

Chapter One: Estate Sale

I

Our Lady of Peace receded in the rear view mirror as Mark Hancock drove southbound down Androscoggin, heading in the vague direction of his home in the rural town of Gloaming, Maine. Reverend Doherty's sermon had been one of the value of community-supporting one's brothers and sisters in the event of a loss.

While, the newly re-appointed preacher had admitted that while Deuteronomy 25:5 was not so *universally* applicable today as perhaps it once was in the Middle East of a couple millennia bygone, the principle within is one of helping to alleviate the burdens of loved ones in need. He had advised his congregation pay at least a cursory visit to the McClusky estate sale due to begin shortly following service that day, and so Mark was now driving the long way home, going a little out of his way to do just that. The widow McClusky was in dire need of support, and he intended to give his, wholesale.

It had been over six months since the girl, Erin, had gone missing, and it was common enough knowledge that the widow McClusky's late husband had taken his own life due to the understandable despair. There was still no sign of Erin McClusky, living or

dead, in the ensuing weeks of estate management, and the widow's health had visibly suffered as she struggled to manage her husband's affairs and mourn her lost daughter.

Mark glanced down to his right as if anxious that the steak and ale pie was likely to teleport outside his Honda and break open upon the asphalt. He was mostly just hoping it hadn't sprouted legs and attempted to clamber out of the window—he could not be entirely certain of its edibility, though the recipe had been easy enough to follow; he just hoped he wouldn't poison his friend by mistake. Blushing a little as he pulled up to her home, he re-aligned the red and white checkered cloth covering the pie. He had microwaved it, so it was warm, and miraculously the top layer of pastry had remained crispy enough to make it look like he knew what he was doing.

"Fresh beef and a whole lot of Guinness," Mark called to Elizabeth McClusky as he gently nudged the door of the Civic closed with his heavy-booted foot. He was a hulk of a man, and looked like a werewolf driving a clown car, but his gentleness was clear—having been a large and clumsy child, he had learned to adapt to a world built for chihuahuas, and his great dane strides had shrunk to deliberate paces over the years.

"Oh, Mark, really now..." Elizabeth began, but started over. "It's lovely of you to do this for me, I haven't even thought

about food," she admitted, "not with all of..." she gestured to the yard, her husband's belongings littering it like a very conscientious twister had torn the house apart and gently deposited its contents in neat rows, and Mark noticed some of Erin's things mixed in too.

"All this? Even the big stuff?" Mark asked, almost amazed, peering up into the face of the ancient pendulum clock that had turned the dining room of the McClusky household into something nearly stately.

"Everything must go!" Elizabeth cheered wanly, furnishing Mark with a sad but genuine smile. "I'm leaving town, Mark. There's nothing left for me in this big house any more... not without Harry and—" she stifled a sob. "Not without Erin."

Mark placed the cloth-covered ceramic dish on the nearby armoire, a shoddy creation that functioned well but looked to have been built by the platonic amateur, and folded his old friend into his massive arms. She let him hold her for several moments as she began to freely sob into his shirt. Mark caught the eye of a couple new arrivals and they smiled sympathetically, as much for Mark as for the widow moistening his button-down.

"I'm so sorry," said the huge man with the trembling waif within his arms. "I'm so sorry, Liz, I can't even begin to imagine..." he paused. "Where will you go?"

Elizabeth sniffed deeply and pulled the handkerchief from her cardigan.

"My sister, New York, she lives near the city, I can get the train, commute, you know? I've spoken to Lauren at the Daily, and she says I can work on a column by email, something I don't need to be in Gloaming to keep up while I find something in the city. Who knows—" she laughed, almost bitterly, "maybe you'll be reading me in The Times by next year!"

Mark gave her a placating smile and held her at arm's length.

"Ayah, I don't doubt it for a second; I always knew this town was too small for you, especially with all your fancy letters."

Elizabeth had gone into waitressing straight out of high school and poured all of her wages and tips into a correspondence course at the University of Maine, getting her undergraduate degree in Communication and Journalism. It took her over twice the length of the full-time course, but with her parents' support—and, more importantly, no rent to pay out of her childhood bedroom—it was the only way to get it done. A small-town girl would have no way to support herself in Orono, she figured, if she wanted to save herself for marriage.

Elizabeth Fletcher, daughter of Martin and Dawn Fletcher, had found her way to graduation and a job at the local rag, a decidedly conservative broadsheet that had a funny way of being able to spin gossip and sensationalism for a reserved and almost deluded audience who believed themselves

above such tawdry things. Indeed, with her knack for sniffing out a juicy story and her uncanny ability to tailor it for a market who'd deny wanting 'juice' from all but the sourest of lemons, she certainly had prospects. In a strange way, she found herself musing, her husband's suicide had really freed her. Her, a forty-something year old down-easterner, had no more earthly tethers to this small, gloomy town.

"You've been reading me since high school, haven't you?" Elizabeth asked Mark as he began to pore over her late husband's belongings like a vulture looking for the prime parts of a rotting pangolin, its belly opened up and exposed to the sky.

"Ayah," he reflected, "since '93 or thereabouts." He wrinkled his nose at an uncleaned and overfilled potpourri dish. "This was his?"

"Mine, I'm just trying to get rid of as much as I can. The rest is going to the church basement once those bees are removed. Reverend Sean says there's plenty of room down there and he'll donate or sell it piecemeal and use the funds to redecorate the rectory—" she began to explain.

"'Lord knows that's overdue'," Mark finished for her. Sean Doherty had been talking about the fabled refurbishment for years, now. "How he's lived there for so long without going mad is beyond me," he added, before realizing what he'd said and closing his eyes in regret.

"Ayah," she said, "careful there. The rehab's still fresh, and if I can help him do up his home I'll consider it a public service."

The good Reverend Sean Andrew Doherty had returned several weeks prior from a multi-month stint in a facility to wean him off the communion wine with which he'd been drinking himself to death.

"Aha!" Mark called from behind the grandfather clock, where a basket of odds and ends sat atop a collapsible table Elizabeth had borrowed from the church. "This is universal?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," she said, coming to join him.

"It's unbranded," said Mark, turning over the silver plastic television remote in his massive hands. "Looks fairly new, too, the batteries are probably still good." He flipped open the hinged battery cover and saw the Duracell rechargables inside.

"You need a new chick-chuck?" She asked, using her father's word for it, referring to the sound made by the buttons of her family's TV remote from the 80s.

"Ayah, lost mine a while back, just up and vanished," he mused. "How much?"

"A buck, it's of no use to me; Harry even smashed the television before he hang—" she stopped. "Before he, you know..."

"Mm. He smashed it?" Mark asked.

"Ayah, I found him in front of it, broken glass from the tube on the carpet,

chair on its side... must have been a news broadcast about Erin that, y'know, pushed him over the edge."

He'd looped his belt around one of the notches in the ceiling beam of the family room, according to the local gossip, and from what Elizabeth had said about the television, Mark was sure the gossip had it right.

The conversation lulled as the image of Harry McClusky's softly swaying corpse loomed above them. Mark almost fancied he could smell the man's final bowel movement coming from the mental tableau alone. He shuddered, gripping the silver plastic remote in his hands until his knuckles turned white

"The," Mark began, and had to clear a wad of phlegm from his tightened throat. "The pendulum clock, is it spoken for?"

"No. I figured that would be the hardest thing to shift, actually, so I'm surprised you're even asking about it."

"I've always loved that clock. The atmosphere. It's serviced?" Mark asked, caressing its side panel reverently. His dark, dark eyes glinted in the sunlight and Liz saw the beautiful walnut color of the clock reflected in them. It brought to mind something from the Narnia books she'd read; the allure of that wardrobe.

"Believe so," Elizabeth mused. "Harry tried to keep it in good repair. I'll let it go for four hundred if you want it."

"Piece of history like this? I'd sooner pay you six." Mark murmured wryly. An

invisible fish hook pulled one of Elizabeth's eyebrows skyward.

"I'm pretty sure that's not how you haggle," she pointed out.

"And I'm pretty sure the whole town just got an earful about brothers marrying their sisters," Mark said, "to remind us to do our part for those we know need a little extra support for the moment."

"In law."

"Hmm?" Mark asked.

"Sisters *in law*" Elizabeth corrected. "But I catch your meaning. I'll not take a penny over five fifty, though."

"You have yourself a deal," said Mark, and dug into his coat pocket for his checkbook.

II

"Yep, just in here," called Mark from the doorway of his house. The charming New England wooden cottage was painted a stark white when Mark first bought it twenty years ago, the leaden encasement flaking and peeling, giving the bedraggled yard a year-round speckling of toxic snow. The first thing he'd done with his fiancée was to strip it all off and expose the bare cedar from which the building was constructed, then apply a weather-resistant finish, bringing out the natural color of the wood. It was a truly beautiful cottage with low ceilings that made Mark both duck and develop a thicker skull in equal measure, a now-manicured front yard, and a back path that opened into a lane across which was a stile one could cross into the edge of Gloaming woods. The only major overhaul, aside from the stripping of the paint, came when the 19th century roofing tiles finally gave out and sent a torrent of cold, dirty water into Mark and Elly's marital bed just a few weeks after their wedding, necessitating the purchase of a new mattress. And new pajamas.

"Careful of the step, now," said Mark as he navigated John & John Joyce across the threshold and into his hall. "I cleared out this space for it, just over here, I figured you wouldn't appreciate having to carry it very far."

"Uff, yah, you'd be right about that," replied John Joyce Sr., the town carpenter—though he was considered by most to be the town dogsbody. His son, also a John, was propping up the base of the huge pendulum clock that Mark had purchased a few days prior. The Joyces were the only people with a flatbed that wasn't full of muck from transporting silt-laden lobster pots or muddy vegetables around town each week, and also probably the only people in Gloaming who would respect the antique enough not to inadvertently smash it through the door frame of Mark's home.

The Johns waddled slowly to the space Mark had prepared and placed the walnut behemoth on its front edge, then gently rocked it backward until it stood upright.

"Ah, almost forgot," said the junior tradesman, and sped back outdoors.

"The pendulum," the senior of the two explained to Mark. "We took it out, so it wouldn't bend in transit."

"Aha, I wouldn't have thought of that."

"And that's what you're paying us for," said John, "our expertise."

He was right, of course, but this is exactly the reason Mark had not been looking forward to this particular interaction. John Jr. was a perfectly nice lad, but his father had come to develop a particular brand of pride in his work that other townsfolk tended to find somewhat distasteful.

"Thirty bucks, right?" Mark asked.

"Well, for the transport, ayup," came the response as Mark reached for his wallet. And then Mark froze.

"John, no," he started, but John was already shaking his head and muttering half-apologies.

"Well, it's just that we did have to take out the pendulum-ah," the other John now stepped through the door holding the large brass instrument that would allow the clock to function, "and here, look, it's thirty bucks for the transport, but we've had to do extra work y'see, and now we'll have to re-fit the thing for ya now, of course..."

Mark beckoned to the younger John to hand him the pendulum so that he could inspect it. It didn't seem too complex a piece of equipment, Mark thought, so maybe he could... and then the larger, older, much plumper John casually swung open the door panel of the clock.

"Damn it." The network of gears and springs was too much for Mark to reckon with, and he conceded that he'd lost out to this latest extortion from John & John Joyce.

"Yuh, so, how about we call it twenty for the installation?" asked John the elder, knowing he'd knocked every last puff of haggle-wind out of Mark's sails.

Mark dug back into his wallet, balancing the pendulum in some kind of awkward elbow-to-shoulder crook, and produced the fifty dollars.

"Pleasure doing business with you," beamed the fat man as his son gingerly retrieved the pendulum from Mark's limp grip. This was turning out to be a pretty expensive week.

It was at this point that Mark had an inkling of a bitchy little move that could make him feel a bit better about being scalped.

"So, did you find anything good yourselves at Liz's estate sale?" he asked, with a sideways glance to the son, whose face then began to turn a slight pink.

"Oh, uh, no," said John, hastily stuffing Mark's money into the side pocket of his grubby gray-green overalls. "Didn't see anything interesting there, did we, Jack?" He looked imploringly at his son.

"No, sir," said John 'Jack' the younger, reddening more at being put on the spot.

"Oh, really? Liz still has that armoire you built, didn't you see it there?" Mark asked, feigning ignorance. He knew that there was no way that 'Tightwad Joyce' had deigned to go anywhere near a charitable effort like Elizabeth McClusky's estate sale; the man, in the manner of only the most devout of Christians, even managed to find an excuse most weeks not to show up at Sunday service just so he didn't have to drop his change into the collection tray; it was "flooded basement" this, and "fallen shelf" that. Once Reverend Doherty went down to Portland for his six months in recovery, John Joyce had

stopped attending altogether, though his son had not. The so-called 'Catholic Guilt', if truly hereditary, couldn't have come from John Joyce Jr.'s father.

In truth, Mark felt a little bad for having put the kid on the spot like this. He was twenty-something years old, and well on his way to saving up for community college, where he intended to get a degree in engineering. Despite his savings, he was not a penny-pincher like his father, and always found a way to put a crisp ten in the collection tray every single Sunday, without fail, and now Mark was making him feel all sorts of awful.

"Is that right?" said John. "I must have missed it, I should go and ask about that..." and the three exchanged a glance that they all understood to mean '*There is no way in Hell that I'll be spending money on that piece of garbage*'.

It was one of the first carpentry projects that the elder John Joyce had attempted during high school, working on weekends in his own father's garage shop. It really wasn't bad, not by any stretch of the imagination, but Mark and Liz had spent many a night giggling over how John Joyce was embarrassed by his early works. That pride of his cut both ways, after all.

"I think so, yeah, she seemed reluctant to part with it, but I'm sure I can talk her around for you," Mark knew he was pushing his luck at this point, but he was going to have

to go without that bottle of bourbon he wanted now that he'd had to spend an extra twenty, and that was his monthly ritual—a glass of bourbon by the television to nurse his broken heart. It was down from a weekly thing, but the hurt from the divorce was still fresh enough that John Joyce ruining his plans to wallow was worth pushing back a bit harder.

"I'll call her now, I think," Mark said, and pulled out his cell.

"You don't have to—" John began, but Mark cut him off with his index finger, raised to indicate the ringing phone.

"Hi! Liz, did you shift that armoire yet?" A pause. "Nup, the one your pop bought from John Joyce," another pause. "Oh! Great! I have John here right now, he'd love to help you out by taking it off your hands, here," and Mark handed his cell phone to John.

Another pause.

"Ayah, this is John, you still have the armoire y'say?" He asked, desperately hoping she didn't. "Oh, that's great. Yup, I'd be happy to buy it back, anything to help you out with your, eh, troubles," he trailed off as Liz's tinny voice burst from the speaker of Mark's cell phone.

"Thank you so much, John!" Mark heard her yell, "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about it!"

"Oh, uh, nope; I remember we talked about it at church, I just didn't see it at your, uh, garage sale," he replied.

"You were there? I didn't see you, you should have asked and I'd have shown you!" At this point, Jack was turning away, ashamed of his father for lying to the widow he had no intention of helping, and sore at Mark manipulating the situation to cost his family money. Mark tried to catch his eye to issue an apologetic look, but only saw the back of the younger man's head as he buried it into the cavity of the pendulum clock, clicking and screwing to get it up and running again.

"Oh, sorry, Mrs McClusky, I just didn't want to disturb you."

Liz was quieter now, and Mark took a step closer so he could hear her voice.

"How much are you offering?"

"Well," John bristled at the subject of parting with his money, "your father bought it from me for twenty dollars back in '85, so _"

"Actually, it was fifty," Liz corrected.

"Ayuh, that sounds right..." John conceded.

Mark cut in. "So, adjusting for inflation?"

John closed his eyes, suppressing the urge to throw Mark's phone onto the ground and leave outright. "So, adjusting for inflation, that'd be... what?"

There was a pause as Liz opened her laptop and told John she'd look it up right now.

"One hundred and twenty dollars."

John Joyce Senior looked Mark dead in the eyes, John's own burning with contempt, and spoke.

"Done," he said to Liz, but at Mark, through gritted teeth.

III

Mark had, by now, forgotten that Jack was in the hall, let alone within three feet of the him, and it was almost with a start that Mark noticed him returning from the confines of the huge pendulum clock.

Unlike his father, John "Jack" Joyce Jr. did not take up much space in a room. This is not to say that he was a small man. He was, in fact, nearly a foot taller than John, and Jack did take up less space horizontally, but the well-built young man was by no means small.

The fact of the matter is that one would be forgiven for mistaking Joyce the Younger for someone much smaller. He took up much less *mental* space in a room on some level that couldn't quite be articulated from the back of the mind to the front and, as a result, people often seemed to "misplace" him, not least when his father was around.

The vast differences between the father and son, who were surprisingly recognizable as such a familial pair, served to further push Jack into the background, perpetually in his father's practically three-dimensional shadow.

This young man was, to the naked eye, a tall, broad shouldered, dark blond boy of middle-ish twenties. Contrasted with his father's rotund, graying, bushy presence, Jack was a perfectly average person.

Jack was closely shaven most of the time, while his father's whiskers were unkempt, only spending precious time and money on a barber maybe three times a year. Jack shaved every morning with an heirloom straight razor formerly owned by his father's father. This ritual allowed him to slot his waking brain's jumbled thoughts into their proper order of a morning.

Mark unconsciously took all of this in and his brain somehow managed to filter *in* the noise. The movement of Jack wasn't even close to enough to tear Mark's attention away from John's thick, folded arms, their layers of paint and varnish rivaling those of the overalls he wore.

Jack wore the same overalls as his father; blue denim, newer, with fewer patches on them, of course. John's were worn through at the knees and to call them 'flecked' with paint would be a disservice to the true artistry of their aesthetic. To call them merely *flecked* would be as to call the late Jackson Pollock 'a bit of a messy painter'; John Joyce's overalls were a Pollock forger's dream. John's dream was to die and take it all with him.

Following in his father's footsteps for most of his life, Jack was content enough to be just that, a Jack of all trades, but he harbored his own dream to be a master of some.

"Pap," he'd said a couple of years earlier, "I want to go to college."

"Ha!" His father had said, "with whose money? Last I checked, this town's full of loungers and drunks with a penny to spare for booze and not much else. Anyway, hell, I didn't go to college and I'm doing fine. You're doing fine, aren't you?"

"I've been saving," Jack said, ignoring that last comment. The real conversation had begun. This had piqued John Sr.'s interest.

"Oh, have you?" he asked, trying not to sound eager.

"Yup pa, I have two hundred already, just from the half-time you've been paying me, and if you bring me on full-time then I could be doing a correspondence course at Orono by the time I'm 30," said the then-22-year-old completely without irony. Silently, John scoffed at this, but decided to outwardly humor his son and see how far ahead he'd thought about this.

"Alright, Jack, say I bring you on full-time. That leaves less for me to pay the mortgage, the bills... to keep you fed while you study. You see where I'm going with this, right? We both save a lot of hassle," and tax, the elder John thought to himself, "if we keep you underpaid, y'see?"

Jack seemed to consider this for a second and then scampered to the back of the house, to his bedroom, where he kept the ledgers. John could say what he wanted about the kid's ambitions but he had a great head for numbers.

"No, look, see, I worked it all out," Jack began, and John immediately began to regret indulging his son.

"...Alright, go on..." John allowed uneasily.

Jack proceeded to provide, in detail, a scenario in which—tax notwithstanding—the two could afford the mortgage, Jack's savings, and even have a little put away for a rainy day or an emergency. John was genuinely impressed. Of course he'd have to look over the numbers himself, he said, and took the ledger to pore over it.

John slid into his pickup and sped to the industrial complex on the southern rim of the town. *No traffic*, he thought, *that's good. Might catch him before he locks up.*

The pickup pulled into the parking lot outside a tiny office overlooking a lumber yard. The office of Smeal and Associates, as the sign claimed, was an accountancy service. *No Business Too Small*, it promised and, on that, it certainly delivered.

John was here to consult a scrawny man by the name of Woody Smeal, who had long-since been providing Jack with a set of books that weren't entirely accurate. It was these 'cleaned up' ledgers that Jack had been working from when designing his future.

Smeal was slipping the key into the lock as he heard the slushy sound of his favorite client's worn out door squishing closed.

"Mr Joyce!" Smeal proclaimed as he turned around.

"Ayuh, how'd you know? Reflection in the window, was it?" John queried. *Window* had come out as *windah* in the strong down eastern tongue of the elder Joyce.

"Your truck has needed that door fixed for years, John. Hell, it should probably be replaced at this point. I could get you a good deal..." Smeal smiled as he beckoned John into his place of business.

"Nah, Woody, it closes fine and I don't fall out." John offered.

"Yet," rebutted Smeal.

"Hah, ayup. Yet."

Smeal sat behind the secretary's desk, overlooking the lumber yard. He watched as his neighbors piled into their trucks and peeled off one by one.

"Gimme a sec, John," said Smeal. "Not sure how she does this, gotta pull up your file," he was slowly and pointedly *tik-tak-tik-tak-tik-tak-click-click-doubleclick-tak-ing* at the keyboard with his spindly index fingers. John waited for a few moments while Smeal struggled with the software he'd freely obtained from a WareZ website a few years ago.

Woodrow "Woody" Smeal was impressed by the book work put forward by the Joyce kid, and over the ensuing years it wasn't just one time that he wished he could bring him aboard to help him massage the finances of his other clients. The problem, of course, was that Honest Jack had been using the wrong information, and so his projections were

somewhat inaccurate. And, so, Jack remained a part-time worker up until the time at which he decided to purchase a particularly amateurish armoire from a widow in his hometown of Gloaming, Maine, in order to attempt to defuse a confrontation between his father and another man who lived a few miles south of the church. [in progress]

*

Jack, now in his late twenties, was nearing his goal of a few thousand dollars for a single semester of correspondence at the University of Maine in Orono. He was hoping to work his utmost to try and get as much done as possible in the single semester he could afford, and take whatever exams were necessary to graduate. The townsfolk of Gloaming could see exactly how seriously Jack was taking this, and none but his father had the heart to tell him how impossible such a feat would be. More accurately, everybody but his father had *too much* heart to break it to the poor kid [in progress]

after this part I haven't edited it

John had never given his son a raise, despite the impressive bookkeeping stunt of 2017, for reasons Jack would not learn for a little while yet. Smeal had, in fact, told John that Jack's projections would work well with their embezzlement plan and so he could plausibly set aside enough money for a full course in maybe five to seven years, but all John heard was "Your son has just given you the opportunity to embezzle even more than you already expected to," and—given that his commission was a ludicrous thirty five percent, Smeal felt it in his best interests not to argue with John and, instead, used Jack's projections to lay them both a couple of exceedingly large nest eggs.

Nevertheless, Jack was determined, and had been corresponding not just with the university regarding a specialized tuition schedule, but both current and former students of the particular engineering course in which he was interested, and he had learned a great deal free of charge. It was, of course, beneficial to all involved, as Jack had convinced them.

"You need to learn to understand the concepts involved in this, right?" he'd asked one student, an apparent girl whose twitter handle, "@PrincesaRupert", intrigued him enough to ask her all she knew and more about the mechanics of the tensile oddity known as the Prince Rupert's Drop.

"Sure, why?" she'd responded.

"I'm working part time for my father and I want to be an engineer. I can't afford college yet, but if you can explain things to me about the way tensile strength works in glass, then I'll gain a foundation and you'll learn better too," he'd said.

"That's... not a terrible idea."

And so Jack and Princessa Rupert had become correspondents, and Jack learned all he could about tempered glass and more. This kind of interaction went on for many many months, with all kinds of engineers; through civil engineers, Jack learned about the structure, function, and limitations of dams and hydroelectric plants, among other things. From mechanical engineers Jack developed a seriously intense interest in the transfer of energy from one place to another; levers and pulleys, cogs and gears, and-clocks; what really fascinated him was how you could use different sized gears to make different sections of a single mechanical building function completely differently.

When Jack's father learned about Jack's extracurricular activities, he jumped at the chance to introduce them into their work, giving people the opportunity to pay more for Jack's expertise. Jack's pay grade, of course, remained the same.

This is how Jack found himself burying his face inside the antique pendulum clock in the hall of Mark Hancock's cottage while Mark and Jack's father played their game of chess

with Elizabeth McClusky as the pawn they were pushing for the home row.

*

"*The epicenter love is the pendulum swinger, she is, she is, she is...*" Jack was now humming to himself. He pulled his head out from the clock and gently pushed the front panel until he felt the soft *click*. "I'm all done, Mr Hancock," he said quietly as he turned to face the man who was .

"Indigo Girls? You've got good taste, kid." Mark asked.

"Oh, thank you Mr Hancock," Jack breathed in a sigh of relief, thinking about his first experience watching a Tig Notaro comedy special and not understanding the jokes leading up to the Indigo Girls coming onstage. Why did she keep trying to trick her audience? It made him feel... strange. She said they were there, then pretended they weren't, and then... she said they were there. They were, in the end, and he had, eventually, very much enjoyed their performance of *Shame On You* , and had made a point of purchasing two or three of their albums between then and now.

"No, they're- they're good, I'm just surprised that you know who they are," Mark said.

"You calling my boy uncultured?" John bristled.

"No, John. Here, just take that pocketful and get out, your boy's got the clock working fine, you're not nee..." Mark trailed off as Jack left the building as quickly as he could. He did not want to feel the anger like his father, and he didn't want Mark to upset him: he liked Mark and hurting him would be bad, he understood.

"Pa, you coming?" Jack called from the path alongside Mark's front yard, voice almost trembling.

John exited after his son, and Mark latched the door after them, frowning.

IV

The violent rage he felt toward Mark had temporarily melted away as he held Liz in his arms, her shuddering body and resounding sobs shaking John Joyce to his core. He'd left his son at home, deciding he was probably a liability given the web of lies that Mark had spun on their behalf, and John was eager to clear everything up by just buying the fucking armoire back.

Now, though, said fucking armoire was the furthest thing from his mind, Elizabeth McClusky was far too much of a mess to make any sort of transaction yet this afternoon.

"I," she sobbed, "I don't want," she snorted and struggled to inhale deeply, "to die too", she was wailing. Her next outburst sounded like "are we cursed?" followed by "Is my family doomed?", but because John wasn't exactly sure, he just hugged her tighter and rubbed her back, murmuring platitudes.

"Liz," he started, "Grief, uh, that is, fear is one of those stages, isn't it? This is normal, of course it's normal, just calm down, please," he began to descend into that so tricky of pitfalls of those trying to comfort one another—telling them to calm down.

"*Fuck you!*" She immediately retorted. "I don't have to be calm! Anger's a fucking stage, too, *Joyce!!*" The way she yelled his name as a kind of accusation took him aback

for a moment. For all his business acumen, John Joyce was one of those folks somehow able to live totally obliviously to the way people actually saw him; why was she saying his name like it was a poison, or a curse?

"You're just some gross money-grubber who knows nothing except how to offend people, you bastard," she was saying, but by now he was tuning her out. How dare she speak to him this way? He, who had tightened his belt a notch and given in to dumping a hundred and twenty bucks into a shitty armoire he was planning to overwinter with to save on firewood? John Joyce was doing her a fucking favor, and here she was yelling at him about nonsense he had nothing to do with. He didn't kill her husband, or make her daughter go missing, what the fuck was her problem?

"—so read a fucking book sometime, you asshole, about empathy, you fucking... fucking... sociopath!!" She knew full well that he wasn't a sociopath at all, and she knew he probably wouldn't know one from Adam, but she spat it out all the same, and it seemed to wound him.

"Mrs McClusky," he began calmly, "I came here to do business and you started bawling at me, and I did my best to listen too," his voice began to raise, "and now it's your turn to listen!"

Elizabeth was quiet, a couple diamonds of saline welling up in the corners of her

pretty green eyes. John paused for a moment before taking a deep breath and continuing.

"My boy is doing his best by you and the church and the community while trying to save for his college tuition," he began, deflecting so far that were he a mirror, the sunlight reflecting off him would hit Neptune before anything orbiting closer. "I'm trying to support him too, so maybe I pinch pennies every now and then! But that's no reason to just demonize me like some kind of scalper," the scalper added.

"I—"

"No, it's my turn to talk! I do hard work, I move all the shit people want to take from point A to point damn A-point-five! I drive, using my gas and my flatbed, distances that most people could walk!" His face was now beet-red, and he was aware that he was either scaring or infuriating Liz, perhaps both, but he couldn't help but continue. "I am sorry about your husband, and your Erin, but I am still a businessman, and I come here to do business with you and you bury your face into my chest and begin to insult me when I try to comfort you—"

"Comfort me? You're a fucking liar, John Joyce, you came here because Mark put you on the spot. I *know* you weren't at my sale, you didn't even know about it until Jack told you he wanted to go, and then you forbade him from coming!" She roared.

"How—"

"He told me, John, because he's an honest boy and twice the man you are. He could see what you were doing to Mark, with that damn pendulum, and he was ashamed of the both of you. He was fucking ashamed, John, you're both fucking children you and Mark." She was now fondling the dials on her lockbox, click, click, click, click, until they read the combination that opened it to reveal almost two thousand dollars. She held up a handful of dollar notes.

"What about them?" John asked indignantly.

"Twelve crisp tens. One hundred and twenty dollars. This is the money that your son paid me for the armoire you have come to collect." She spat each word almost stoically, but there was venom on her tongue as she did so.

John blanched, and reached for his cell phone, intending to call his son and ask just what on earth he was thinking.

"Do you really need to confront him about this?" Liz asked. "He was doing you a favor, and punishing Mark at the same time, though I doubt he'd admit that he intended that bit." She ran her fingers through her hair and ran the back of her hand over her damp forehead, beaded with sweat. "I don't want to argue with you any more, John," she sighed. "You're not a bad man, I know that, most of us know that."

John bristled at this, having never considered himself as anything other than a pillar of the community.

"I only want fair compensation for my—" he began.

"And there it is! You know exactly what I'm talking about, what people don't like about you, but your ego just keeps you in denial. You're a fool, John Joyce. The fact that your son turned out so utterly beautiful is testament to the will of God, I think."

John remained silent as he waited for her to continue, his teeth locked together in an attempt to channel his anger and shame into some physical pain; at least he could choose to dispense with physical pain.

Neither Liz nor John had expected this day to be so emotionally charged, and Liz had certainly not intended to be so very candid about the way John was seen around the town of Gloaming. John, completely flabbergasted, enraged, confused, hurt, and more than anything else ashamed that his son was the one who somehow managed to see through the bullshit that the people of this town were using as masks when he couldn't see it himself. They both collapsed into nearby armchairs with a thu-thump, and sat in silence for several seconds before beginning to speak at the same time.

"John, I'm so—"

"Liz, I'm just—"

They stopped simultaneously and John waited for Liz to continue, raising his bushy

gray eyebrows in a gesture for her to go first.

"I'm sorry, John, for blowing up at you. It's been a really, really hard time," she raised her hand as John opened his mouth, "and," she continued, not allowing him to interrupt her, "that isn't an excuse. It is a reason. I think if people stopped using reasons as excuses, we could all be a little more civil." She pulled down the hem of her blouse, feeling self-conscious as it was riding up a little, and inadvertently she allowed the upper rim of her bra to show.

While John didn't notice this specific turn of events, he'd long regarded her as a beautiful woman, certainly not past her prime, and was in the process of kicking himself for being so rude to her when he could be flirting; she was single now, after all.

"I don't blame you," he began, and unconsciously readjusted his shirt, mimicking her movements, unaware that he was actually more than a little smitten with her. "Mark is a bastard and he put me right on edge, and when it was my son who came to the rescue, and then I couldn't fix things about your husband—"

Elizabeth McClusky stood up primly and simply said "Get out of my house, John."

Baffled, he arose and shuffled out of her door, leaving the armoire in the hall.

Chapter Two:

I