him up. No one at the school spoke to the police either, though the police were convinced Justin was responsible.

It took an additional two weeks before the surgeons unwired Hudson's jaw and started him on physical and speech therapy. At that point, his jaw muscles had to be fully retrained. Chewing food was useless for another week. The best he

could do was stick with liquids or blended foods, soups and ice cream being his usuals.

Graduation day grew closer. It has been almost two months since his attack. He was talking better now and could eat most of the foods he was used to. His fractured ribs had healed, for the most part, as well.

"Are you sure you don't want to go, Hudson? You only have one high school graduation, you know," his mother reminded.

"Yeah. That's *exactly* what I want to do, Mom. Show up to graduation and have everyone point and stare at the kid who went viral for getting his ass stomped in front of a hundred people. Great idea. Got any more of those?"

"That's right, Hudson... be a smartass. Over seven weeks I've taken care of you and listened to nothing but negativity and sarcasm! I missed fifteen days of work... had to call my mortgage company and beg off for two whole payments! You know, they're tacking those missed payments onto the end of my—"

"Yeah, Mom... I know, I know! I've heard it all already! Like I *asked* for what happened to me?"

"Hell, Hudson... I still don't even *know* what exactly happened to you yet, or why. I *certainly* don't think that taking up for another student is what got you almost killed! I don't think *that*, I'll tell you!"

"Well, it *did*, though, didn't it? The proof was written all over my body... remember? I'm never going back to that piece of shit school! I finished my assignments from here, and that was better for *me*, anyway. Screw that place! It totally sucked for four years! I'm glad it's over."

"Look... I know it wasn't easy for you. You're a smart kid. Much smarter than the average. Everyone knows average people don't understand the gifted ones. They never will."

"Sure... okay, Mom! Can we *just* stop talking about it?"

"Fine, Hudson. Listen... I'm going to get us some tacos. What kind do you want... beef or chicken?"

"I don't care... just not the crunchy ones."

"I know. I'll be back soon."

His mom left the driveway, leaving Hudson alone to stew in his anger and eventually sink back into his morbid fantasies. None of them ended well.

Prom was a lackluster memory for Cassie. She went alone, having caught Justin at the lake with Brandi the week before.

The way he'd told her about wanting to go fishing that afternoon seemed suspicious. She'd had enough experiences with his lies in the past to know something wasn't right. Brandi and Justin were still dressing when she discovered them in the bushes.

This breakup came easier for Cassie than the first, though, despite what she saw. It solidified in her mind what she already knew, but had chosen to ignore. Justin never loved her. She was a trophy to him, and that's all. All his talk of wanting to change was just that; talk. Talk meant to get her back by appealing to her loyalty and time invested in the relationship. But Cassie found the old saying was true; 'a dog returns to its vomit'. In this case, the vomit's name was Brandi.

"Good riddance," Tiffany said, helping herself to Cassie's refrigerator.

"I'm only upset that I gave him another chance to hurt me," Cassie said. "I mean, what the hell was I thinking?"

"Well, you know... the heart wants what it wants, right?" Vanessa offered. "He was your first, right?"

"First and only," Cassie answered.

"Then don't feel stupid," Vanessa said. "You did what any of us would have. You gave him the benefit of a doubt that he really wanted to change. So, you kept *your* end of it... he didn't."

"Yeah, I guess so... thanks." Cassie smiled and hugged her friends.

"Okay, girls... now onto something more important," Tiffany said. "Eight bucks for a large one-topping. That's almost \$3 each..."

"What about me? I have two dollars!" Taylor added from the family room.

"Okay, that'd be two slices each at \$2 each. I'm good with that... are you guys?" Cassie asked. They nodded. Tiffany ordered the pizza and Vanessa left to pick it up.

“So, Cassie... still going to community college? I wish you'd come with Vanessa and me to State. We could be roommates together!”

“Yeah, I wish, too, Tiff. And I'll get there, but I have to do two years here first. Saves my parents like eight thousand in tuition. But I can drive out there on weekends and stay with you sometimes. It won't be too bad.”

“Could be worse. You could be married to Justin with a kid on the way,” Tiffany laughed. “No future there!” Cassie thought about how close she'd come to having that exact life.

“Yeah, no thank you. Not after he double-dipped in Brandi Harrison!” Cassie said. “And he's damn lucky Hudson never pressed charges on him. He would have gone to jail for sure! Hudson had his jaw wired shut for like a month, I heard.”

“Sorry, but that boy gave me the creeps and I'm glad he *didn't* come back to school,” Tiffany said. “I heard he's graduating from home. Do you think he'll come to the ceremony if he's well enough?” She picked through Cassie's refrigerator again.

“I seriously doubt it. His beatdown went viral. I think he'd be too embarrassed to be pointed at and whispered about the whole afternoon. Part of me wanted to feel sorry for him, you know? I thought he was really sweet at first... not a weirdo like everyone said. Like, at the mall... remember? I really tried to be his friend... until he snapped on me! The guy called me a ‘stupid redneck’, like Justin. After that, I just don't care anymore.”

Hudson logged out of his fake Facebook and Instagram accounts. He'd been checking Cassie's posts daily, hoping to find out what she was doing. To his surprise, she had just posted something five minutes before.

Question: Is it really fair to ask your teenage daughter to push mow a yard when you know it's big enough to require a riding lawnmower??? Ugghhhh! Oh, well... sun is sun, no matter how you get it!

Hudson immediately grabbed his gear and walked downstairs. This would be the first time he'd been out of the house for more than a few minutes. He left a note for his mom, packed his car and drove to Cassie's neighborhood. After parking in his usual spot, he put duct tape on his license plate to hide his number and made his way to his favorite spot in the woods. Twenty minutes later, he spotted Cassie in her bedroom. He carefully approached her window with the drone and zoomed in to watch her change clothes. This time, she changed in the center of the room and Hudson got the eyeful he'd been waiting for. Afterwards, she emerged on the patio wearing the cropped shorts and swimsuit top she'd just put on.

He flew the drone higher and to the south of the house, just enough to get the perfect view of her mowing the yard without being detected. He leaned back on a tree and enjoyed the show, once again fueled by the power he felt watching her in a way no one else could. He couldn't take his eyes off of her, dreaming of the day he'd have her for himself.

"There he is! That's the guy I told you about! See? It *was* his car!" The young boy who had discovered him months earlier was standing about fifty yards behind Hudson with two police officers and one distraught mother.

"Police! Drop whatever's in your hand and get down on your stomach!" Hudson panicked, unable to think of what to do. He tried to stall.

"I can't! It's a \$2000 drone! It'll crash if I do!" He immediately sent the drone to base.

"I said drop it and get down on the ground! Now!"

"Okay, okay!" Hudson responded.

He knew if they saw what he'd been filming, he was going to jail and would lose his drone. In a moment of panic, he snatched his bag off the ground and started running.

"Stop! Get on your knees, now!" he heard as he ran down the hill. The two officers followed in pursuit. The deeper Hudson got into the woods, the faster he ran. When he'd put enough distance between him and the two officers, he changed directions, making his way northwest now, up the hillside again. He figured the older officers would get tired running uphill, if they even managed to see he'd switched directions. He struggled with the climb himself and was almost out of energy when he finally spotted his car. The drone was waiting for him on

top of the car's roof. He opened the trunk and quickly put it inside, still seeing no sign of the officers. He jumped into the driver's seat to make his escape. As he drove out of the neighborhood, he passed the little boy and his mom standing on the street. He covered his face as he drove by.

"Shit! Shit.... Shit!" He said, hoping they hadn't removed the tape on his license plate and ran his number. He slapped the steering wheel several times. "That little bastard! That fucking little bastard!"

After he pulled into his driveway, he jumped out to look at his plate. The tape was still there.

"Stupid cops!" he said as he opened his trunk to retrieve his equipment. His mind reeled at the thought of how close he came to getting caught and his accessibility to Cassie being cut off. The woods were a no-go now. He'd have to find another location, farther away, *and* another vehicle. He knew what he needed first, though.

"A what?" his mom asked, already frustrated.

"A signal extender. They make them for drones. I need it for extra safety."

"Another \$79 dollars? For antennas? I don't understand, Hudson. I thought this drone was the best."

"It is. And I love it! It's just that sometimes bad winds can blow it out of range, that's all. I don't want to crash it during longer video shots. A signal extender would make it safe to fly the extra distances I need. They're the best antennas around. I swear, I'll pay you back after the first job I get with it."

"Fine, just get what you need. I paid too much already to have it destroyed for \$80."

Two days later, Hudson received his signal extenders. By Saturday afternoon, he was back in business, parked on the far side of Cassie's neighborhood. His new extenders allowed him to operate far enough away to avoid suspicion, but close enough to control the drone from inside his mom's car. He'd told her he was

going out to practice some high altitude video captures for future business. His mom let him take her car after he complained the air conditioning wasn't working well in his.

Hudson had figured out Cassie's routine by now. After dinner, by eight or eight-thirty, she'd take her bath. He'd gotten pretty good at catching her either dressing or undressing. Hudson's fantasies of abduction, rape and murder began to appear in his dreams. As his collection of videos grew, so did his desire to have her in the flesh. Until then, the drone footage would have to satisfy him.

His relationship with his mother became more distant as the weeks passed. Eventually, she stopped trying to keep their dialogue alive, ultimately looking forward to the day he moved out.

He spent most of his time in his room, plotting ways he could get Cassie alone without anyone knowing. Soon, he created a plan he believed could work.

Cassie had taken a job at an ice cream shop in town. Hudson figured out she was working part time, Wednesday through Sunday evenings. The shop closed at 10pm, and by the time the employees had finished cleaning and closed the register down, it was 10:30 or after. That gave him the cover of darkness, the perfect environment to execute his plan.

"Please? C'mon, Cassie! I've got a dollar!" Taylor waved the bill in the air as she put on her work shoes.

"They cost \$3," she said.

"But you *work* there! Please?"

"Ugghhh!" She grabbed his dollar and opened the front door. "You know, I only get a 25% discount, Taylor. I'm still going to end up paying more than you!" She shut the door and started her mom's car. Ten minutes later, she pulled into the ice cream parlor's back lot.

"Hey, stranger. Seems like it was just yesterday I saw you here," Amy laughed, finishing her cigarette.

"It *was* yesterday, goofball," Cassie replied, "and *you* shouldn't be smoking those!"

"I'm not on the clock yet, newbie!" she laughed.

"Yeah, but who wants to work in an ice cream parlor that smells like an ashtray?" Cassie asked, grinning.

"Hey, it could be worse," Amy said, "you *could* be working at a factory or hardware store... with everything around you being metal... gray, heavy and just *blah!*"

"True," Cassie said, waving the smoke from her face.

Amy was right. The parlor had a good vibe and lots of color. It was decorated like a 1950's ice cream shop, even though the store was less than twenty years old. They even had an elevated toy train track installed that ran around the inside walls, near the ceiling. Add the constant music and cool air conditioning, and it wasn't a bad place to work.

"I can't believe we never became friends before this," Cassie said. "You cheered for three years?"

"Yep, one more to go, and hopefully in college, too."

"I guess since you're a year behind me... still, you'd think we would've known each other."

"Well, I knew who *you* were, dating Justin and all. We all thought he was the cutest guy at Harley."

"Yeah, well... looks aren't everything, believe me. He treated me like crap the whole time we dated."

"I heard. Sorry. But you were like... one of the prettiest girls in school. You could have done way better than him, no doubt."

"Thanks, maybe if my self esteem wasn't so bad. He had a way of keeping it low. But right now, I just want to forget about him and save up some money for next year. It'd actually be nice to start college without any boyfriend drama."

"For sure," Amy said, "I'll be thinking the same thing next year. Getting out of this town!"

"So, you're not going to work here part-time? You're already an assistant manager and barely seventeen years old!"

"Haah! And you know what that amounts to?" Amy asked. "A dollar an hour raise and I get to close every Saturday and Sunday. In other words, I work the weekends so the owners don't have to. I've done that for over a year now. Thanks, but no thanks! I'll be *happy* to start college! I'll have more of a life than I do now."

“Wow, I never thought about it that way.”

Hudson sat in his mom's car, watching the parlor from the opposite corner. There was an old, wooden fence separating the shop from the business next door. Hudson noticed a gap in the fence where someone had broken off a few pickets. The top fence cross support was still intact, but the middle one was broken and hanging down. It left a two foot opening in the fence.

Hudson drove to the front of the store next door to see what kind of business it was. The sign on the door showed it to be a vision care center. From that, he knew it probably closed around five or six o'clock each day, and shouldn't be open on Sundays. The wheels in his head began to turn feverishly as he imagined pulling a docile Cassie through the fence and into his waiting car without being discovered. For that, he knew he'd need a way to render her unconscious without injuring her. He parked his car and stepped through the opening in the fence between the businesses. He casually looked around, finding no one else in the area. As if playing a role in an action movie, he crouched down and counted to five before shuffling backwards in six inch steps. He continued like that through the fence and to his car on the other side. When he reached the rear door, he checked his watch.

Sixteen seconds... I'll have to get faster than that.

He cleared some broken branches and debris from the ground and tried again, this time moving faster.

Twelve seconds... that's more like it!

He sat in his car and waited until Cassie's shift was over, hoping to get a glimpse of her before he left.

It had been fifteen minutes since the last customer left and closing time had finally arrived. Cassie turned off the lobby lights and waited for the young assistant manager to finish closing out the cash drawer and follow her outside. It was 10:30pm.

Hudson stood on the opposite side of the fence, out of sight of the employees. He watched carefully as the two women exited the rear of the parlor. Amy locked the door behind them and talked to Cassie a moment before walking to her truck. Cassie got in her car and immediately locked the door, as was her usual. Before she started the engine, she opened up her phone and scrolled for any messages she might have missed. A minute or so later, she pulled out of the lot. Hudson watched her leave and noted how close she had parked to the damaged fence. He decided then he'd carry out his plan on a Sunday night when no other businesses were open except the gas station across the street. All he needed now was a way to render Cassie unconscious without alerting anyone. For that, he turned to Google.

"Yes! You got one! Thanks, Cass! And look, I found two more quarters in my room after you left. Here!"

"Keep 'em, Taylor. But next time, don't ask me unless you have \$2.25. Is Mom in bed yet?"

"Yeah, like an hour ago. Told me she was going to read for a while. I checked a few minutes later, and she was asleep."

"Ugggh, figures. I didn't have her card for gas tonight. It's on empty now. I'll leave her a note for tomorrow morning."

"Oh, there's a package on the porch," he said, "it's been there for a half hour."

"Then why didn't you bring it in, doofus?"

"Cause Mom said never answer the door if she's asleep or not home. And she was asleep."

Cassie unlocked the door and grabbed the package.

"It's for me... from school," she said, opening the large, padded envelope.

"School? School's over, dummy! You already got your diploma."

"College, doofus!" She looked over the letter and the welcome goodies that fell from the envelope.

"Hey, cool! Can I have the notebook and pens?" Taylor asked, grabbing for them. Cassie smacked his hand away.

"No! This is *my* stuff. You'll get your own when you go to college! If you *do*, that is!"

"I'll go to a better one than yours," he said.

"Not without money, you won't! Besides, I'm transferring to a better one in two years. You probably won't even *get* past two years!" Taylor grabbed some candy from the pile of welcome gifts and ran upstairs. Cassie threw a piece at him.

"Go ahead... rot your teeth!" Cassie said as she looked over the diagram of the school and its class list.

Oh, well... better than no school at all.

Four weeks passed. Summer was slipping away. Cassie kept working at the parlor, and on her tan when she had time. That, she figured, was going to have to be her vacation for the summer. Hudson's drone was the only thing absent from her latest tanning sessions with Vanessa and Tiffany. His time was spent working on *his* plan for the summer: Cassie's abduction.

Through his research, he found his initial idea of using chloroform was not an option. From all the movies he'd seen, it seemed to work almost instantly. In reality, it took three to five minutes for most people to be knocked out from its effects, even with a drug-soaked rag held over their mouths. He eventually came up with a new plan. He'd scatter some small branches over her windshield and onto the trunk of her car. She'd think they fell from the tree overhead and walk around her car to remove them. At that point, he'd take her by surprise.

Wearing black clothes or camo, he'd lead her by knife point to his car. From there, he'd gag her and tape her hands and feet. Fifteen minutes later, he'd have her in the heart of the woods across from her own neighborhood. The chances of anyone being outside at 11pm on a Sunday was almost zero. The plan gave Hudson a rush of adrenaline and goosebumps from thinking about it. If everything worked right, he'd have her to himself for a whole night. He figured with his face covered, she'd never know who abducted her. He'd be pulling in his driveway long before she figured out where he left her or how to get home. In his

mind, it was the perfect plan and a deserved fulfillment of all his past fantasies. One more week of careful preparation and he'd explore Cassie for himself.

"No! Sorry, Hudson. How many times do I have to say it? Use yours. You said yourself it started around 9 or 9:30pm, so... it won't be *that* damn hot outside."

"Mom! Listen to me! These are *rich* people. I can't be pulling up to their place in my junkie car. Please! I'll be home by morning!" Hudson took a step to close the distance between him and his mom. She reacted by backing up a step, suddenly frightened of him.

"Forget it, Hudson. I'm drawing the line. You said three weeks ago you wouldn't ask for it anymore and I'm holding you to that."

"Except for this! You don't fucking *listen*, mom!"

"That's it!" she said. "I'm done with this bullying of yours! You keep this up and I'll have the sheriff put you out of here! Don't ask me again. And don't ask me for any more money, either. Where's all the wonderful cash you promised you'd make if I bought you that damn drone? You're still begging me for gas money!"

"I'm building my portfolio! You have to have examples of your work to *get* work!" His expression shifted from panic to disgust. "I swear... If you weren't such a bitch, Dad would still be here! I wish *you* had left instead of him!" After hearing that, Valerie threw her drinking glass into the sink. It exploded in all directions, covering the kitchen counter and the floor. Some landed in her hair. Hudson watched as she stood there, fists clenched. He could see she was fighting back tears when she passed by him on the way to the patio. She closed the door behind her without saying another word.

Hudson casually brushed a couple pieces of broken glass off the microwave and heated up a Hot Pocket. He walked upstairs to his room and watched Youtube videos while he ate it. Afterwards, he grabbed a shoebox from the top shelf in his closet and laid out its contents on his bed. He had everything he needed for his big night. A bowie knife, rope, duct tape and a pellet pistol that couldn't be discerned from a real handgun. All he needed now was the intestinal fortitude to follow through with his plan. He put everything back in the box and placed it back on the shelf, ready for Sunday night. As was his custom, he opened

Cassie's file on his computer and fed his lusts for her with several doctored porn videos. This time, however, he left his door unlocked and turned the volume on his computer speakers up.

Hudson's excitement increased each day until his wait was finally over. He woke up Sunday morning wondering if he was brave enough to carry out what he'd envisioned. Worries of his plan failing and landing himself in jail plagued his mind all morning. By noon, his nerves had taken over. He snuck into his mom's bathroom, stole two Xanax pills and decided to sleep his nervousness away for a couple of hours. He landed on his pillow in a daze. The next thing he heard was a persistent knocking at his bedroom door.

"Hudson! You told me you had to be at that party by 9pm to start filming. It's 6:30 already."

"I said 9 or 9:30... so leave me alone, alright? I'm getting up." He struggled to get out of bed. The drugs were still in full effect, making it hard for him to walk straight. As he looked into his dresser's mirror, a wave of reality surged down his spine, jolting his mind from his slumber.

This is it, he thought, become a conqueror or stay a bitch!

He had reached the final day of decision. Four or five hours from now he'd either be consummating his desire for Cassie or still sitting alone in his bedroom... a coward.

Cassie finished her break and stepped up to the counter again. The shop had become busy with the local church youth group showing up after evening service to buy ice cream. She noticed her feet hurt as she waited on another surge of customers. The tile floor showed little mercy to her, which only bolstered her resolve to make something of her next four years in school.

She'd need to pick a decent career to afford anything more than apartment living. She wanted what her parents had; a home of her own... a pool and a decent

car. For that, she'd have to tough out nights like this, looking forward to a hot bath when she got home, and eventually, a brighter future.

"Miss? I asked for caramel on top," a voice said, breaking through her daydream.

"Oh, sorry! One second," she said, whirling around to add the topping. She almost knocked Amy over.

"Oh... my... God!" Amy said.

"Sorry! Didn't see you," Cassie explained, adding a layer of caramel to the sundae.

"No, no... not that. Justin! He's in the drive thru lane!" Cassie turned around to see.

"And look who's with him," Cassie said, shaking her head.

"Hello? My sundae?" the customer said, noticeably aggravated.

"Yes, sorry... here you go." Cassie handed over the treat, her eyes still focused on the drive thru.

Amy leaned over and whispered, "Oh, you mean Brandi, the human semen bank? I heard she's dropping out of school after summer break."

"Why? Are her grades *that* bad?"

"I'll tell you in a sec. Do you want the drive thru or want me to take it?" Cassie looked at her like she was crazy for asking.

"Oh, no... I'm not letting those two think they got the best of me. I got this."

She let Amy take his order, but stepped around her when he pulled up to the window. The familiar sound of his truck's engine brought back a slew of painful memories. Still, she managed a polite, though mostly indifferent smile as she spoke.

"Hello sir, did you want any whipped cream on your milkshake?" Before he could answer, Brandi leaned forward, her eyes fixed on Cassie's.

"He's got all the whipped cream he needs right here!" she said, showcasing her chest.

"Well, *ours* is guaranteed fresh... but okay, got it... no cream," Cassie said, smiling. She reached back, took the milkshake from Amy and held it out to Justin.

"I'll take that!" Brandi said, forcing her left arm past Justin's face. As Cassie handed her the drink, Brandi made it a point to show off an engagement ring she

wore on her left hand. For a brief moment, Cassie was stunned, and her face showed it. Brandi noticed her discomfort and smiled smugly. Unintentionally, Cassie belted out a quick laugh, then another. It was a purely natural reaction, but one that managed to thoroughly piss Brandi off. Cassie turned around to hide her face, but couldn't stop laughing.

"I can't," she told Amy, "I just can't... here!"

Amy took the straw and napkins from Cassie and handed them to Justin. Cassie suddenly broke out in uncontrollable laughter. Justin angrily spun his tires in response. Amy waved goodbye to the couple.

"Y'all come back real soon, ya hear? You two make a *wonderful* couple. I'm sure you'll have what *has* to be an *amazing* future together!"

Amy had barely shut the drive thru window before Cassie dropped to her knees laughing.

The girls looked at each other and screamed out in excitement.

"Oh, my God! He is actually marrying that ho!" Cassie said.

"Not by choice," Amy said, grinning. Cassie's eyes grew even wider now as she realized what Amy was suggesting.

"Yep, and when Justin found out, he asked her if she wanted an abortion! An hour later, her father showed up at his house, packing a shotgun. He ripped Justin's ass right in front of his parents and told him whether he marries her or not, he's 'supportin' that damn baby!'"

"How do you know all this?" Cassie asked her.

"My boyfriend, Nathan. He works with one of Justin's buddies. Brandi's like nine weeks pregnant, I think!"

Cassie's face suddenly became somber.

"Amy, you have no idea how close I was to that being me."

"Well, you dodged a bullet then," she said. "Nathan said Justin tried to enlist in the Army to get away from her but they didn't take him! They're obviously going to have a *great* marriage, huh?"

"No worse than he deserves," Cassie said. "You know? I think I just got the most closure from that relationship that I could ever hope for."

"Yep, and you're on the clock... so you got paid to get it, too!"

Hudson stared at the shoebox's contents one last time. He closed the lid and stood motionless, staring at his closet. This was it. Go forward or drop the whole thing. As his fragmented mind fought to decide, his computer proceeded to the next video from his collection of "C" files. It was the first deepfake porn he had made of her. He laid the box back onto the bed and sat at his computer. As the video played out before his eyes, his mind shifted to the dark place of lust and desire he had for her. Scene by scene, he imagined being the male in the video. Having her to himself, overpowering her, taking her, dominating her... tasting her fear and, ultimately, her passion. The power he felt playing the role spurred his teetering decision past his fears. Tonight she would become *his* student and learn the repercussions of rejecting him. Once she had a sense of his determination, she'd willfully become his. If she didn't, she'd pay the price for rejecting him. Either way, tonight he would have what he knew he deserved; her.

"I already wiped those tables down, Cassie. All we have left is mopping back here," Amy told her.

"Oh... got it! Sorry... was still thinking about the happy couple."

"Haah! Yeah, I bet you are! The money's in the safe and the register's closed. You care to mop?" Amy asked.

"Sure... sit down. I'll be done in five minutes. You know, since the drive thru episode, I forgot all about my feet hurting."

"That's the medicine of freedom, girl! Something you can be sure your ex will *never* know again. Hey, I'm running out the last bag of trash. Back in a minute!" She tied the bag and carried it through the back door, just missing seeing Hudson placing some small tree branches onto Cassie's car. When Amy was safely inside the shop again, Hudson took another look across the moonlit lot. Cassie's car was parked right next to the open fence this time. Amy's was closer to the building, by the parlor's back door. No other cars were in the lot.

This is it! There's a reason she parked here. Fate is making this happen for me. I knew it!

He felt along his beltline, his fingers finding the leather sheath that hung from his right hip. The bowie knife had never been used before. It still maintained the same, sharp edge it came with from the factory. A birthday present from his uncle, it would become Hudson's enforcer tonight, an extension of his hand and of his will.

He got in his car and looked into his rear view mirror. His face was fully covered in black and green camo paint. On his head he wore a tight, black beanie. He felt thoroughly prepared as he stared at himself in the mirror. Checking his watch, he knew he was just minutes away from turning his fantasies into reality.

The back door of the parlor opened. Cassie and Amy exited with their personals and stood under the dim, yellow light for a moment to talk. They ended their conversation with some laughter and a quick hug.

Hudson watched them from behind the fence. Amy got into her car. About the time she started it, Cassie had reached hers. Before she got inside, though, she stopped to remove the small branches Hudson had put on her windshield and roof. Hudson watched closely as Amy pulled her car over to Cassie's.

"You good?" Amy asked.

"Yeah, the tree decided to crap its limbs onto my car, that's all. No worries. Probably just Karma for making fun of Justin so much."

"Yeah, but it was worth it, right?"

"Even if I have to take this through a car wash!" She watched Amy pull out of the lot before walking around the car to remove the last branches.

Hudson's heart raced. He knew he'd reached the point of no return. As Cassie turned back to get into her car, Hudson jumped through the fence to grab her! His left foot caught the lower rail of the fence, though, causing him to fall directly on top of her. Cassie screamed as they both hit the ground at the same time. Hudson scrambled to his feet and tried to open the sheath holding his bowie knife. Cassie was able to get to her feet and instinctively kicked him in the groin! Her kick was hard enough to double him over in pain! She ran around him and tried to open her car door before realizing it was still locked! As she fumbled for her keys, Hudson was able to unsnap the sheath and pull out the large Bowie

knife. He lunged at her, spinning her around. Hudson pressed her back and shoulders against the car.

“What... what do you want?” she cried through frightened tears, “I don’t have any money!” Hudson brandished the blade before her eyes, then placed the spine of the knife against her throat. Cassie froze, not knowing what to do.

“Don’t talk. Don’t scream,” he whispered, “or I’ll pull this blade across your throat and leave you here to bleed out! You understand?” He grabbed her shirt by the collar and pulled her away from the car and through the opening in the fence. When she saw his car with the back door open, she tried her best to stop moving forward.

“No...no...” she whimpered as he pulled harder at her shirt. He pressed the point of the Bowie knife just below her eye to let her feel its sharpness. As she froze, he lowered the knife and pulled her downward by her collar, trying to force her into the car. She blocked him with her right leg, propping it against the door’s quarter panel.

“Get in, bitch!” he said, “Get in the fucking car!” His voice was louder now. He held the knife up like an ice pick. Carrie panicked and used both her legs to push herself away from the car. They both fell to the ground once again, this time onto their backs, Hudson landing on the bottom. As they hit the ground, Hudson’s knife plunged into Cassie’s shoulder. He felt it hit bone and panicked, letting go of the handle. Cassie screamed loudly in pain. Hudson was unsure what to do, but knew he had to get the knife back before someone heard her screaming. He got out from under her and quickly mounted her waist. He grabbed the knife to pull it out. But when he did, the blade shifted, tearing new flesh. Cassie screamed even louder as her nerves responded to the additional trauma. She flailed at his face with her left hand, knocking the beanie off his head. As he scrambled to retrieve it, Cassie’s eyes met his. Suddenly, she realized who her attacker was!

“Hudson?” she cried out.

His heart stopped beating in hearing his name spoken. As he stared down at her, he knew there was only one thing he could do now, or go to prison. He yanked the knife out of her shoulder, causing another scream! As he lifted the blade into the air, his expression changed from fear and panic to an unsettling calm. Cassie immediately knew what he meant for her and screamed for help, grabbing his wrist with her left hand.

As he fought to free his arm from her grip, a loud screech came from the street behind them. A flash of light shot through the trees, illuminating them both. Hudson spun around to see two men running towards him. They were policemen!

“Police! Stop!” one of them shouted, his weapon in hand.

Hudson realized that nothing he'd planned had come to pass. Now he was facing death or possible life in prison! Staring into her eyes, he made his final decision. As he struggled to free his arm, Cassie suddenly let go of his wrist, unable to hold it any longer. Hudson's arm and knife sprung quickly into the air. As the policeman shouted for him to drop the knife, Cassie sent her right knee into Hudson's groin again! The blow caused his body to jerk forward. The moment the officer saw Hudson's arm moving in a downward motion, he opened fire. Hudson was grazed in the back of the neck! His head flew backward, then forward again. Still holding the knife in his hand, his eyes met Cassie's for the last time.

“You bitch! You ruined everything for me!” he said, raising the knife again.

A second gunshot rang out, hitting Hudson in the left temple. Cassie watched in horror as the right side of his face exploded! Hudson's back straightened as half his face suddenly disappeared, leaving a ghastly spectacle of flesh and gaping skull. His body fell limp, collapsing onto hers. Blood and brain poured out of his head onto her face and neck. His legs began to violently twitch. Cassie coughed through the blood and frantically fought to get out from under him. The officers arrived and kicked him off of her. The last thing Cassie saw before going into shock was the face of a horrified officer as he knelt over her, yelling for his partner to call an ambulance.

The next four months posed a difficult recovery for Cassie. It took three surgeries to repair the physical damage Hudson had done to her shoulder. The emotional damage she endured was worse, though. She was unable to talk about the attack for several weeks. Nightmares of the incident plagued her sleep.

Valerie was devastated when she was told what her son had done. The investigators heard from her the same things they did from Hudson's neighbors:

“He was a quiet kid... not very outgoing, but was never considered dangerous in any way.”

Valerie did add that there had been some issues with his lack of respect for her recently, but she certainly didn't think he was capable of kidnapping and attempted murder. The police asked her for Hudson's phone and computer so they could learn if anyone else was involved in planning the attack. She handed them over without objection, along with his drone.

Weeks later, a detective called Cassie's parents to let them know about the evidence they collected. Everything they reviewed suggested Hudson was working alone. The investigator also informed them of the many inappropriate photos and A.I. generated videos of Cassie that Hudson had created and stored on his computer. Lastly, he discussed the drone footage and the hours of stalking they discovered.

Concerned with Cassie's mental and emotional recovery, her parents decided it was better not to tell her everything the detective revealed. All they relayed, in fact, was the news that no one else was involved in Hudson's scheme.

Cassie's new school permitted her to attend classes online for the first semester while her shoulder healed. By the start of the second semester, though, she was healthy enough to attend in person. Her mom was more nervous on her first day of class than Cassie was.

“Are you sure you have everything? And don't use your phone to record lectures. Use the voice recorder your dad bought you! And keep your phone off in class.”

“I know, mom! You act like I'm moving onto campus. It's just a twenty minute drive. I'll be back home every day!”

“I know... but still. It's college! My little girl is going to—”

“Mom! Enough, please!” Her mother conceded by covering her mouth.

“Haha! Mama's little girl!” Taylor chided.

“Yeah... keep it up, junior. You're in eighth grade now, remember? You've got five years to go before you can even *call* yourself a college student!”

“Four and a half!” He corrected her.

Her mom opened the door and gave her one last kiss before she walked outside.

“Good luck, Sis!” Taylor said, a little somber now. As they hugged, he squinted his eyes, pointing over Cassie's head.

“Hey look Sis! Something's in the sky... over there.”

Cassie looked up.

“What is that?” she asked. “Looks like a big, black diamond or something.” Her mother suddenly became tense.

“It's one of those drones,” Taylor said, waving at it. “Wow, it's really high... and just sitting up there, like it's watching us!”

“Don't wave at it!” his mother said, pulling his arm down. “You don't know who's on the other end of that thing!”

As Cassie watched the drone, an unexpected chill ran down her spine. During the time it took for her to blink, the foreboding object suddenly disappeared from her sight.

The End