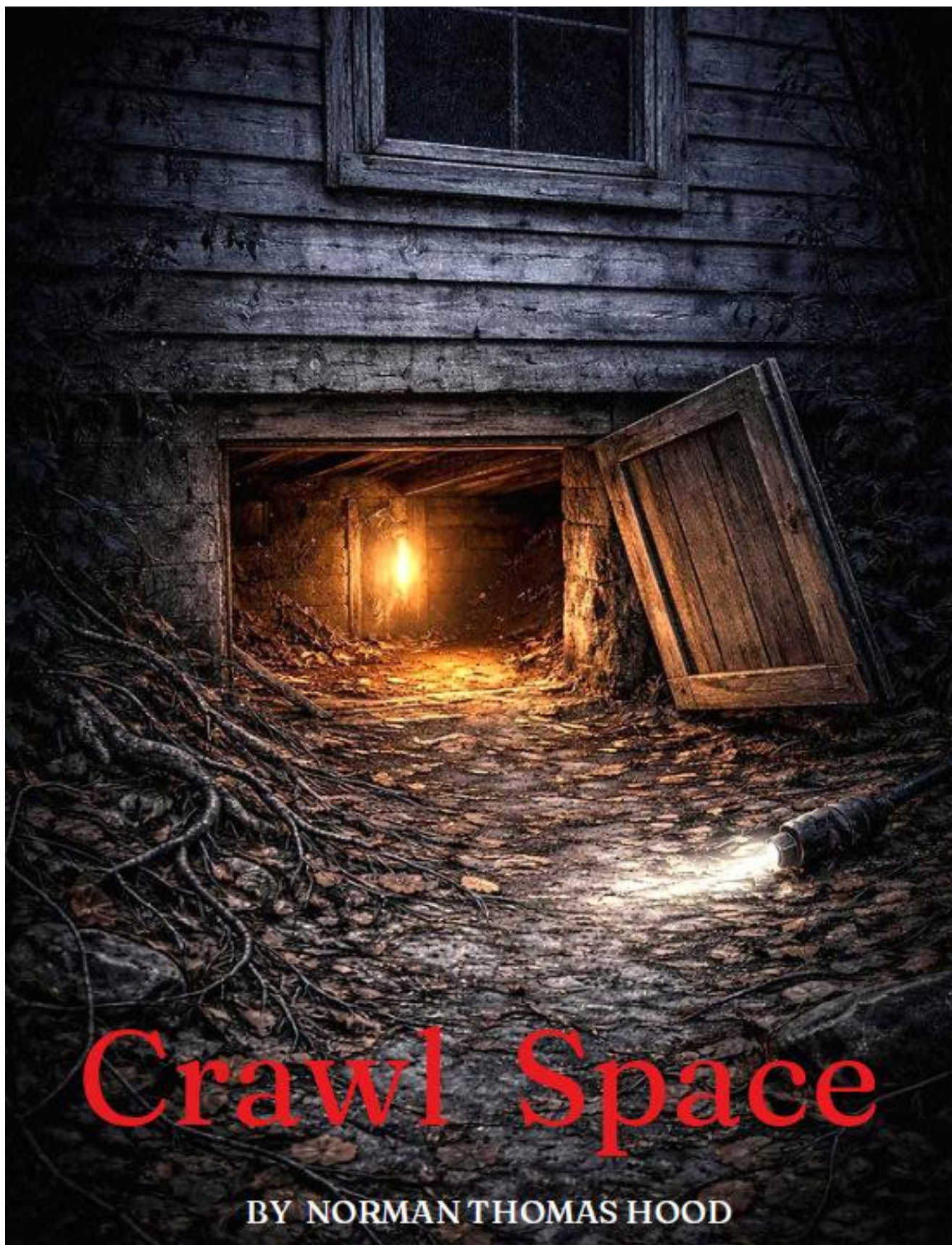




Crawl Space

By Norman Thomas Hood

Jan 21, 2026 Michael C. Stevens 46376-378, Session 1. Leopold Eldrin, MD
ABPN, MCC - IDOC 74098583

Michael: “There’s certain memories I’ll always carry from that time in my life: The harsh, rough surface of having concrete for a bed. How the cold penetrated my bones at night, making it impossible to sleep for more than a couple hours at a time. Watching Mom wrap plastic bags around my feet to keep my toes from freezing. The noisy cars and scary people.

“I know now that we were homeless and living on the street. My best guess is I was around five or six years old. Too young to complain and too small to do anything about it. The nights were becoming colder. Soon, we had no way to get warm. I missed my room and my toys. I was constantly hungry and asking my mom for more food. Sometimes I got it.

“My dad slept most of the time. I remember the day I pulled on Mom’s hand and pointed to the small, red dots on the inside of his arm. One of them was bleeding. I got my hand smacked for pointing it out.

“My parents ended up giving me to a man who'd recently lost his son. He and his wife fostered a child and had a warm home with an extra bedroom. I remember watching them talk about me. Mom was crying when the man handed dad some money and shook his hand. The next thing I knew, I was in the back of the man’s car, driving away from my parents. I stood on the backseat and cried

through the back window, seeing my parents grow smaller until they both disappeared.

“That's the day my birth name was changed. Not just my last name, but my first name, too. My real parents named me Michael and called me Mikey for short. Mr. Jenkins named me Jake, like he'd adopted a dog and changed its name to something he liked better. He and his wife Alice were my parents from that day forward. They weren't good people.”

- Excerpt from page 2, session 1, Michael C. Stevens 46376-378, 1-21-2026

The above was part of the transcript from my first session with Dr. Eldrin. It was difficult opening up to someone about my past with my hands cuffed to a table, but I managed. A lot happened between the events we discussed and where I'm sitting right now, sharing a cell with an inmate they call Bango.

The prison psychiatrist gave me an empty journal after our session and encouraged me to write down my memories of life in the Jenkins' home. He said it would help him to understand why I did the things that put me here. I wrote everything down exactly as I remembered it. It didn't take long for me to fill the journal.

Journal: November 2013 - Present day

“I wish you would have let me keep some of the old clothes, Charlie. What's he going to wear while I'm washing these?”

“Wash them? Just throw them away, Alice. You can get him more clothes at Goodwill. And bag those damn things up, would you? They stink to high heaven! Thanks to him, my car smells like a wet dog now!”

The man's voice scared me. His stare was just as frightening. I'd been crying for my parents for over an hour, and he was tired of hearing it.

The lady wasn't much better. She acted like she was annoyed I was so upset. She was as tall as the man, but much bigger around. She had a tremor in her right hand that made me nervous. It wasn't long before I learned it would get worse just before she'd discipline me. If I noticed it quick enough, I could usually get

away from her, or at least move enough so her hand didn't hurt as much. The man never used his hands for spankings. He used a long, leather belt instead. It was thick and heavy. If he was drunk enough when he spanked me, he'd swing the wrong end, hitting me with the steel buckle. He was thin and could run faster than his wife. I rarely got away from him.

"Come with me, boy," the lady said. "I'm running a hot bath for you. We're going to scrub that nasty street dirt off. You'll feel like a new person when we're done. After I get you clean, you can wear a towel until I get back from Goodwill. I'm buying you some new clothes. Isn't that nice? We're going to cut that long, messy hair of yours tonight, too. Make you look presentable for dinner."

I sat in the warm bath while she took a soapy washrag to me. The scrubbing hurt, but she didn't seem to care. The water was really dirty when she finished, but I was clean. She wrapped a big towel around me and took me to a room that had lots of toys. She sat me on the bed and handed me a not so gently used stuffed animal.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," she said. "You stay here and play with any toys you want to. Just don't make too much noise or you'll upset Charlie. When I get back, I'll fix us some dinner."

She didn't wait for my answer before leaving me alone in the room. When she'd closed the door, I heard something metal slide across the other side of it. That was the first time I was locked inside what would become my new bedroom.

I was nervous during our first dinner together. There were four of us at the table. Charlie, Alice, me and a girl with curly brown hair. The first thing I noticed about her was that both of her arms had paint or ink on them. I found out later they were bruises.

"Hand me your plate, young man," Alice said. I did as instructed and waited patiently for her to fill it with food.

She put several things on it. I could hardly wait to start eating! When she put my plate down, I quickly grabbed my fork and tried to get a bite of potatoes. She immediately smacked the fork out of my hand.

"That's not what we do here!" she said, wiping the mashed potatoes off her fingers.

I pulled my hand away and waited while she filled everyone's plate, including Charlie's. After saying a short prayer, she nodded to him. He cleared his throat and turned to the young girl.

"Amy, this is Jake," he said. "He's your new brother. Jake, say hello to your new sister." She looked at me, waiting for me to talk.

I was confused by the name he'd called me. The man kept his eyes on me, waiting for my reply.

"But... my name is Mikey," I said, nervous that I hadn't agreed with him. The man slapped his hand down on the table, almost turning over his coffee.

"Your name is Jake!" he said, standing up. "Your *old* name was Michael. That name is dead to you now!" He pointed his finger at me. "We saved your life today, young man. Don't you forget that. Your old life is gone now, like those deadbeat parents of yours! Your *new* name is Jake. And I'd better *never* hear you say that old name again. Do you hear me?"

I was terrified. I shook my head yes, but that wasn't enough for Charlie.

"Say it! Jake! Say your name now!"

I could barely get the name out of my mouth. It felt so odd to even try. I felt tears running down my face.

"J-Jake," I uttered obediently.

"Say it again, son! What's your name?"

"Jake!" I said, fully crying now.

"That's right! And if *anyone* asks you, that's what you're gonna tell 'em. Got it? And nothing else! No Michael, no Mikey, no nothin'. And quit that damn whining." I nodded again, trying my best to stop crying. Alice's unemotional voice cut through the resulting silence.

"You're fine, Jake. It's good to learn new things. Now, let's have dinner. Pick up your fork and start eating," she said.

I looked across the table and picked up my fork. Charlie was eating as if nothing had happened and Amy was staring down at her plate. When she picked up her glass to take a drink, I noticed her hand was shaking.

I was assigned a new birthday along with my new name, and made to memorize it. While doing so, I realized I didn't know my real birthday, and never would unless I saw my mom and dad again. They also taught me exactly what to say if anyone outside the home ever talked to me.

Amy and I had lots of chores. They were actually her chores, but I was supposed to help. She didn't talk to me at all on the first day. Anything she wanted me to do or learn, she'd demonstrate it with her hands. I thought maybe she *couldn't* talk. That was until I stepped on her pinky toe. We were folding clothes and I leaned forward to grab some socks.

"Ow! Stupid!" she said to me, grabbing her foot. "You did that on purpose!"

"No, I didn't. It was an accident!" When she stood up again, I backed up, worried about what she might do. She saw my fear and shook her head at me.

"I'm not going to hit you," she said. "That's what *they* do. Just watch where your shoes go!" I nodded and wiped my eyes.

"Your name's Mikey, right?" I didn't answer her, remembering what Mr. Jenkins had said.

"It's okay... you can say it to *me*, just not when they're around. So don't say it too loud... whisper it instead." I nodded yes.

"Jake, the *real* Jake, died a few days ago," she whispered. "At least, I think he did. Charlie said he ran away, but I don't believe him, because he never went out looking for him," she said. "You're the *new* Jake now. You look like him, too. Pretty soon, a lady is gonna come to the house and check on us. It happens every month. The lady works for the foster company and is Alice's cousin. Do you know what a cousin is?" I shook my head no.

"It's like a sister or brother, but not from your parents. When she comes over, you have to say whatever Charlie and Alice tell you to. Oh, and you have to call them mom and dad in front of her... and smile a lot. Otherwise, you'll be in big, big trouble. I think they get money from the foster company for keeping us. I've been here five years. I'm eight already. I'm a *real* foster kid, though... no parents. You're not. They said they found you in the street. I heard them talking about you before you came here. So, you get to be the new Jake now. I know it's confusing, but at least you're a boy. You're lucky that way."

I didn't understand what she meant about being lucky I was a boy, but I understood the fact I was taking Jake's place. I had to be the new Jake or I'd be in big trouble with Charlie.

Amy and I vacuumed the hall one afternoon while Alice took her bath. Amy was the one vacuuming, I just followed her around. Alice said my job was to watch and learn. When she finished the room, she showed me how to wrap up the cord. It was about an hour after lunch, and Charlie was in the TV room, asleep in his recliner. The midday news had just ended, and a cartoon was playing. I walked around the corner and stood next to Charlie's chair so I could see the screen. Soon, I felt someone grab my wrist. She quickly pulled me out of the room.

"What are you doing? Trying to get a whooping?" Amy asked. "We're not allowed in here while Charlie's watching TV. If he woke up and found you here, you'd get your butt blistered! Understand?" I nodded yes.

"What's in that thing?" I whispered, pointing to the large can on the floor by his chair. "It stinks."

"It's his spit," she said. "Don't look in there and don't *ever* touch it. He chews up his tobacco and spits the brown juice into that old coffee can. Alice makes me empty it every week. I hate it."

I didn't understand why he spit the juice out, but I didn't ask. The smell almost made me gag. I saw a shadow cross Amy's face.

"What did you say you hate, child?" We spun around to find Charlie standing over us!

"Nothing," Amy answered nervously. "Just how dirty the carpet gets sometimes, that's all."

"Is that right? The work gettin' a little too hard for you?" He looked at her like she'd better answer him correctly.

"No, sir. I was just telling Jake how often I had to vacuum to keep the carpet clean."

"Well, you can tell him after you're done sweepin' this room, then. I'm goin' to the bathroom. I'll be back in five minutes, and it'd better be done!" He cupped

her chin in his hand and raised it enough to get a good look at her face. She looked *very* nervous.

“Five minutes,” he said, walking to the kitchen. When he was out of sight, she turned to me.

“Hurry up! Unwind the cord and I’ll plug it in.”

I did as I was told and looked up for my next instructions.

“See those magazines on the floor? Stack them up nice and put them in that rack. And pick up Charlie’s shoes so I can vacuum there.” She looked into the coffee can. “Dammit! It’s almost full.”

“Can I see?” I asked, curious about the tobacco juice.

“Yeah, just don’t breathe in when you do,” she said.

I can’t describe how bad it smelled. I didn’t listen about holding my breath, either. I could feel my stomach folding. I coughed hard and felt something coming up my throat. Amy quickly pulled me away from the can.

“I told you not to smell it. Why don’t you listen? You’re lucky you didn’t throw up on the carpet. You would have gotten his belt, for sure!”

I *did* throw up a little in my mouth, but I guess I swallowed it. After smelling that can, though, I never got close to it again.

After a couple of months, I learned enough to help Amy with most of the housework. The vacuum was too heavy for me to push for long, though. I was slow at folding clothes, too. But Amy seemed to like my help anyway.

Sometimes she told me jokes. Most I never got, but as I got older, I began to understand them. For the most part, *everything* I learned in the next ten years came from her. She could read and write really well. So much so that Alice stopped helping us with our home schooling. Amy ended up having to do her work and help me with mine.

We got visits from the foster lady every month or so, just like Amy said. The lady was old and didn’t talk to us much. Usually, she just asked the same questions each time. She spent most of the visits drinking coffee with Alice and talking about soap operas. There was another lady, too, but she just stayed in the car or drove somewhere during the visit. The old one was Alice’s cousin, like Amy had said.

We took care of keeping the house clean, but one thing we never helped with was dinner. Alice prided herself in her cooking and didn’t want anyone else in

there while she was working. That was *her* space. Unless we were washing dishes, we had to ask her permission to go in there, even for a glass of water! She was the boss in there. The rest of the house was under Charlie's control.

The food was hot and tasted good, though. I quickly noticed hers and Charlie's plates were always piled full, but ours weren't. If we asked for more food, it made Alice mad. Sometimes we got it but sometimes we didn't. Going to bed while still being hungry triggered old memories of living with my parents. When we *were* allowed to have more, Alice would take our plate and decide how much we got.

The first birthday I remember celebrating in the Jenkins' home was Amy's. She'd turned nine years old. Alice made her a small, white cake with colored candles on it. I think it was the first birthday cake I'd ever seen... or could remember, anyway. That night was the first time I saw Amy really smile. They gave her a little pink purse with some bows and things for her hair. Seems ironic to me now that they gave her a purse, since we weren't allowed out of the house to go *buy* anything. They never gave us money, anyway. If we needed something, Alice or Charlie would go out and get it for us. Still, Amy liked her pink purse. It was one of the only girly things she owned.

After we ate the cake, Amy and I did the dishes while Alice and Charlie watched TV. When we were done, Amy ran to the bathroom mirror and tried out her hair accessories. She pulled back the sides of her curly brown hair and put a bow on top of her head. I thought she looked really pretty. I wasn't the only one.

"Look at *you*, little lady!" We both turned to see Charlie standing behind us. "Why, you look sixteen years old with your hair pulled back like that!" Amy glanced at him for a second, but quickly dropped her head. After he left us for the TV room, Amy yanked the bow from her head and shoved it into her purse. I was too young to understand why she was upset. Months later, I found out why.

The sound of rain hitting the bedroom window and occasional thunderclaps made a light sleeper out of me that night. Some people sleep like babies when it pours, but if you've ever lived on the street, you'd know there's nothing good or soothing about a rain storm. Everything you own gets soaked, including yourself.

My real mom used to wrap a blanket around us and Dad would cover us with a tarp to keep the rain off our heads. It worked well unless it was raining hard. Then, I'd eventually feel water from the ground soaking into my clothes. The morning after a bad rain, everyone got busy spreading out their wet belongings so the Sun could dry them.

A man gave my dad a small pop-up tent once. Having some protection from the weather made the three of us feel like kings! Some people came by with policemen and took it away, though. The policemen made everyone leave so the street could be cleaned up. The mayor of the city called it an "eyesore". Some homeless were taken to a local shelter, but most of us just took our belongings and settled somewhere else.

The Jenkins home was nice and dry, though. I didn't need a tarp to stay dry in my bedroom. The storm was unrelenting, though, and very loud. Every time I tried to get to sleep, I'd see flickers of light through my eyelids and hear a big clap of thunder after. It really scared me, triggering my fear of having no shelter.

I'd just about given up on trying to sleep when I thought I heard someone's voice outside my window. It sounded to me like someone was crying. I ran to my window and tried to see who it was. It was impossible to see, though. The rain was just too heavy. I heard the cries again, but this time, it sounded like it was behind me! I spun around, but no one was there. A minute later, I heard it a third time. I was sure now it was coming from inside the house!

I climbed out of bed and opened my door. All the lights in the hallway were out and it was completely dark. Even the nightlight in the bathroom was off, and it *always* stayed on. I was about to tiptoe down the hall when thunderclap stopped me in my tracks. I stood there for a moment, listening closely for more sounds. I heard nothing. Then I remembered Alice's cat. I thought maybe someone had accidentally shut it inside a closet or something. I stood there another minute, but heard nothing else. When I started back to my bedroom, I heard it again! It was muffled this time, but I was sure now that it was her cat. I walked to the end of the hall and opened the closet door, hoping to free it. A

loosely hung jacket fell on my feet. I jumped backwards, thinking it was the cat! As I picked up the jacket, I heard a faint thumping sound coming from Amy's bedroom. I figured the cat was pawing at the door. I leaned in and whispered Amy's name. She didn't answer, so I tried to open the door. It was locked. That was strange to me since we weren't allowed to lock our doors. I whispered her name again, this time a little louder. She still didn't answer. I jiggled the knob. Suddenly the door sprung open! I fell back onto my butt. Mr. Jenkins stood over me, sweat dripping from his face. He was holding his belt in his right hand. I thought he was going to swing it at me.

"Jake! What the hell are you doing out of bed?" He grabbed my pajamas' collar and pulled me up to my feet.

"I-I heard the cat. I was trying to let it out of Amy's room, that's all."

"Cat? What the hell you talkin' about, boy? Are you sleepwalking?"

"N-no sir. I just heard the cat and thought it was stuck in Amy's room."

"Well, it's the middle of the night. So unless you have to use the bathroom, you know you're not to come out of that room of yours until breakfast! You understand? Cat or no cat. You're not to be up and running around this house at night!"

"Yes, sir." I looked past him to Amy on the bed. She was sitting up, drying her eyes. She had been crying. I felt Mr. Jenkin's grip on my shoulder tighten as he pushed me down the hall.

"Go on, now... get to bed! If I catch you out of bed again, you won't be able to feel your ass for a week!" He walked me to my room, pushed me inside and shut my door. I waited until he got downstairs before I climbed into bed, wondering what Amy could have done to get the belt so late.

It was four years later before Amy told me what Mr. Jenkins had done to her that night. I was terrified by her story, but my terror soon became rage. I wanted to kill Charlie. I asked her why she didn't call the police or tell Alice. She said he threatened to kill her if she did. He told her he'd bury her in their garden, next to the *real* Jake, then tell the police she ran away. When I asked why she didn't tell me sooner, she said I was too young to understand and she worried I would say

something to Charlie or Alice. I knew she was right. At six years old, I was far too young to be trusted with that kind of knowledge. At ten, though, I understood her abuse perfectly and knew how to keep my mouth shut.

She told me he'd made her bleed when he was on top of her, but promised he'd never do it again. Eventually though, he broke that promise. She made me swear never to tell anyone what she told me. I agreed, as long as she swore someday we'd run away together and tell the police what he'd done. And not just about the sexual abuse, but of the real Jake's disappearance and possible death.

Something bad had happened to him. We both knew it. The Jenkinses had gone to great lengths to make sure no one ever found out Jake was even missing. Finding me, a lookalike off the streets to replace him. Giving me his name. If it weren't for Amy occasionally reminding me who I really am, I doubt I'd even know by now.

It was two years from that night when the really big rain came.

"Charlie! It's pouring in down there!" Alice said.

"And what the hell am I supposed to do about it, Alice? I put boards over the accesses. It's still gettin' under there. Not a damn thing I can do about it 'til it quits raining!"

"But if it gets to that corner—"

"Stop worrying about it, woman! Dirt's higher there. Ain't nothing gonna happen! For God's sake, just take another sleeping pill!"

It had been raining for two days. Half the backyard was under water. It looked like a small pond back there. To Amy and I, it was exciting. But Alice was in a full panic over the water getting into the crawl space. On the second night, the rain suddenly stopped. Their arguments didn't.

"Not until it dries out, woman! If you wanna get your fat ass under there, you go right ahead. Until then, shut your damn mouth about it!"

We didn't know what the problem could be from having a hard rain like that. All we knew was they were upset about it. I told Amy if we were lucky, the mud would wreck the house and take the Jenkinses down with it. It wasn't until the next day that what we had laughed about happening took a darker turn.

“Hey,” someone whispered. I looked up to see Amy standing in my bedroom doorway. I motioned for her to come in. She quietly closed the door behind her and handed me a drawing notebook and pencil.

“In case they come in, I’m showing you how to draw a horse, got it?” I nodded. She sat on the floor, next to me.

“I think I know why Alice was so upset about water getting under the house,” she continued.

“Why?” I asked, “Because the house would float away?”

“No... because of what might be down there!” She put her mouth to my ear. “I think the real Jake is buried in the crawl space!”

“What? C’m on Amy, quit teasing!”

“I’m not kidding, Mikey. I’m serious.” She paused for a moment to make sure no one was coming. “Just think about it. When Charlie threatened to kill me... what did he say? He said he’d bury me in the garden, right next to Jake!”

“So? The rain didn’t hurt the garden, except it’s all muddy now,” I said.

“Like I said... think about it. Do you really think he’d tell me where he put Jake’s body? What if I told the police what he said and they dug him up? No... he lied about it, I’m sure. Not about killing Jake... but where he buried him.”

Instantly, my brain put the pieces together.

“So, he’s really under the house? Right underneath us?” Chills raced down my spine.

“Well, where else *could* he be?” she asked. “Burying him anywhere else would have been taking a real chance. Someone might have seen him digging. He probably dragged Jake under the house and buried him there. No one would ever see him. Why else would Alice be so worried about the rain getting to one of the corners down there? She’s worried the mud would wash him up!”

“Up here?” I asked, even more scared now.

“No, not up here... but if the water washed the dirt off of him, you’d be able to see all his guts and bones!” she said.

“But you told me he probably ran away, just like they said... because he got the belt too much!”

“Yeah, I know what I said. But he got whooped really hard the night he disappeared. You could hear him screaming all through the house! Alice tried to cover up the noise by playing piano. All I heard for ten minutes was church music

and screaming. Then I heard nothing. So yeah, I think he killed him. If Jake ran away, the cops would have found him and arrested Mr. Jenkins. But no one ever came around looking for him. The next person who came through our front door was you.”

I was literally shaking from her words.

“It’s not funny, Amy! Please say you’re teasing me!” I begged.

“I’m not teasing. I’m sorry, but I’m really serious. I think he might be buried down there!”

“What do we do, then? We should run away and call the police, right?”

“No,” she warned. “If we’re wrong, then we’d get our butts beaten after the cops leave... or worse! We need to wait and see what Charlie does. If Mr. Jenkins doesn’t go down there to check the crawlspace, I’m probably wrong. But... if he goes down there with a shovel, we’ll both know I’m right!”

“Then what? Call the police?”

“Not unless we’re sure of it. One of us will have to go down there and check to see if Charlie’s been digging in a corner. If he has, we’d need to dig some of Jake up!”

“No way! Not me! I’m not going down there to look for any bones! I won’t do it!” I said.

“You don’t have to touch any bones, Mikey. We both know you’re not brave enough for that. All you have to do is see if he piled a bunch of dirt up in a corner, and dig until you see a bone.”

“I’m brave enough, but what if he catches me? I’d end up down there with Jake!”

“No you won’t. I swear, if he catches you, I’ll call the police right away! I’ll tell him if he hurts you, I’d tell everyone what he’s done to me. He won’t hurt you then, I promise. Besides, we’ll wait until the middle of the night, after he’s been drinking and Alice takes her sleeping pills. I swear, if I see him come outside, I’ll call the police right away.”

“I can’t do it, Amy! You see how I’m shaking, just *talking* about it! I can’t do it for real!”

“You don’t have to do it right now. We need to wait and see what he does, remember? Right now, all we have to do is spy on him. Now, hurry up. Try to draw a horse. I think I hear Alice coming.”

Several days went by without anything unusual happening. Mr. Jenkins never went under the house and neither he nor his wife said anything more about the crawl space. Amy and I had almost given up on the notion that anything was buried under there, much less Jake's bones.

That night I went to bed early with a stomach ache. Just after midnight, I felt a soft squeeze on my shoulder. I sat up in my bed.

"Shhsh, don't make any noise!" Amy whispered. "I think Charlie's under the house! Be real quiet and listen with me for a minute."

I did as I was told and listened closely.

"How could we hear it, anyway?" I asked her. "We're upstairs, remember?"

"I know... just be quiet and listen!" Once again, I shut my mouth and tried to listen for whatever she'd heard.

All of a sudden, we both looked at each other. We heard a knocking sound, then another! It sounded like something was tapping something under the house.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"I think it's his shovel handle hitting the wood floor above his head. I've heard it four times now! I think he's down there, covering Jake back up!"

"What'll we do? Where's Alice?" I asked.

"She's asleep. I heard her snoring. Look, I need you to sneak down the hall and see if Charlie's in bed with her, Just in case I'm wrong."

"No way! He'll wake up if he's in there!"

"No, he won't. Besides, they sleep with their door cracked open so they can hear us if we get up. All you have to do is tiptoe over there and look inside. If he wakes up, you could say your stomach hurts and you have to go to the bathroom. He'll yell at you, but he'll believe it."

For once, I didn't chicken out. Maybe it was because I was getting older and braver, or maybe because I wanted to impress Amy... I don't know. But I got out of bed and quietly tiptoed down the hall. When I got to their room, I looked inside. I couldn't tell if he was in there or not. I put my hand on the door and gently opened it until I could see the whole bed. He wasn't there. Alice was alone!

Instantly, I worried he might be on his way back upstairs, so I let go of the door and hurried back to my room.

Amy was sitting on my bed now. Before she could ask me, I blurted out what I'd seen.

"He's not there, Amy! It's just Alice!"

"I knew it! Okay, just go back to sleep now. In a few days we'll check out the crawl space... together."

"You'll go with me?"

"Yeah, I might as well. I'll take the phone from the kitchen with me. If he catches us, I'll dial 911 right in front of him and give them the address! I'll say we're trapped under the house with a crazy killer!"

I shook my head in agreement. All we needed now was the perfect night to carry out our plan.

Halloween had just passed. We weren't allowed to trick-or-treat, but Alice made us give out candy. I was beginning to think we'd never have a chance to explore the old crawl space. Then, one day our luck changed.

The old man had joined a bowling league in town. Every Friday night he left the house at 6:45pm and bowled until about 9pm. A little while after that, he'd walk through the front door either bragging or bitching about his night. Amy and I planned on grinding up a few of Alice's sleeping pills and slipping them into her dinner. By 7pm, she'd be looking for her bed. That would give us enough time to take a flashlight and shovel into the crawl space and find out once and for all if the first Jake was really buried there.

Friday night came and Amy and I needed a way to get the Jenkinses away from the dinner table long enough to stir the sleeping pills into Alice's mashed potatoes. It was looking to me like we might have to wait another week. But when we started eating, Amy suddenly got up from her chair.

"I'm sorry, my stomach's really hurting. I have to go to the bathroom."

"Well, hurry up, dear," Alice said, "I didn't cook all this just for it to get cold waiting on your stomach!"

I wondered if she was really sick or just up to something. My question was answered thirty seconds later.

“Oh, no! Help! It’s overflowing!” Amy yelled.

“What the hell did you do?” Charlie yelled, running to the bathroom. Alice followed behind.

“Shit! Get some damn towels, Amy! Hurry!” he said. A second later, Amy was with me in the dining room, pulling out a folded napkin from her pocket. She quickly dumped some white powder into Alice’s potatoes and mixed it up. The old man yelled again.

“Where the hell are you? The towels are in the linen closet! Hurry up!” Charlie demanded.

“I’m sorry! I got confused. Here they are!” She ran back to the bathroom and helped them soak up the water while I ran for the mop bucket.

“We don’t need the damn mop, boy! Just get me some more towels!” Mr. Jenkins yelled. “What the hell were you thinking, girl? Putting so much toilet paper in there at once!” he asked Amy.

“I’m sorry! I thought I had flushed it once already. I didn’t mean to clog it up!”

“Well, if you’re sick, you certainly don’t need to be eating *my* dinner!” Alice said, sweating now. “Finish cleaning this up and go to bed. You can eat your dinner for breakfast tomorrow! Jake, leave it alone and get back to the table. Amy can clean it up by herself!”

The three of us went back to the dining room and finished eating. I couldn’t help but fixate on Alice eating her mashed potatoes. I felt a combination of fear and excitement. Fear, because I knew there was no turning back now. Excitement, because I hated Alice almost as much as I hated Charlie.

I did the dishes alone that night. Alice left the table to watch TV after Charlie left to go bowling. A few minutes later, I looked in the TV room to see if Alice was asleep yet. She was, and snoring heavily.

I rushed to Amy’s door and whispered her name.

“It’s me! Alice is asleep in the chair. She never even made it to her bedroom!”

“Good, let fatty sleep, then! She won’t wake up. We’re not going to make *that* much noise down there.”

“But what if she *does* wake up, and finds out we’re not upstairs?”

“I know... you’re right. We really need her to go to her bedroom. You just did the dishes, right? So, go in there and drop a pan or something. If she sleeps through it, we’ll go to the crawl space. If she wakes up, she’ll yell at you, then she’ll waddle off to her bedroom. Got it?”

“Got it!”

I went to the kitchen to find something I could drop to make some noise. As I looked around, the tea pitcher kept catching my eye. It was off limits to us. Alice said it was her mother’s and was afraid we’d break it. When I was seven, I poured a glass of tea from it, thinking she was asleep in the TV room. As I finished drinking it, I lowered my glass to find her standing in front of me! Thirty seconds later, I was being held over a chair to get my ass beaten with Charlie’s belt!

I opened the bottom cabinet to look for a cookie sheet, but couldn’t stop thinking about that pitcher. I shut the cabinet door, walked to the counter and picked it up. With my eyes shut, I lifted it high in the air and let it go. The sound it made as it crashed to the floor scared Alice out of her coma. She literally screamed herself awake!

“What was that?! What broke?! Charlie! Jake! Who’s in my kitchen?!”

“I’m sorry! I knocked the pitcher off the counter and it broke! There’s glass everywhere!”

“Oh, no! My mother’s pitcher! Amy! Amy, get out here and help me!”

Somehow, Alice made it to the kitchen before Amy. Her girth blocked out the light from the hall when she entered the room. When I saw the look on her face, the hairs on my arm stood up! By the time she got to me, I already had the broom in my hands and had begun sweeping.

“Give me that broom, you little bastard! That was my mother’s pitcher! You just destroyed a precious, family heirloom!”

I handed her the broom and pretended to cry. Inside though, I was glad I broke it. Her using the word “family” went straight through me. *My* family was lost out there, probably still on the street. Amy and I were just prisoners of their’s, *not* family! We were a way for the Jenkinses to make some money from the state, and that was all!

“Amy! Help me clean this up! Your brother just broke my mother’s beautiful tea pitcher! Just look what he did!”

Amy took the broom and started sweeping up the glass. The entire time she worked, Alice stood over me, staring holes into my head. My face showed sadness, but my inward satisfaction only grew.

"I can finish this, Alice," Amy said. "I'll sweep it twice to make sure I got all the glass up," Amy said. Alice never took her eyes off of me.

"You're doing extra work around here until I feel you've paid me back for my mother's pitcher, Jake! And as soon as Charlie gets home, I'm telling him what you did. I hope he belts you good this time!" She staggered backwards for a moment as the sleeping pills began to take hold.

"You don't look so good, Alice," Amy said. "Don't you think you should go lie down now?"

"Yes I do! That useless brother of yours... he... almost gave me a heart attack!" She picked up an envelope from the counter and began to fan herself. "I have to lie down. If I'm asleep when Charlie gets back, you tell him to wake me up. I want him to punish Jake *tonight*, not tomorrow!"

"Yes, ma'am, I will."

Amy glared at me as Alice waddled down the hall.

"Why the hell did you break the pitcher? You know you're going to get your ass beat!"

"It's worth it! I hate Alice and I hate that pitcher! Do you think she'll wake up again?" I asked, turning off the light.

"Nope. I gave her four pills. I'd be surprised if she woke up before noon tomorrow. It's been over a half hour since she ate them. She's *really* gotta be feeling it now!"

Amy grabbed the flashlight from the tool drawer. We checked on Alice one last time before leaving the house. Amy clapped her hands in front of her face to prove she was out. Alice didn't flinch. We went outside and found the board Charlie used to cover the crawl space entry. It had been moved aside. I started to let myself down through the access, but hesitated before going all the way in.

"Go on, Mikey. I'm right behind you," Amy said.

It was only that she was coming with me that I had the courage to keep moving.

Once we were both under the house, it didn't take long to spot the corner Alice was worried about. There was dirt piled up in that area, almost to the bottom of the floor above.

"Geez, there's more room down here than I thought!" Amy said. "You gotta bend over a little, but at least we don't have to crawl on our bellies."

I tried to act enthused, but all I could think about was what might be under that heap of dirt in front of us.

"I'll dig first. You hold the light," she said. I took the flashlight, but accidentally dropped it into the dirt, near my feet. Most of the light was instantly cut off. Amy picked it up and placed her palm over the bulb, causing everything to become black.

"Ooooooh... wow! Gets spooky real fast without any light, huh?"

"Cut it out, Amy! You know I don't want to be down here, anyway!"

"Oh, don't be such a baby! Fine... take it and shine it on the pile. I'll start digging in the middle."

I sat down and shined the light on the dirt pile in the corner, just knowing an arm was about to break through it and grab one of us!

Amy dug into the middle of the pile. After it had been about ten minutes, she held up the shovel. We switched, and I dug for another ten minutes. We both gasped when the tip of the shovel struck something hard. Suddenly, I couldn't move.

"Keep going, Mikey! We have to know!" When I heard her using my real name so loudly, a flood of anger for the Jenkinses washed over me. I hated them for trying to erase my identity. I wanted even more now to find the real Jake and tell the police what they'd done to him! I pushed the shovel deeper into the same spot and twisted it. Dirt began to break apart above the blade, and we both saw a long, white bone beginning to appear!

"Oh, my God, Mikey! It's really true! He killed Jake and buried him down here! Dig a little deeper and pry it out!"

My hands started to shake. Amy reached for the shovel, but I refused to let it go.

"I can do this! Just give me a second!" I said, startling myself with my tone.

I put the tip of the shovel under the side of the bone and carefully pushed the handle down. I pried hard, trying to free it from the dirt. It wouldn't budge. I took a deep breath and pushed down even harder, feeling the shovel's handle starting to bend. All of a sudden, the bone broke away from the dirt and came flying out from the pile, hitting me in the chest and knocking me over!

I landed on my back with the bone settling over my chest! I scooted backwards and quickly knocked it away. As the dust from the disturbed pile began to settle, Amy picked up the bone and showed it to me. It was a piece of PVC pipe. She laughed loudly, then waved it around in my face, making ghostly sounds.

"Oooooooo... ooooo! Good job, Mikey Ghostbuster!" she laughed, "You just unearthed a broken piece of drain pipe!" She dropped it at my feet.

"It's not funny, Amy! You thought it was a bone, too!" I kicked the pipe across the crawl space and picked up the spade.

"Here, give it to me," she said. "I'll dig for a while."

A half an hour later, we had switched again and gone through the whole pile. When we reached the corner, we hit some pieces of wood supporting the floor above.

"Well," Amy said, dropping the shovel, "now we know what Alice was worried about. The corner of the floor is sinking! They propped it up and packed a bunch of dirt around it to keep the boards in place!"

"Can we go upstairs now?" I asked, exhausted now. She looked at me like I was stupid.

"Do you know what Charlie would do to us if he came down here and saw all this dirt moved?" she asked. "We have to put it all back! And *exactly* how it was, too!" She was angry just having to say the words. I was angry too, just having heard them. Now we both realized there wouldn't be police cars sitting in our driveway tonight, ready to arrest the Jenkinses. Just two dirty, worn out kids with blisters on their hands!

As we were patting down the last part of the reformed pile, a stream of light lit up the walls of the crawl space!

"Shit! He's home! Quick, Mikey! Be ready to climb out of here when he drives his car into the garage. We have to get inside the house before he opens his car door!"

"What do I do with the shovel?" I asked. "I got it from the garage!"

“Leave it by the pile! He’ll think he left it. Listen, the second that car gets in the garage, we have to run! Go straight to your room and hide your dirty clothes under the bed. I’ll do the same and wash them when I get a chance!”

Charlie pulled his car into the garage. The moment he cleared the overhead door, we jumped out of the crawl space and ran to the house! We got to our bedrooms and hid our clothes just before we heard the front door opening. I was scared, but excited our plan worked without us getting caught.

The next morning, we heard Alice complaining to Charlie that she felt tired and weak.

“It has to be the flu or my heart, Charlie! I feel terrible! I don’t even have the strength to get out of bed today!”

“Well, just so you’re feeling better in time to cook dinner. Take it easy ‘til then and make these kids clean the kitchen after we eat!” he said.

I know Amy was thinking the same thing I was. We kept the house clean every single day. Alice didn’t have to lift a finger except when she was making dinner. If anything needed doing around the house, it was left to us! I wondered if other kids went through the same thing we did, or if they got the belt when they messed up. Regardless, the main things I wondered about that day were these: what really happened to Jake, and would I get my ass whooped? If he didn’t run away, then where did they bury his body? My curiosity came to a quick end when Alice told Charlie I broke her mother’s pitcher. Within seconds, he was standing in my bedroom, holding his belt.

Three years have passed since our adventure in the crawl space. I turned fifteen and wasn’t the same boy that dug through that pile of dirt. I was taller now, stronger and less afraid. The belt came more often as my mouth learned to talk back without fear. Charlie couldn’t swing it as hard as he did when I was little, either. Sometimes I wanted to fight him for the belt, just to see his face when I took it away from him. More and more I dreamed of getting as far away from that house as possible. I almost left once, but Amy talked me out of it.

“You know the police will find you! They’d bring you right back here or put you with another family. Then what? We’re stuck here until we’re eighteen,

Mikey. I can't prove what he's done to me any more than you can prove you're not the real Jake! Besides, if you *did* get away, I'd be left here alone to deal with them. I can't do this alone."

So, I was stuck exactly where I was. But I loved Amy. She had always been a great sister to me, even though I didn't think of her like a sister anymore. I grew to love her in a much different way now. That realization kept me confused. I thought there might be something wrong with me. I felt like a sicko for having those kinds of thoughts about her. Those weren't the thoughts that grew to plague me the most, though. I sincerely wanted to kill Mr. Jenkins, and fantasized about it constantly. My only regret would be I could only do it once. As far as killing Alice, I wasn't so sure about. I hated her, too, but she never hit us herself. She knew Charlie would handle that for her. I struggled with the notion that her *knowing* we were getting beaten was just as bad as beating us herself. My only consoling thought on the matter was her health was getting bad on its own. She had gotten bigger each year that passed. She could barely even get around the house anymore! If she didn't have a walker, she'd be stuck in her room all day. It got so bad that she eventually had to hand the task of making dinner over to Amy. That really bothered Alice... but not us. I helped Amy in the kitchen. Cooking together felt like we were creating something, kinda like painting a picture. Amy enjoyed it too, though we joked more than once about the joy of poisoning both of them one day.

Amy and I made a pack with each other. The day she'd turned eighteen, we'd leave in the middle of the night... together. She'd be legally allowed to leave and I'd be a runaway. We'd take a bus to another state and live together under fake names, saying we were both eighteen. We looked old enough. I had grown six inches since digging up the crawl space. Soon, I'd be shaving my face. I didn't know if Amy would consider us a couple or not, but I wanted to be with her either way.

Our escape plan was the only thing keeping us going. Every once in a while, Amy would take a few dollars out of Alice's purse. Alice never knew how much money she had, anyway. She had bills stuffed in several pockets and places. We figured by the time we got out of the house we might have four or five hundred dollars stashed away. As far as we were concerned, we'd earned that money a hundred times over!

Life got easier. Charlie started to care less and less what was going on in the house and generally left us alone. He was almost sixty now and spent most of his time in the recliner, watching his shows. I knew if I had to, I could kick his ass. Chewing tobacco ended up giving him lip cancer, eating a hole through his cheek, actually. The surgeons were able to cut it out and sew him up, though. At least Amy didn't have to empty that damn coffee can anymore. The only problem was that without the tobacco, Charlie's drinking increased. Usually, he could make it to his bedroom just before passing out at night. If not, we'd leave him on the floor unless Alice was still awake and asked us to move him.

I started stealing sips of his whisky. Not much, just a little here and there. I liked the taste, probably too much. One night, Charlie fell asleep in his chair with a half drank pint of whisky sitting next to him.

I snuck over and drank most of what was left before putting the bottle back onto the floor. I figured he'd never know whether he drank it all or not. I slept like a rock that night. No anger, no worries. When I got up the next day, I noticed Amy wasn't in the kitchen yet. I knocked on her door and spoke to her from the hallway.

"Hey, you getting up? I slept like a dead man last night. Do you want some eggs and toast?" She didn't answer. "C'mon... get out of bed. Are you sick or something?"

"No, just go away, please."

I don't know why, but instead of leaving, I opened her door and went into her room. She covered her face with a blanket, but not before I saw it. Her face was bruised on the left side and she had dark spots under both eyes. I took a step toward her and could barely speak with my jaw clinched as tightly as it was.

"I'm gonna fucking kill him!" I said, not caring who heard it.

"No, Mikey! Don't do anything! Swear it to me! I'll handle it myself."

"Handle it? What are you going to do? I *know* what *I'm* gonna do to him!"

"No!" she whispered my name this time. "Mikey, please. Swear it to me! I tried to fight back but he was too strong. When he was done I hurt him really bad with my knee, though. He drove himself to the hospital and just got home two hours ago. He told Alice he'd hurt his hernia while moving something in the garage. But, please, Mikey... don't do anything! I'm going to have my revenge soon enough."

“Look, Amy... let’s just go to the police now! I can testify with you about this and send that bastard to jail!”

“And then what? The foster company would just move us to separate homes!” She got out of bed and closed her door. She stepped close to me and took my hands.

“I love you, Mikey. I want to be with you... like *really* be with you. But if we go to the police and he gets out of it somehow, we’ll be split up and he’ll get away with everything! All the beatings, Jake’s disappearance, my abuse... everything! I don’t want that. I want him to suffer for what he’s done! I want to know he got back everything he dealt out! And I don’t want to be away from you when it happens.”

Her words worked against my instinct to hurt the old man. I truly wanted to rip him apart. Yes, he needed to suffer. She was right about that. But now, not later! She could sense my refusal and repeated her words... “please, just wait... for my sake.”

I couldn’t refuse her. It was her abuse, anyway... not mine. I felt horrible for sleeping through it, though.

“Only if you swear to me that we’ll follow through when the time comes. You have to swear it, Amy, or I’ll kill him right now!”

“I swear it!” She squeezed my hand and pulled herself close. I remembered her words.

“You said... you said you *love* me?” I asked quietly. She nodded yes.

“For a long time now, Mikey. You couldn’t tell?”

“No, not really,” I said. “I figured you thought I was too young for you to like.”

“Well, I’ve always loved you like a brother, which you’re not... and you *remember* that, Mikey... you’re not my brother! But this year, something changed inside me. Maybe when you got taller,” she giggled, “I’m not sure.”

Looking down at her bruised face, I experienced the most confusing moments I’ve ever had. Knowing what he’d done to her, I wanted to go into Charlie’s room and beat his face in until he stopped breathing. But on the other hand, I wanted to honor Amy’s wishes and wait until *she* decided the time was right for revenge. I didn’t know what to do other than keep my word to her. I avoided Charlie for a while until I could be sure I wouldn’t break my promise.

Six weeks passed and Amy and I found ourselves sneaking kisses from time to time. We were careful where we displayed our feelings for one another, though, as Charlie or Alice could always be around the next corner.

Sometimes at night, I'd sneak into her room and we'd talk about what we wanted to do when we got away. She talked of going to school to be a nurse. I decided I wanted to run my own business. I didn't care what it was, but just wanted to work for myself. I found myself counting down the days until her eighteenth birthday, and our escape.

Amy threw up while we were eating breakfast one morning. We had just eaten scrambled eggs.

"What's wrong with her now, Charlie?" Alice asked, covering her mouth and nose. "She'd better not get me sick again. My heart can't take another bout with that flu she drags around!"

"Probably the damn chops she cooked last night," he said. "I didn't think mine was done enough. She didn't make the coffee right, either!"

It wasn't the pork chops, and it wasn't the flu. Amy had thrown up twice the morning before. As I started the walk to my bedroom, she followed and pulled me into the hall bathroom, shutting the door.

"Mikey, I'm really scared! I keep getting sick in the mornings."

"So? You just have a sensitive stomach, that's all."

"I don't think so."

"Then what else? You got a fever or something?"

"It's not a fever, Mikey! I feel different... inside."

"Different? Then what is it? A disease?"

"I'm scared to tell you." She looked like she was about to cry. Suddenly, I felt my heart racing.

"Did he do something to you again? You promised to tell me if he ever tried, and I'd take care of it! So... did he? Did he do something?"

"He did it two months ago, Mikey. I'm just now finding out."

I still didn't get it. She used her arms to mimic holding a baby. My stomach suddenly folded. It was *me* who was sick now. She pointed to her belly and nodded. My heart was beating out of my chest.

"If you don't want to be with me now, I understand. But I really think I am."

"What are we going to do, Amy? You can't have his baby! It's just not right!"

"What am I supposed to do then? Kill it? I can't do that, Mikey. It's half of me, too!"

"Then what are we going to do? Raise Charlie's baby? You're only seventeen! And I'm not even sixteen! He needs to die for this, Amy! Like, really die!"

"I know he does... and he will! But right now, I don't want him to know *anything* about the baby. Alice, either. I can't kill it, Mikey. It's already a little boy or a girl. I'd be killing an innocent baby! So, listen to me... I've been thinking about this all morning. I'll have the baby. But afterwards, I'll give it up for adoption. We'll find a good family. It's the only fair thing to do."

"Fair? Are you serious? Why do we have to be fair, Amy? Fair would be him getting his head blown off... not getting away with it!"

"Not fair to *him*, Mikey... fair to the baby! Someone who can't have children of their own can raise him, or her, and give her a life we can't. You've said yourself how horrible it was to live on the street, remember? Do you really think we could afford to live by ourselves *and* take care of a new baby seven months from now?"

"They're going to see your belly getting bigger, Amy! What are we going to do, then? They might force you to have an abortion!"

"I won't do it, and they can't make me. I'll tell him I'm leaving when I turn eighteen and he has to give us money to take care of the baby or I'll go to the police and make him take a DNA test. I won't tell him I'm giving it up for adoption.

"So, he gets off with nothing but having to pay us a little money?"

"No. I meant what I said about getting revenge. I just need to be eighteen before I leave, that's all. If I leave now, we can't be together. I need you, Mikey! You're the only person in the world who really knows me and what I've been through. And I know you, too. I don't want us to be apart!"

"It's just too dangerous! Anything can go wrong. We know he did something to Jake... he might try to get rid of you and the baby, too!"

“It won’t be forever, Mikey. I’ll turn eighteen less than a month after the baby is born. If things get too bad before then, I promise we’ll leave and go straight to the police. But if we do that, they’ll put you somewhere else, and I don’t want that!”

“I just want to do it *now*, Amy. Kill him and make a run for it! We could go to another state!”

“Then it’s *us* who’d be guilty of murder! We’d both end up in jail the moment we try to sign the baby up for adoption! No. We have to have a better plan, and stick with it!”

I didn’t have anything else to say. There were no good options. If we didn’t do it her way, we’d end up being separated, just like she said.

Four more months went by. For the most part, Amy didn’t even look pregnant. She hid it well, wearing hoodies and sweat pants most of the time. It was early March, and still cool enough to get away with it. Soon though, it became too much baby to hide.

We waited until Alice took her shower one morning before confronting Charlie. She’d gotten too big for a bath, and we hoped the running shower would drown out our talking. Charlie was watching TV, his usual after breakfast. Amy and I walked into the room. She took the remote out of his hand and turned the volume up on the TV.

“What the hell are you doing? I hear it good enough already! Give that back!”

We both stood in front of the TV, blocking his view. I saw Amy’s hands were shaking, so I pulled the bottom of her hoodie up a few inches to show him her stomach.

The look on his wrinkled face said it all, but it didn’t match the words that came out of his mouth.

“Oh, no! What... what have you two done?”

When Amy heard that, she suddenly found her voice.

“*We* didn’t do anything! *You* did this to me, Charlie Jenkins!”

“What? Honey, you know I didn’t—”

I stepped forward and put my finger in his face.

“Don’t deny it! It was you, Charlie! I even walked in on it once, when I was little! Amy and I haven’t done *anything* like that! If you deny it again, I’ll kill you right where you sit!” I held up a butcher knife I was hiding behind my back. Amy’s eyes got big. She instinctively put her hand over her stomach.

“Mikey, don’t! He’s not worth cleaning up the blood afterward!”

“Oh, he’s worth it, alright! I’d clean up the mess a hundred times if I had to!”

For the first time in ten years, Mr. Jenkins didn’t look like the vicious monster we were used to seeing. He looked weak and pathetic, even scared! I wanted to put the knife in him even *more* now, for every shitty thing he’d done to both of us!

“This is what’s going to happen now,” Amy said, lowering my arm. “We’re going to live here until I have the baby and turn eighteen. Then we’re leaving this house for good! You won’t follow us, you won’t call the cops... nothing! If the foster company comes looking for Mikey, you can tell them he found out his real parents lived in Florida and he ran away to find them. And if you don’t convince them well enough, we’ll tell everyone the baby is yours and go to court to prove it with a DNA test. And you’re going to give us enough money to get started somewhere, too. Or I’ll swear in court to the rape! You should never have touched me, Charlie Jenkins! I was a child, you sick, old pervert! I wanted to kill myself because of you!”

He didn’t have anything to say, but kept glancing around to see if Alice was near.

“And something else, too. I’ve been keeping a journal of everything you’ve done to me, with the dates and times you did them. I could give it to the foster company if I wanted to... or the police! I’ll even take a lie detector test for them! So, either you agree to what I said, or the first thing I’m going to do is march into that bathroom and show Alice what you did to me. And if you don’t think I can make her believe me, you wait and see. The guilt’s written all over your face right now! So, what’s it going to be?”

It didn’t take him two seconds to answer.

“I’ll do it! I’ll do it all, and some money, too! Just don’t go to the police and don’t tell Alice! I’m sorry Amy. It was the liquor! If I hadn’t been drinking, I never would have—”

She slapped his face hard. So hard, in fact, I thought Alice would hear it above the TV!

“Don’t you *ever* say that to me! Don’t you *ever* say you’re sorry! You don’t mean it!” She pulled on my sleeve and we left him shaking in his chair, the TV still blaring.

When we got to her bedroom, she saw the shock on my face.

“You didn’t think I had it in me, did you?” she asked, pacing the room.

“Amy, I couldn’t believe it! You almost gave him a heart attack, right there!”

“I wish I had now. He deserves nothing less than a heart attack! Blaming it on the alcohol!”

“Did you really keep a journal of everything?”

“No. I’ve wanted to forget it this whole time! The *last* thing I’d do is write it down. But *he* doesn’t know that.”

“I was ready to end this today, Amy! I wanted to pay him back for everything!”

“I know you were, but just seeing him so scared and pathetic was satisfying, too.”

“Well, he has a lot more coming,” I said. “It’s not over yet.”

“Oh, you have no idea. I’ve dreamed about it since the first day he touched me. And that reminds me. I’ll never let him call you ‘Jake’ again. That shit’s over! I don’t care what they think. But we’re going to have to be really careful for the next few months. I don’t put anything past him... or Alice!

As Amy’s pregnancy continued, she decided it was too hard to keep hiding her belly from Alice. It was more than just a baby bump now. On an unusually warm May night, Amy served everyone dinner in a pair of sweat pants and a tight t-shirt. She was nearly eight months pregnant.

“Oh! Oh! Oh, my God, child! What have you two done?” Alice said, fanning her face with her napkin.

“Leave ‘em alone, Alice. What’s done is done.” Charlie said.

“What do you mean, ‘What’s done is done?’ Charlie! Are you serious? The child’s pregnant! Very pregnant!”

“I’ve talked to them about it, Alice! Nothing can change what’s happened. Just leave ‘em alone I said!”

“I don’t understand why you’re reacting like this, Charlie! What are we going to do when Junice finds out? I can’t believe she hasn’t already!”

“Well, *you* didn’t! So, like I said, leave ‘em alone! I’m handling it.”

“How are you—”

“Dammit, woman! I said shut the hell up! I don’t want to hear another damn word about this! Just take your sleeping pills and go back to bed! I’m handling it!”

He ate his dinner faster than usual, without saying another word to Alice. Afterwards, he left the table for the TV room. Alice didn’t say a word either, but suddenly retreated to her bedroom, leaving a full plate of untouched food on the table. Amy quickly got up and dumped Alice’s food in the trash can. Before she came back from the kitchen, she started a pot of coffee.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Are you actually making him coffee?”

“Hell no. It’s for us. From this moment on, we’re not their slaves anymore.”

We sat at the table, drinking Charlie’s gourmet coffee. I hated the taste of it, but drank it anyway, feeling we had earned the right. It was then we realized our plan might actually work.

Life in the Jenkins home changed that night. Amy and I still did some basic chores like dishes and cooking, but we didn’t touch the vacuum again except for our own rooms. Nothing else got cleaned, and we didn’t care. We didn’t have much to say to the Jenkins, and they rarely spoke to us, either. In fact, Alice never even looked us straight in the eyes again. We think she knew the baby was Charlie’s by the way he was acting towards us. That meant she probably knew he was abusing Amy all along and had kept her mouth shut about it. Knowing that just made me hate her even more.

Charlie spoke occasionally, but only to Amy; not to me. The next words he said to me came about three weeks after Alice had learned of the baby. He was holding a loaded shotgun.

“No, I’m sure. You go ahead,” I told her. “I can wait.”

The baby seemed to enjoy sitting on top of Amy’s bladder, which sent her to the bathroom twice one morning before I had a chance to use it. When she came out, she gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

“You still think I’m pretty? Even though I look like a cow and have to pee fifty times a day?”

“You don’t look like a cow, and you only pee about twenty times a day,” I said laughing.

“Well, I guess you get another kiss for saying I’m not a cow.” She kissed my face again before I took her place in the bathroom.

I was just about to flush the toilet when I heard her yell out my name. As I yanked up my shorts, I heard her scream “No!” I flung the door open and saw the butt of Charlie’s shotgun pushing Amy down the steps! She hit the wall at the top step, then continued falling down the stairs! I stepped forward, only to be stopped by Charlie’s barrel pressing hard against my chest! I froze.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he snarled, his old eyes full of hate.

“Amy! Amy, are you okay?” I yelled, turning my head towards the stairs again. She lay on her side near the front door. Her eyes were closed and she wasn’t moving.

“Leave her be, boy! You’re staying right where you are!” Charlie kept the barrel pressed into my ribs. I looked down again and saw Alice getting down on her knees, next to Amy.

“Alice! Please, help her! Charlie pushed her down the stairs!”

“Shut up, boy!” he said, pressing the cold barrel into me even harder.

Alice reached out to Amy. Her weight made her fall forward, almost on top of her! She was on her stomach now and had a plastic grocery bag in her hand. She quickly worked it over Amy’s head. She was trying to suffocate her! I leaned forward.

“Don’t do it, boy!” Charlie said.

“Haah! Fat Alice passed out!” I said, pointing.

Charlie only bought it for a split second, but that was long enough for me to swing my left arm down against the steel of his barrel, knocking it sideways. The gun fired! Some of the blast grazed my side, putting me on the floor.

The recoil sent Charlie backwards. The gun fell from his grip, landing between us. We both hit the ground about the same time, but I got to my feet first. I grabbed the gun and pointed it at his head. Every evil thing he'd done flashed across my brain. I spit in his face and lowered the barrel before pulling the trigger! The gun fired, hitting him just below his belt! Charlie's mouth sprung open with a look of pain and horror. Everything between the belt and his knees took the bulk of the blast! He was blown backwards and landed on his butt; his back leaning against my bedroom door. Not a second passed before he folded forward, his chest and face landing directly between his feet, like a suitcase lid falling shut under its own weight.

I turned and ran down the stairs. Alice was still on the ground, but took her hands off the bag when she saw me coming. As my feet landed on the foyer next to Amy's, I continued with the butt of the gun into Alice's forehead. Her head bounced off the wood floor like a basketball needing some air. She was instantly knocked out.

I dropped the shotgun and yanked the bag off Amy's head. Her eyes were still closed. I couldn't tell if she was breathing or not.

"Amy!" I screamed. She didn't move. I pressed my mouth over hers and blew hard, as it was all I knew to do. After two breaths, her head jerked backwards. She opened her eyes and found mine staring down at her. I gently caressed her face for a moment, then ran to the kitchen to call 911. Minutes later, an ambulance arrived with two police cars in tow. I figured someone must have heard the shots and called them. I walked out the door with my hands in the air and knelt down on the porch. The officers quickly approached, their guns drawn.

"She's eight months pregnant! Just inside the door!" I yelled, pointing. "Mr. Jenkins pushed her down the steps and tried to kill me, too! Help her, please!" Two cops cuffed me before another two entered the home. By the time they got inside, Amy was sitting up. I was put in the back of a police cruiser and watched through the window as they attended to her. They put her on a stretcher and wheeled her to the ambulance. Seconds later, another ambulance arrived, this

one for Alice, who still hadn't moved. It was days later before I knew Amy and the baby were okay. Alice wasn't so lucky.

Dr. Eldrin put down my journal and sat back in his chair. I sat back in mine as well. The chain in my cuffs slid over the table's edge, breaking the silence.

"After my time in Juvie, they transferred me here, with you, doctor. So now you know everything I know."

The psychiatrist gingerly unfolded his hands, still transfixed by what he'd just read. He took a drink of water before speaking.

"I appreciate you writing all that down, Michael. I'm left with one important question, though. Do you have regrets for killing the Jenkineses?"

"Well, doctor... if you check the court documents, you'd see Alice actually died of a massive heart attack that most likely began before I even got down the stairs. But she still deserved the butt of that gun. As far as Charlie goes... yes, I do have regrets. Regrets that his shotgun only had one shell left when I fired it. I would have shot him again. Still, every piece of flesh he abused Amy with was gone after one shot, so I'm satisfied with it."

"The police report said they found another body at the home, but it was already decayed," Dr. Eldrin said. "I assume that was Jake."

"Yeah, that was maybe the best part of all of it. They found the real Jake's body after hearing our story. Amy had told the police what Charlie said about burying him in the yard, and how they forced me to assume his identity. Forensics crews tore up the whole garden, but found nothing. Before they left, though, one of their dogs ran to the entrance of the crawl space and started barking. When they checked down there, the dog led them straight to Jake's body! It was buried in the corner, opposite of where we'd dug. Now, at least he can rest in peace while the Jenkinses rot in Hell."

The doctor stood from his chair, straightened his tie and put his suit jacket on.

"I have to tell you, Michael, in all my years of interviewing inmates, I've never heard a story like yours. If it weren't for shooting Mr. Jenkins and the way you spoke about it in court, I think the judge would have gone easier on you, maybe

even ruled it self defense or justified. But, to be frank with you, voluntary manslaughter and five years wasn't a bad sentence, considering two deaths."

"That's just it, Doctor. I didn't need any judge to rule it justified or self defense. I could have shot Charlie ten times and it still would have been justified to me."

"Well, you did two in Juvie and have less than three to go in here. It'll go faster than you think. Any plans when you get out of here?"

"Yeah. Amy's in school for nursing. She'll graduate just before I get out. After that, we're gonna get married."

"That's great, Michael. If you don't mind me asking, what happened to Amy's baby?"

"She kept her. We decided the baby couldn't help how she got here and didn't deserve to pay for who her biological father was, anymore than we deserved the childhoods we were handed.

As far Amy and I are concerned, all *three* of us are survivors."

The End