

**The Schoolhouse**  
**By Kevin J. Prentice**

Fall had officially overtaken summer. The warm days spent without cares transformed, seemingly out of no where, to cool nights and an impending sense of darkness. Fall also meant one other thing. Playoff baseball.

“Here,” JD choked out, “Take it. Take it.” He leaned forward in his recliner, extending the packed marijuana pipe.

“Im good. Fucking toasted off that blunt.” Nathan, sprawled out on the couch, responded.

JD blew out the rest of the smoke from his lungs and set the pipe on the coffee table, disappearing amongst the growing number of empty beer cans. Stale Pabst Blue Ribbon and Coors Lite clashed with the marijuana smoke and body odor to create a foul scent. Neither seemed to notice. If they did, it did not bother them. Both kept their focus on the television as the Atlanta Braves continued their trouncing of the Florida Marlins in the first game of the National League Divisional Series. Then a thought roused JD.

“Holy shit!” He shouted, “Guess what I heard today.”

Nathan peered over the top of his phone, too stoned to engage in small talk, but interested in what his friend had to say.

“You know that old school, the one on Barker on the east side?”

Nathan nodded his head. He forced a cough to clear his throat. “The one that’s all boarded up?”

“Mhm, so check this shit out. Susy from shipping, that lady with really wide shoulders and wears crocs all the time, she was telling me the most insane story about how that school is haunted.”

Skepticism crossed Nathan’s face.

“Swear to god. She told me the whole story.” JD defended his claim.

“I’m sure she did. She also told half the workers there that she’s Michael Jackson’s second cousin, so,” Nathan lifted one leg off the couch and clench his stomach. An obscene rumble shot from his ass, partially muffled by the cushion, “That’s what I think of whatever story Susy has.”

“Don’t be an asshole, dude. That’s my couch you’re ripping ass into. I see where you’re coming from. It was weird that she, a white woman from Idaho, told everyone she’s cousins with the prince of pop, but when she told me this story, I swear to god, dude, the hair on the back of my neck fucking stood up.”

The sentiment managed to grab Nathan’s attention once again. He let his phone fall flat on his chest.

“I heard it’s haunted. Someone died?” Nathan said.

“That’s exactly what she told me, too. Plus so much more.”

“How does she know this?” Nathan asked, skeptical.

“Her brother in-law, or I guess would-be-brother-in-law, was one of the students who got murdered, or died, in the school. Like way before she married her husband.”

The story transformed in that moment for Nathan. What had once been a tall tale by an outlandish co-worker earned a sense of reality with that claim. Nathan could not help himself. He needed to know more.

“Serious?” He questioned his friend. “Did she say his name?”

“Swear to christ that is what she told me. His name was Bart.” JD’s face lit up in excitement.

The friends sat in silence for a moment. The only sound came from the television as the announcer described the double-play executed to perfection by the Braves that kept the Marlins from scoring.

“This game is a wash.” Nathan sighed.

“So...” Leaning forward in the recliner, JD stared at Nathan.

“What?”

“Do you want to hear the story or not?”

The game moved into the seventh inning with the Braves ahead by seven runs with the top of their order coming up to bat. Barring a miracle, the game would end in an Atlanta victory. Nathan turned towards his friend and studied his face carefully. No sign of the curled lip, JD’s giveaway anytime he tried to joke around, appeared to Nathan.

“Fuck it. Fireaway.”

## Part Two

Forty years before JD regaled Nathan with the story of how students met their end inside Barker High School, an Oldsmobile Cutlass raced along the back roads of New York State en route to Buffalo. The vehicle looked nondescript. Rust ate away at the wheel wells and door handles from years of neglect, and smeared bug guts stained the windshield. The driver kept one hand on top of the steering wheel while the other lit a Marlboro that dangled from his lips. As soon as the end of the cigarette ignited he blew out a puff of smoke and pushed the pedal closer to the floor, slicing through night.

By the time the cigarette burnt down to the driver's finger tips, the signal for RWKB, Rochester's rock radio station, began to fade into chopped-up static. He snubbed out the butt in the car's ashtray and fiddled with the radio dial. Burst's of songs blared before they faded into more static. Annoyed, the driver gave up and switched off the radio, intent on making the remainder of the drive in silence. Then he heard a rumbling.

It sounded like someone put a soccer ball into a washing machine, a rhythmic thump, except he had no soccer ball and he had no washing machine, but he did have something in the trunk. His mind raced. His eyes scanned the forest that lined both sides of the road, trees passing in a blur, and he thought it best to ditch his load. He wanted something quick, to get back on the road and avoid, even at the late hour, the possibility of a passerby. Then, as if his prayers had been directly answered by the universe he steered the Cutlass around a bend and came upon a bridge.

The Cutlass downshifted and came to a stop about halfway across the hundred yard long bridge. The driver turned to look over his shoulder, leather from the seat crackling beneath him.

Silence. Maybe the thumping ended for good, he thought. Then it started up, and he turned off the engine. With the headlights out, the woods became fully engulfed in darkness. The door creaked as it opened. A leg swung out and a black well worn boot landed on the ground in an inept fashion. The driver hoisted himself out of the seat, and made his way to the back of the Cutlass with a saunter that caused the keys on his hip to jingle in a syncopated rhythm with his foot steps.

Standing right outside the trunk, he placed his hands on the top to feeling the vibrations. Grease caked the crevices of his skin and his fingernails. He took the key ring from the buckle of his work jumper and searched with squinted eyes through the dark for the correct key. He found it. As gently as his first time with the neighbor girl, he slid the key into the lock, twisted, and popped it open. Long black hair falling around his face, he stared into the trunk, expressionless.

A teenager, stricken with panic and covered in sweat glared up at him, pleading for mercy. Duck tape wrapped around the young boy's head and mouth stifled his screams. Blood from the first blow, made hours earlier, had matted the boys brown hair. It dried in a stream from his hairline, down his forehead, and along the side of his nose. With his hands duck taped behind his back and his ankles tied together, he could only move like a fish on trapped on land.

Without warning, the driver lifted his fist into the air and brought it down hard on the side of the boys head. A muffled scream tore the boy's throat to shreds. He whimpered and remained submissive. The driver reached down and worked his hands around the boy's body, pulling him out of the trunk like one would a bag of mulch and hoisted the boy up onto his shoulder.

Exhausted, and tears blurring his vision, the boy could only see the black work boots walk across the concrete. Then he heard a frightening noise. Rushing water.

The bridge stood eighty feet above a river. The rapids flowed fast and strong, unyielding to any man, and the temperatures, in the early days of October, dipped close to freezing. The driver looked down and studied the current. The boy writhed, overtaken by desperation, but failed to escape the driver's grip. Fingers dig deeper into his legs and back. Then, all the sudden, the young boy felt weightless. Shrugged off as though he had been a bag of trash, the boy plummeted towards the river below, and as he looked up he saw the silhouette of the driver staring down at him over the side of the bridge.

The water swallowed the boy. The splash barely audible over the rushing river. The driver turned and sauntered back to the Cutlass. He removed the keys from the trunk, slammed it shut, and climbed back into the driver seat. The engine roared to life. He popped a Marlboro into his mouth and flicked a flame from his lighter. Smoke billowed out of the corner of his lips and he tried the radio. ABBA's hit 'Dancing Queen' came from the radio, now within radius for a Buffalo station, and he continued his drive through the night.

~

The cafeteria inside Barker High School buzzed with midday chatter from students divided by the popularity hierarchy. In the back corner sat the honor society discussing plans for college and SAT prep. The drama kids, by far the loudest, occupied the seats in the center, bordered by the burnouts who counted down the minutes until they could hop in their trans-ams and light up a joint. Near the front, the tables closest to the food line and with the easiest access in and out of the dense space, sat the jocks. Most discussed the football season, almost half over,

and their weight lifting regiments meant for either bulk, speed, or both. At the end of the long table, three players discussed something they wished to keep secret.

“It’s too nose-y in here,” Bart, the team’s quarterback told his teammates. “Let’s go out by the dumpster.”

The six foot four star player rose, and like Jesus’ apostles, his teammate Dex and Nish picked up their trays and followed him through the maze of tables and out the back door. The October air felt crisp. Leaves, dried and fallen off trees, blew around the parking lot in the back of the school. Bart pulled a pack of Marlboros from his letterman jacket and lit up. He took a long drag and began to delegate.

“So where all in agreement then? This is what we have to do.” His eyes, cold and calculating, examined the other’s faces.

Dex looked at Nish, who stared back, and then both nodded their heads.

“I mean it’s the only way we’re going to pass.” Nish, the team’s running back answered.

“I’m in. If Bellamy wasn’t such bastard and would just let us pass, we’d be fine.”

“But he isn’t. I don’t know about you two, but if we don’t play against McKinley then I consider our whole season shot to hell.” Bart reinforced their sentiment.

“Exactly. It’s like he doesn’t even give a shit about the team,” Dex, an offensive line-man with offers to play college football, moaned.

“Can we run over the plan again?” Nish asked.

“Ok.” Bart answered, blowing smoke from his mouth. “The test is on Thursday, so we have to do this tonight. We come back later, once everyone is gone, break into the school, and go

right for Bellamy's room. Tessa told me that he keeps the exams in the bottom left drawer of his desk, but he also locks that drawer. This is where you come in Dex."

"Right. I can lift my dad's lock pick set no problem. It'll be easier getting in that drawer than Samantha Overton's panties."

The boys grinned, each pretending that they slept with the senior who had to drop out because of a surprise pregnancy with the clerk at the 7/11.

"Good. I love it. Once we have the test, Tessa said she'd be able to look at it and get enough answers right where it looks like we barely passed. We don't need to be scoring hundreds and have him thinking something is up."

"She'll do that tomorrow night then?"

"Yep. Take the test on Thursday, pass, and that wily ol' bastard will have no choice but to let us play for homecoming."

Dex and Nish stood in marvel at the simplicity of Bart's plan as well as the bravado it took to even think of it and execute it. That, they surmised, is why Bart lead the team.

"So who wants to drive?" Bart floated the question out.

"I can get my mother's pinto, but I'll have to wait until she falls asl-"

The door to the cafeteria shot open with a bang that made the three students jump and jerk their heads. Bart instinctually hid the cigarette behind his back, not because smoking had been banned on school grounds, but because he had an image of health to uphold. Their heart rates returned to normal when they realized a teacher did not come outside, but the janitor.

In his black boots he stood and stared at the teens for what seemed like an uncomfortable amount of time.

“Can we help you with something, boss?” Bart asked, returning the cigarette to his mouth.

The janitor did not answer. He only kept his expressionless stare fixed on the boys.

“Yeah, why don’t you take a picture, it’ll last longer,” Dex chirped.

“What the fuck is this guy’s problem?” Nish wondered aloud, feeling uneasy by the janitor’s presence.

As soon as Nish stated his inquiry, the janitor continued to the dumpster, dragging the bag of trash behind him as his keys jingled in a syncopated rhythm with his footsteps.

“Fucking wierdo,” Bart muttered. “Just keep quiet till he leaves. Don’t want John Wilkes Booth ratting us out to teachers.”

The janitor reached the dumpster, and for the first time since he emerged from the cafeteria, shifted his focus away from the teenagers. He hoisted the bag of trash up onto his shoulder and then heaved it into the open dumpster. The bag, never tied at the end, opened on impact, and its contents spewed out. One piece being a milk carton with an image of a brown haired teenager from the Rochester area who had gone missing two weeks earlier. The janitor turned around. He pulled his own pack of Marlboros from his work jumpsuit and lit up.

“Fuck this.” Bart snuffed his smoke out beneath his Chuck Taylor sneaker. “Let’s get back inside. Dex, call us as soon as your mom goes to sleep tonight.”

“Got it.”

The three football players broke from their huddle and ventured back into the kingdom of high school popularity, where they ruled supreme.

~

Bart waited in his bedroom for Nish's call, flipping through an old copy of Playboy to kill the time. A soft knock came from his door. He looked up and lowered the volume on his cassette player. The knock came again.

"Bartholomew, sweetie," The voice on the other side of the door, even softer than the knock, belonged to his mother. "It's almost eleven thirty, sweetie. You have school in the morning."

Bart rolled his eyes, a feeling of contempt starting to swirl. His eyes went back to the busty blonde woman posing with taxidermied jaguars in the magazine.

"I'm doing school work, mom." Bart answered. "Extra credit. It's really important and I need my privacy."

"Oh, ok, sweetie. I'm so proud of you doing extra cred-"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Ok. Goodnight, sweetie."

"Good night, mom." Bart said to his mother in a tone that made it difficult for her to picture Bart's middle finger up in the air on the other side of the door.

Anxious about the events that lay out before him, and now annoyed by his overbearing and dimwitted mother, Bart need to blow off steam, but never dared to smoke inside his room. For as soft and delusional as his mother acted, his father operated the exact opposite, once beating Bart for leaving the butter on the counter on a hot summer day. Instead of nicotine, he reached for the tub of vaseline and a tube sock. He laid down, arched the magazine up on his

chest so he could see the blonde in the faux amazon, and started to unbuckle his jeans. Then the phone in his room rang.

“Nish?” Bart answered.

“She’s asleep.” His friend on the other line spoke in a whisper. “I’m going to get Sex then I’ll be to your house in five minutes.”

“Perfect. I’ll be outside.”

Bart laid the receiver back down and zipped his pants back up. He pulled a black sweatshirt and mask from his closet, opened his bedroom window and jumped from the ranch styled home’s first floor, where he waited in the shadows for the Pinto to roll down his street.

The Pinto eased to a stop on Bryant Ave., a sleepy city side street one block over from Barker High. The three boys, Bart, Dex, and Nish, dressed in black, remained silent.

“Kill the lights,” Bart ordered from the passenger seat. Nish complied.

They exited Nish’s mother’s car, closing the doors softly behind them, and cut through a series of backyards until they hopped a fence and landed in the back parking lot of the school. Bart lead the mission. He instructed the others to stay low, move fast, and keep quiet. It proved easier for Dex, the running back, who only stood at five feet and six inches and moved as though he had wings attached to his ankles. Nish struggled. The lineman, just south of two hundred and eighty pounds as a seventeen year old, moved with loud footsteps and heavy breathing.

“Wait up,” He called as quietly as he could as Bart and Dex raced along the fence, attempting to keep out of the lamps glow in the parking lot.

“Keep up!.” Bart barked through gritted teeth.

They made it to their first check point. The dumpster in the back of the school where they had their meeting earlier in the day provided a much needed cover of darkness where the boys caught their breath.

“Ok.” Bart began. “Everyone ready? No turning back now.”

Dex and Nish nodded their heads at the same time. Dex, clear eyed and maintaining a low heart rate, gave Bart more confidence than Nish, who wiped sweat from his face and struggled to catch his breath.

“Sorry,” Nish said, “Must be the adrenaline.”

“No time for apologies. It’s do or die. You got the lock pick set?” Bart’s eyes, wide and piercing locked on to the lineman as he checked his pockets.

“Shit.” Nish said to himself.

“Shit what?” Bart asked immediately.

“I-I-I just had it.” Nish searched every pocket of his jeans over and over as though the pocket-knife sized set of lock picks would reappear.

“Mother fucker.” Dex tilted his head up, closing his eyes.

“What do you mean you don’t have it.”

“I mean it’s gone. It must have popped out when we climbed the fence.”

“Of course it did. Look how tight those pants are!”

“I’m sorry,” Nish stated, “Don’t worry about the desk though. As long as I can find a paper clip and scissors I can pick that lock. I promise you.”

“How are we going to get in though?” Dex asked.

Bart turned away from the group. The wheels in his head began to turn at double speed. An idea clicked.

“That window.”

“Where?” Nish asked, hoping for an alternate plan to get him off of the hook.

“Up a little further.” Bart pointed along the side of the brick building. “See, the one that’s at the ground. Must lead into the basement.”

Dex and Nish squinted their eyes to see through the dark, and they made out, about ten yards down, a window slanted open.

“C’mon.” Bart instructed them.

“God dammit.” Nish uttered as they kept moving.

The boys knelt down and huddled around the window. A layer of greasy ingrained dirt covered the glass, and Bart used the sleeve of his sweatshirt to wipe away as much as possible. They leaned closer and peered through the clean patch into the room below.

“Is that a cot?” Dex asked.

“Holy shit, those are Playboys.” Nish said, the excitement of naked women trounced his ability to keep a hushed tone, which earned him a punch on the arm from Bart.

“Quiet,” He ordered.

“...and canned goods AND a hot plate.” Dex’s eyes rapidly scanned the interior of the basement room. “Someone’s living down there.”

“Who?” Bart wondered.

“Don’t know. The janitor?” Dex surmised.

The first feeling of something going wrong crawled up the boys' backs, but each one, afraid of being seen as a coward, and desperate to pull off their mission, ignored their instinct.

"I don't see him though." Bart pushed the other two out of the way and leaned in closer for a better look. "Yeah, he's not there. Maybe he just crashed there sometimes?"

"So what do we do?" Nish wanted to know the next steps.

"We climb in through the window. Well, only one will have to do that, then come and open the door for the other two."

"Ain't no way I'm fitting through that." Nish, thankful for his size, stated.

"Yeah, no way you'd ever squeeze through." Bart waited a beat. "Don't think I'll fit through either. My shoulders are too broad."

"Mother fucker." Dex sighed as he picked up on Bart's insinuation. "Y'all got to at least help lower me through."

Bart and Nish, thankful for Dex's team spirit, handled the running back with great care as they lowered his small frame through the window, not knowing that it'd be the last time they would ever see their friend.

Bart and Nish snuck back to the dumpster by the cafeteria door, and waited for Dex to let them in the school. Neither said much at first. Their nerves had been too frayed, and they couldn't think of anything besides getting in, stealing the test, and getting back home. The minutes spent waiting began to stack up.

"Where the hell is he?" Nish asked aloud.

“It’s a big school. Plus it’s dark...he’s got stay quiet...just give him time.” Bart reassured his teammate, but did not feel certain himself in what he said. He checked his watch. It’s been ten minutes since Dex slid into the basement window. He could have walked around the whole school twice in that time. The feeling that began in the bottom of his spine, his instinct that told him to run, started to grow.

“Should we go?” Nish asked, also feeling the urge to surrender.

“Are you fucking nuts?” Bart glared, nostrils flaring at Nish’s weakness. “Our teammate is in there. We’ve come this far there’s n going back. So, no. We definitely should not go. Jesus, Nish, what the fuck is wrong with you.”

“I-I,” Nish stammered. “I just feel something is off about all of this. Don’t you.”

“Yeah, of course I do, ‘cuz what we’re ding is fucking illegal.” Bart spat the words out, and for the first time since the plan had been hatched, both boys realized the possible consequences of their actions.

The boys fell silence for a moment, Nish feeling scolded, and Bart feeling like he had come down too hard on his friend, like a stressed out parent reacting to a child’s repetitive questions. Then they heard a metallic thud. Both jerked their heads. The door to the cafeteria finally popped open.

“Thank god,” Bart said to himself, then in a whisper he called for Dex, “Dex, you son of a bitch. You almost made Nish shit his pants.”

The door popped open and swung out about six inches. Nish and Bart stared at it a moment, expecting it to fully open and see their teammate standing in the doorway to the cafeteria.

“Dex?” Nish called. “You there?”

No answer.

“Now’s not the time to be fucking with us, Dex,” Bart threatened. He looked at Nish, who had fear and confusion written all over his face. Bart knew that he’d once again have to take control of the situation. Be the man. He took two steps towards the door as careful as burglar getting ready to enter a home. His hand, covered in sweat and shaking just slightest amount, reached out and grabbed the door handle, the metallic handle felt cold to the touch. His muscles tensed.

“Wait!” Nish, petrified, gave a final plea.

Bart pulled and swung the door open in a fast single jerk. Nish turned, covered his face with his arm, and let out a terrified shriek. When he turned back, he saw Bart standing in the door way looking into the darkness of a totally empty cafeteria.

“What the fuck?” Nish wondered. “Where is he?”

Bart could not think of anything to say. His eyes adjusted to the complete darkness and he continued to scan the cafeteria from outside the doorway, too frightened to enter.

“I...don’t know.”

“How did that door open?” His voice cracked, begging to know the answer.

“Musta been the weather...the cold probably warped the lock and it never closed all the way...just popped open.” Bart rambled. His voice trailed off as he tried to convince himself with his logic.

“Then why was it dead locked when we tried it earlier? If it just popped open cuz it wasn’t shut why couldn’t we open it? You pulled on it yourself. It was locked.” Nish emphasized the last word, driving his point home that he did not believe his quarterback, which then gave Bart less confidence in himself.

Bart turned from the door way. His brown hair, sticky with sweat, poked from beneath his black beanie. Nish stared at Bart’s face, void of color and outlined with the beanie and black turtleneck sweatshirt, seemed to be floating, unattached to any body.

“You have to go in,” Bart said.

Nish responded in knee-jerk fashion.

“Fuck that.” He spat.

“Stop being a bitch. You’re the only one who knows how to pick the lock for the drawer.”

Bart turned around, squaring up on Nish.

“What about you? You’re coming in, too.” Nish countered, practically pleading.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I have to stand guard. What if someone comes, like the cops.” Bart grasped at straws.

“Or what if Dex shows up, doesn’t know where we are and gets confused. Trust me. It’s better this way.”

Bart began to move toward Nish, his arms extending and grabbing onto the offensive lineman’s broad shoulders. He pulled. The large mass of Nish refused to move, and after a few more attempts by Bart, began to push back. The situation escalated. Both swore at each other, wrapped their arms around the other, and in fit of rage, stumbled into the dumpster, pushing it

into the side of the school and causing a boom that should have woken the entire block. Bart surrendered.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” He called, releasing Nish from his grip and attempting to pull away as the lineman threatened to bring him down to the ground. “I said let me go!”

The shout scared Nish into putting his hands up, and he stumbled backwards, leaning against the dumpster to regain his balance.

“Jesus Christ, dude.” He looked at his sweater. A tear ran from the collar to the middle of his chest. “You ripped my fucking sweater, asshole.”

“Just cool it, ok?”

“You fucking cool it, Mr. Hotshot. This was all your idea and now look at you. Too big of a pussy to even go into the school and get this stupid god damn test. You know what. Fuck you. I’m going to go in there and get the test, and tell Tessa to fuck you over. Pussy. You ain’t getting shit once I get the test.”

Bart stammered, searching for something to say. Nish, righteous in his anger, gathered himself and strode by Bart, leaning into him with his shoulder as he passed. The quarterback stumbled backwards and watched his teammate cross through the doorway into the cafeteria.

“Nish,” He called, “Wait, just wait. I’ll come.”

Bart summoned the courage to follow Nish into the blackness, squinting to keep his friend in sight. Two steps away from the doorway, the unimaginable happened. The door swung shut. Hard. Bart dove to get out of its path. A loud slam, almost as loud as the dumpster ramming into the building, echoed through the empty parking lot. Bart immediately reached for the handle. He pulled with every ounce of strength in his body. It did not budge.

From the other side of the door he heard footsteps rushing back and Nish calling out.

“Bart! Bart!” He screamed. His fists beat mercilessly against the metallic door. “Open the door! What the fuck is wrong with you!” Thuds from his body weight being thrown against the divider reverberated along the building.

Bart tried on the other side to open the door. Panic and confusion over took him. His shoulders, pulling hard, nearly dislocated from the force.

“I’m trying! I’m trying!” Bart screamed. “It’s locked! It won’t move!”

“Bart, open this goddamn door right now! It’s not...” Nish trailed off. The pounding stopped for a moment.

“Nish?” Bart asked through the silence. “Nish!”

Then, from the other side of the door, Bart heard a scream unlike anything he’s heard in his entire life. It reminded him of the time his family dog got hit by a car and survived, but so much worse and filled with fear. It sounded like Nish’s vocal chords had been torn to shreds and his chest ripped open. The death scream lasted for only a few seconds, then all fell silent.

“Oh shit. Oh Shit.” Bart backed away from the door. His eyes remained locked on the handle. He stumbled backwards into the fence and it jostled him enough to realize what he had to do. Run.

He took off in a full sprint along the fence, upright, not caring if anyone saw him. At the house’s backyard that they parked in front of, he scaled the fence, sprinted through the yard and came out on the street. The pinto sat in the street underneath a light.

Unlocked, he dove into the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut. Then reality washed over him. Nish had the car keys. Frantic, Bart searched the glove compartment and center

counsel for a possible spare. A map of the city, breath mints, and cigarette matches fell to the floor, but no sign of a spare key. Bart gripped the steering wheel with both hands and in a fit of rage shook the car with all his might. At that same moment, from the end of the street, a pair of headlights turned the corner and slowly approached.

“Thank christ,” Nish whispered to himself, climbing out of the pinto’s front seat.

He moved toward the headlights, arms waiving in the air, praying for the car to be a police cruiser.

“Hey!” He called, body drained of energy, “Help. Please.” He continued forward, as did the headlights, until a stretch of twenty feet separated them. The car stopped.

“Did you hear me? I need help. My friends are in the school over there. I think someone or something abducted them.”

As soon as the last syllable fell from Bart’s mouth, with his head turned and hand pointing towards the school through the backyards, the driver of the car slammed on the accelerator. The tires screeched. Bart’s head darted back towards the headlights and saw them rapidly approaching.

“Whoa! Whoa! Stop!” Was all he could get out before the front end of the car struck him in the knees, sent him flying up over the hood of the car and landing head first on the pavement behind. The car slammed on its breaks. It’s body, a rusted out Cutlass, idled beneath the street lamp. The door swung open. A black work boot, worn down from years of use, stepped out, and in a syncopated rhythm with the keys that hung on the driver’s hip, walked toward’s the body that lay in the middle of the road.

The driver looked down, long black hair caked in grease covered his face like a dog cone as he focused on the teenager's cracked skull and the pool of blood that began to form around his head. The body twitched. The spasms, short lived, stopped. The driver reached down, worked his arms around the waist of the teenager and in one fluid motion, heaved him up onto his shoulder to walk him back to the Cutlass. He balanced the teenager on one shoulder and searched for the key to the trunk with the other hand, popped it, and dropped in his prey.

### **PART THREE**

Inside JD's apartment, marijuana smoke hung like a rain cloud ripe with moisture. The two friends sat in silence, stoned and freaked out.

"So," Nathan cleared his throat, "Did they end up winning the homecoming game?"

JD sneered, and held up his middle finger towards his friend.

"Seriously? That's all you can say after that performance? It was scary as shit, and you come back asking about the homecoming game?"

Nathan busied himself by crumbling more herb and pinching it into the bowl, avoiding eye contact with JD and trying to keep his hands from shaking. He knew, deep down, that the story frightened him, but pride refused him to show his friend his true emotion.

"I mean, it wasn't *not* scary. There were parts I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up, but..." He pushed the flower into the bowl with his thumb, held the pipe to his mouth, and tried to ignite a flame with the Bic lighter.

"...But what?" JD asked, watching his friend touch the flame to the marijuana after fruitless attempts.

“Some parts,” He blew out more smoke, “Some parts just seemed made up.”

“Like what?”

“Like the janitor. If he did it, and everyone knows he did it, then why was he never charged? Or even arrested?”

“No one could find him.”

“A crippled imbecile who smells like rotten flesh doesn’t seem like the most elusive man in the world. Sorry.”

Nathan took another drag from the pipe and handed it across the coffee table to JD.

“...and wasn’t that the school with the asbestos outbreak? I bet that’s why they closed it down for real.”

“Nah, those students were found murdered in there, it’s public record. Plus after that more weird shit started to happen. The principal drove drunk one night with a hooker in his car and both got decapitated when he slammed clean into semi-truck. One of the other teachers embezzled money from the PTA and then hung herself in county lock up before her trial date. A bunch of students from that senior class either died or got arrested at college. Just weird shit, like the school is haunted. Oh c’mon.”

JD rolled his eyes as he watched Nathan, legs sprawled open, miming a self-satisfactory sex act as he listened about the fates of the other faculty members.

“Asbestos fucks with the head. My uncle had it. He nearly went crazy.” Nathan explained.

“Well, I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Let’s go check out the school.”

“Now?”

“Yes. The games over. It’s Friday night. There’s no reason not to. That is unless you are afraid of asbestos rotting your brain and turning you into a sex crazed serial killer.”

Nathan could feel the up tick in his heart rate. He wished his friend never offered the idea, but he knew the only thing worse than going to the school would be to chicken out. He swallowed in an attempt to hide his nerves.

“Fuck it. Let’s go.” His voice barely shook.

Barker High School, a yellow bricked building that faded to a sickly shade over the years, sat resolutely away from the road. Grass, overgrown and rife with weeds, climbed the building walls as high as nature allowed, almost reaching the windows covered with graffiti filled plywood. Critters made their homes in the front yard, scurrying through the unbothered weeds.

JD and Nathan stood at the end of the walk way that lead to the front door. Neither one admitted it, but each swore the temperature dropped at least ten degrees once they came within the vicinity of the school. Under the full moon, they examined the building.

“Scary as shit isn’t it.” JD, wide eyed, said softly.

“Ah, I mean it just looks old.” Nathan masked his insecurity.

“C’mon. You don’t feel that? The spirits around this place? Jesus. I’m getting freaked out just standing here.”

“That’s cuz you’re a pussy.”

“Oh yeah?” JD could not help but smirk at his friend’s machismo.

“And what are you?”

“I’m not a pussy.”

“Prove it.”

“How?”

“Go into the school. Walk around inside there. I bet you’ll be able to find the blood stains from the football players.”

Nathan shrugged. He knew any movement threatened to give away his true feelings. He kept everything close to the chest.

“It’s probably locked. Otherwise I would.”

“Let’s find out. If we can find an entry way you’ll have to go in. For five minutes.”

They tried the front door. Locked. They walked around the side of the school, pulling at the plywood covered windows, but each one seemed more secure than the last. The garage in the back, where the lawn equipment sat, had a pad lock. Nathan made a joke that they should have brought bolt cutters, and JD almost went back to his apartment to get his, but then they found an entry. The side door, that lead from the cafeteria out into the parking lot popped open as soon as Nathan touched the handle, suspiciously easy.

“Shit.” They said in unison.

Nathan looked back at his friend. His face ran white, and a sense of terror that he could not hide gripped his body. JD felt similar.

“Five minutes you said?” JD asked.

“You don’t have to go in. I was just fucking with you.”

“No. It’s cool. Time me. Five minutes and I’ll come out.”

Before he could warn his friend against it, or tell them that they should go home and smoke more weed, Nathan disappeared into the darkness of the school. The door shut behind him. Silence fell. JD took out his phone, flipped to the timer and hit 'start'. Green numbers began to trickle across the screen, counting up to sixty before logging it as a completed minute. His eyes never left the screen. His grip around the phone tightened. The screen flashed four minutes and fifty-seconds, and he moved towards the door. Rapturous knocks echoed through the night as JD pounded his fist against the metal door and screamed, "Five minutes. Five minutes are up!"

He took a step back and listened. Silence.

"Nathan!" He pounded harder. "Five minutes!" His hand reached down and grabbed the handle to open the door and yell into the school, but his heart sank into his stomach when he pulled and the door did not budge.

"What the fuck?" He whispered, confused.

Then, at that same moment, something at the front of the school caught his attention. Lights, red and blue, flashed across the schools front yard. A police cruiser, responding to the schools silent alarm, pulled up.

JD, more worried about his friend than receiving a ticket for trespassing, raced towards the cruiser with his hands in the air. A voice over the megaphone instructed him to stop, turn around and put his hands on his head. JD followed their orders. On his knees in the over grown grass, he felt mice race over his legs, and cold sweat cover his back. Footsteps quickly approached him from behind, and the voice of the officer told him not to move.

"What are you doing here?" The officer asked.

"M-my friend and I came to see if the school is really haunted."

“Where’s your friend?” The officer, a six foot four ex football player scanned the perimeter of the school.

“He’s inside.”

“Jacoby!” The officer called out to his partner, “Theres another one in the school.”

A second officer emerged from the cruiser.

“How’d he get in?”

“There’s a door on the right side of the building. Over there-“ JD pointed with his hand.

“Keep your hands on your head!” The first officer screamed.

“Sorry. Sorry.” JD shut his eyes tight, afraid, trying to stop the tears from coming.

“Jacoby, go check out that door and see if you can locate the other trespasser. I’ll take him to the cruiser and get his information.”

The second officer followed the command of his superior, while the first officer ordered JD to his feet, and he told him that he would not be putting him in cuffs because if he tried to run he would shoot him with his taser. JD obliged.

Fifteen minutes passed before the second officer came back to the cruiser. Alone.

“Any luck?” The first officer asked. Jacoby shook his head.

“I went round to every door and window, all locked, then I tried the side door for a second time and it was opened. I went in, inspected everything, but couldn’t find the second kid. Honestly, I think he’s fucking with us.”

Both officers, like parents scolding a child they caught in a lie, stared at Jd who sat in the back seat with his legs hanging out of the open car door.

“I swear my friend Nathan is in there. I *saw* him go in. Right through that side door.”

“Are you sure? Because I did detect a strong marijuana odor coming from you as soon as I approached.”

“Ok, we smoked, it’s legal now, but I’m telling you he is in there.” Frustration and fright turned into panic that seemed all too real.

The first officer stared at Jacoby for an answer.

“I went in and looked around the whole first floor. The place is covered in dust. When I started to walk back out, that’s when it hit me. My footprints were the only ones in the school. No one entered that building in the last forty years.”

The first officer closed his eyes and took a deep breathe in through his nose, convinced that JD lied to them the entire time.

“I was feeling generous tonight, but you’re going to fuck with us and jerk us around, I’ll happily return the favor. Watch your legs.”

He slammed the car door shut and walked around to the driver’s side door, telling Jacoby that they’d book JD for trespassing. The car kept its lights on and pulled away from Barker High School as JD turned and looked through the back windshield screaming out for Nathan.