

CHAPTER 9

last third

AMID A CADRE OF SOCIAL MISFITS, Jeremy and Big Mac sat silently in the school cafeteria. The smell of ammonia and floor wax signaled that the day was over even for the school janitor. Not, however, for the unruly.

Clare had kept her word and called Principal Young, but as happened many times before, both were found equally guilty and sentenced to a week's worth of detention. Knowing their history, Principal Young interviewed both and warned of serious consequences if this happened again.

At noon the cafeteria served soggy, tasteless pizza and now at day's end, a slice of imprisonment. All detainees, as the gym teacher Mr. Turner called them, had to serve the required two hours of detention in complete silence, or their sentence would be extended at his discretion. Far more torturous than the enforced silence were the lectures. Not that Turner wanted to be here any more than they did, but it was his week in the "lunchbox," as the teachers called it.

"School detention is a gateway to future incarceration," he told his captive audience. "This place is a reflection of your future."

"You mean our future is in the food business, Warden Turner?"

Big Mac yelled, to the other misfits' laughter.

"Not funny, James Patrick McDonough," Turner said.

Jeremy looked out the window, his eyes following a small plane crossing the setting sun. Stearman. That crazy old man is chasing the sun over the next ridge. *Take me away from this madness, you old goat.*

"I've been at this long enough to know that one third of your classmates will go to the best colleges, become well-respected and highly paid professionals and pillars of society," Turner intoned. "The second third will become government employees, teachers, nurses, construction workers, businessmen or women and live a comfortable and/or prosperous life. Trouble will be the only accomplishment of the last third, and they will be subject to the rules of the first two thirds."

"Sounds like a caste system to me," a misfit said.

"A caste system that you create for yourself, not one that you're born into. So from which third do you aspire to?"

"Hey Jeremy, aren't you in the last third?" Big Mac asked. "A bastard zebra from a welfare mom living in a basement apartment?"

"Enough!" Turner roared. "That's another day of detention, McDonough!"

Again the misfits laughed as Jeremy continued to look out the window. Stearman had disappeared over the horizon. The well of anger sat heavy in his gut like the processed lunch meat he'd eaten a few hours before in the same seat. No longer could he hold onto his sense of indignation and anger. He didn't move, he didn't let it show. Because he, too, was of the animal kingdom and could lie in wait as well. *Not my mother. Me, fine, but not her. They don't believe me or her because of who we are. We're not one of them. She tried. I tried.* Jeremy was well past the dread of punishment. He was the loser in a fixed game of Monopoly. Their rules, their way, and the game never ended.

Principal Young had a PhD in philosophy, but philosophical discourse was not part of the job description. Being a principal was

more like being a boxing referee and police detective. He had the skills of neither. His PhD had failed to teach him that violence and deception are not the sole domain of the adult. Children can lie as well as or better than adults. They can be as violent and as cruel.

When students got in trouble, Principal Young spoke to them in a firm but compassionate way. His mistake was espousing Kant, not realizing that Machiavelli ruled the day. Before he had interviewed students who witnessed the beating, Big Mac had already gotten to them. Their story line was consistent but false, orchestrated like a symphony. Mac, the conductor, even claimed he was the victim. He would have gotten away scot-free but for Jeremy's bruised face. Both pugilists, as Principal Young saw fit, had to serve time.

No more. No more. I'm done, Jeremy decided, preparing for his final act as a student at James Monroe Middle School. He picked up his hard-covered math textbook, thick as a ream of paper and as hard as a brick.

When the laughter settled and the room quieted, Jeremy rose from his chair with his math book firmly in hand and calmly walked to Big Mac's desk. Mac looked up from his iPhone to see Jeremy standing over him. Their eyes met. Mac saw the rage and then a flash of light. The violent collision of the textbook against Big Mac's face made a loud crack like a tree snapping in the wind. His nose broke in three places, the force of the blow creating a whiplash, the momentum smashing his face against the desk. Blood flew in all directions as did his teeth, one spinning to Turner's foot nearly fifteen feet away.

Big Mac was a tough kid, but this time the laws of bullying were against him. As Mac had told his lemmings, "Always get the first and last shot." But on this day he would have neither. Jeremy landed the second blow clean against Mac's left temple, rupturing his eardrum and destroying the inner workings of his left ear. Membranes separated from ear, teeth from gum, bone from skin, and blood from body.

Mac crumpled to the floor with a thud and a whimper. Thick red blood spread across the linoleum tile.

Jeremy jumped on top of him and, with the skill of a farmer using a pickax to break up the earth, pummeled his face to a bloody pulp. “Last third! Last third!” Jeremy screamed as Turner and some of the other misfits tried to pull him away. “This bastard child is last third!”