

# The Life and Deaths of Crispin Lacey



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**Dedication:** My big brother, Michael Christopher Bretana. You were and still are one of the brightest stars in my entire world and you had the common sense

that doesn't normally go with genius. I miss you every day. You were taken way too soon from us and I'll always regret that I didn't get to say goodbye. I know I'll see your cheesy grin again.

## Reincarnation: Somerset Maugham

*"Has it occurred to you that transmigration is at once an explanation and a justification of the evil of the world? If the evils we suffer are the result of sins committed in our past lives, we can bear them with resignation and hope that if in this one we strive toward virtue our future lives will be less afflicted."*

## Chapter 1

2016

Mom looked stressed and I was sure I knew why. The rent on the dump was due and she hadn't made near enough to pay the landlord. Although I was only ten, I knew that she could have paid the difference in other ways, but she hadn't yet sunk that low.

We lived in a small two-room trailer parked out back behind the landlord's business. He sold junk cars, scrap metal and whatever he could pick up and resell for a profit. From the fancy car he drove, I guessed he must have made some money. He always had a big wad of cash in the pocket of his ratty old jeans. I tried to stay out of his way, there were times when he looked at me as if I were candy.

The trailer had been one of those nice ones pulled behind a pickup truck but had been sitting there for the last twenty years. It was heated by a small furnace run off a twenty-pound gas bottle and it was my job to carry it to the convenience store and exchange it for a new one. Cost about twelve bucks and we had to fill it twice a month in the summer, more often in the winter. I usually made enough picking up cans for the most part and the rest I found scrounging in the back seats of junk cars. People lost all kinds of things in the creases of the seats. Once I found a diamond engagement ring – I pawned it for a lousy twenty bucks and saw it later with a price tag on it for \$400.00.

Mom was pretty. It wasn't just me saying that, I heard other people say it, too. She was tiny, blonde with huge blue-green eyes, dimples and curved just like those Barbie dolls. Dudes were always hitting on her and it pissed me off. But then, I was only a kid and couldn't do anything about it. She'd told me that her people had come

from northern Italy and that was why she was blonde and not dark like most Italians. There was Swiss in her background, too.

We lived now in rural Tennessee, in the Hollows. I ran wild through the woods and knew every trail, deer hide and copse for miles around the trailer. We were poor, but I didn't know it until we had left my father. He was tall, dark-haired and eyed, with a quick temper that flashed most on Mom. She said he was Creole, from Louisiana and that was why he was so quick to jump on either of us. I had lived there until I was five and didn't remember much of it, just the swamps he had taken me through to teach me about his childhood.

One day we just up and left, but she wouldn't tell me why. But it was much harder for the both of us after he was gone. Food was scarce, and I often walked to school with sneakers where the sole flapped and wearing a coat that was missing buttons, or the pockets had been torn off. I was always hungry until Mom took me out into the woods and showed me how to pick out the bounty that nature provided. I became quite the hunter, even made money selling the hides. What I didn't know myself, I learned from reading at the library. It was one of the few places that I could hang out and not be chased, yelled at, belittled, or attacked. I loved the quiet stacks in the cool dim reaches of the old building. The ceilings were ten feet over my head and decorated with ornate plaster of Paris cornices and bric-a-brac. A true Victorian masterpiece. I only had to walk five miles into town to get to it or wait and hitch a ride with someone I trusted going that way.

Mom stood at the door of the trailer, so worn that I could see through the metal. Luckily, it didn't get cold enough that hanging a blanket on the jamb during cold spells didn't work. Her face was pale, paler than normal and she clutched the door jamb with white-knuckled fingers.

"Mom?" I asked, my heart pounding in my throat. "What's the matter?" I looked down the thin path that led to the front of the junk yard.

"We have to leave," she said abruptly. "It's not safe here for you."

"Did he come for the rent? I'll have the rest for you in a few days," I said. "I found some silver in an old car back under the dead trees. Sterling. I can pawn it, but I have to go to Taylorsville instead of Greentree."

"Why?"

"The pawnbroker told me he can't take any more stuff unless I can prove it belongs to me," I shrugged.

"No, baby. That's not why we need to leave."

"Is it Dad? Is he coming here? How did he find us?" I was panicking. The last time my father had been with us was the reason we had left town and a nice apartment for the rundown shithole we were in now. He beat mom and me, but the

worst part was that he drank and when he had too much, he tried to pimp out both of us. The last time, I had broken a bottle over his head and knocked him into tomorrow. He'd thought he'd fallen into the corner of the staircase, or so he told the Sheriff Department when he reported us missing. We'd left on the bus that night and hitched until our money ran out, stopping in the tiny hamlet of Taylorsville where she'd found a job as a cleaning lady for the local motel on the highway.

Its one advantage was that it paid cash and she could walk to it through the back of the junkyard, a mile of easy walking and no one to hassle her once she made it past old scroungy Mr. Calibrisi. I hated the way he looked at her when he thought no one was looking but it was the way he stared at me that gave me the biggest creeps. I might be only ten-years-old, but I *knew* what he wanted. To Mom's credit, she never left me alone with him. If she thought he was going to just drop in, she brought me with her to the motel and I helped her clean. I didn't take so much as a roll of toilet paper or one of those small bars of soap. I wouldn't risk getting mom fired for stealing, not when we needed it so much. Lots of times, the people who stayed there would give me a couple of bucks to help carry their luggage or keep an eye out for the cops, a certain car or husband if the woman was cheating. I learned more about the nature of humans from hanging around the no-tell-motel than I ever learned in school.

School. I went every chance I had. I loved learning and read anything I could get my hands on. I was a Prince in a mystical land, a Pirate on the Seven Seas, a Beast Master in the far future where animals communicated with man through ESP. Sometimes, my dreams were more real than the life I was living, and I had to be careful not to confuse the two.

I'd done that in class one day and been tormented by the class bully for days until he found a new target to harass. I was fast, able to run from him and had a wild creature's awareness of the danger always around, so it was hard to sneak up on me. Unless I had my nose buried in a book and Shelly Manning had caught me in the bleachers reading *The Lord of the Rings* one evening when I thought the school grounds had been deserted. He was there necking with LaShere Duchenne, one of the girls who'd found it easier to give in than fight. She'd run when he knocked the book from my hand, picked it up and swatted me with it. I'd fallen over backward and didn't remember anything after that. I'd woken up on the ground with the pages of the book ripped and thrown over me, butt naked and with blood covering my face. I'd gone into the school bathroom through an opened window, cleaned up to find a huge knot on my head crusted with blood that had run down into my hair. Pieces of bloody paper were stuck to me and when I stared at the image in the mirror, I saw a wavering, pale and shocked kid with huge eyes. I was afraid to look anywhere else or examine the reason why I was bare-ass naked.

I found clothes in one of the locker rooms, left behind by some careless jock who didn't bring them home, so his Mom could wash them. They stunk of sweat and

BO, but it was better than slinking home naked. I had massive headaches for months after that, some so bad that Mom took me to the Emergency room where the doctor did X-rays and an MRI. I knew what that was and even understood him when he talked about cranial fractures, brain trauma and cerebral pressure. He wanted to keep me overnight, but Mom said no, we had no insurance and she was too afraid to apply for State Aid, afraid that my Dad would find us that way. He had the power to do that, he was a Sheriff Deputy in the town we had left in the dead of night. His buddies had looked out for him, covered for him on other occasions when he'd hit us. Even the Sheriff had looked the other way several times when Mom or I had shown up with bruises and cuts.

I took after mom. Small, delicate bones and with huge flame-blue eyes in a face that was too pretty. Mom said I looked like a Botticelli model if he had painted boys. I looked that up in the library and thought she had been describing herself, she looked like one of those angels and cherubs, not me. I hoped that the one thing I'd get from my Dad was his height. He stood six-feet three inches with the build of a swimmer. Wide shoulders, narrow hips, and long legs. Curly black hair and snapping deep brown eyes. Women thought he was handsome, and I saw that he never had any problems catching any girl's eyes. He flirted with anything he called a split-tail. A term mom had explained was not a *polite* way to describe females of any kind.

"Why do we have to go, Mom?" I asked again, my stomach in knots.

"They let me go at the motel today," she said, and her voice trembled. "I need the rent money to get us out of here. If I don't pay Mr. Calibrisi, he'll want me to pay for it some other way or he'll kick us out."

"What other way? Sleep with him?" I demanded. "I won't let him touch you."

"Not me, Cris. You. He wants *you*." Her face twisted in horror. "Has he ever —"

"*NO!* I've never let him get me alone. I'd kill him first."

She cupped my face. "You are my beautiful Botticelli angel, Cris. I'd die before I let anything happen to you. Mrs. Creighton is going to Gatlinburg. She said she'd take both of us with her. We must meet her at the Circle K on RD. 28. In an hour. I've already packed our things. Can you carry a backpack?"

I nodded. There wasn't much in the old trailer that I wanted to keep, even most of my books were borrowed from the library and I had just taken the last batch back. Most of my clothes would fit in a small backpack and I had no toys worth dragging along. All my most precious items were stored in my head. I'd always known this day might come, but I had assumed that my Dad would be the reason we'd need to leave.

She tucked my coat around me, slipped her hand in my pocket and gave me a kiss on the forehead. "I gave you a hundred dollars, Cris. It's emergency money. In

case something happens. And there's a phone number and address in there for your grandfather. In case something happens to me."

"Nothing's going to happen to you, Mom," I said in panic. "Like what? Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No, but sometimes, things happen that we have no control over, Cris. Just remember, he's a last resort. Don't call him unless you have nowhere else to turn, okay?"

"Okay." I went into my room, a tiny box closed off from the rest of the trailer by a sliding curtain. The furthest room from the heat, there was often ice on the thin windows, but I was always warm snuggled under an old down-filled quilt. My closet was empty, the drawers under the bunk bed cleaned out. Mom had neatly folded and packed my backpack, leaving almost nothing behind. Except for my .22 rifle. That had been my dad's and I had stolen it when mom and I had split. I knew that I couldn't take it with us and truthfully, it was so worn out and old that it wasn't worth much. I left it for the landlord. He could pawn it for ten bucks. I gave the place one last look around.

When I went into the space that she called her bedroom which was nothing more than the couch pulled out flat and served as both couch, dining room chair and bed, she had all her meager possessions in a small, ratty suitcase that had wheels and a long pull-out handle. It would be too awkward to use in the grass of the field but would roll easily once we hit the paved road.

She held the door open for me and I slid out, keeping a wary eye for Mr. Calibrisi. Mom told me that he wasn't there, he had made a run out to a local auction to pick up a flatbed of scrap metal, old copper wires, aluminum awnings and other items that brought good money.

We walked through the old grass and beggar's lice. The tiny prongs of the seed heads poked me through my thin pants and made me stop to dig them out. I had sensitive skin that itched and turned red with the slightest irritant, just like hers. She said we had peaches and cream complexions, a true Botticelli except for the red hair. Sometimes, in the sun, hers glowed almost the color of that last flash before the sun went down. Mine was nowhere near blonde, nor red but a mix of blonde, red and brown so that it looked as if it had been frosted by a drunk and crazy hair stylist. Usually, it was a mess, sticking up and full of grass, leaves and twigs from my time spent in the woods.

This morning, it was flattened down with water and tucked under my watch cap, so I could hide what was a distinctive look if Mr. Calibrisi was looking for us.

Mrs. Creighton was waiting at the corner of County Rd. 28 where the railroad crossed the tarmac right behind the convenience store. She'd obviously gassed up and had bought snacks and soda water, a six-pack of Diet Pepsi and Dr. Pepper in

glass bottles. She handed one of those to me and I took it gratefully. Soda was a treat that I didn't get often even though I usually reserved some of my return change for a fresh one.

"Been waiting long, Mrs. Creighton?" Mom asked breathlessly. She looked tired, even more so than usual, as if the walk had exhausted her.

"No, dear. I saw Calibrisi at the Rohmer auction. He was heading out with a great big flatbed loaded with scrap."

"He'll be gone all day, then? If he has to drive to the scales in Portia. I heard the ones in town are closed due to someone fiddled with the Weights and Measures stamps. State has to come out and re-license them," mom sighed.

"You running to or from?" the old lady asked.

Mom laughed shakily. "We're going to see my father in upstate New York. He's never met Cris and I thought it high time the two got to know each other."

"Uh huh," the old lady nodded. "Just want to mention that Eula-Mae told me that she heard there's a good-looking Deputy looking for runaways. Made it as far as the Sheriff's Office in Diamond. They sent out a flier that looks kinda like you and the boy."

"Really?" Mom was silent and then made sure my seat-belt was latched. She smiled at me. "Be a long ride, honey. You tell me when you have to pee or anything, okay?"

"Mom," I said in embarrassment. Mrs. Creighton snickered and put the car in gear. We drove off and I resisted the urge to stare out the back window of her Subaru at the receding town limits.

## Chapter 2

2016

Gatlinburg was a four-hour drive and Mrs. Creighton managed it in one shot without having to stop for the bathroom or for gas. She chattered non-stop and mom made appropriate replies at the correct times, but I tuned her out and daydreamed. I went over and over the conversation with mom, wondering why we had left this time and at such short notice. I wondered where we would go after the old lady reached her destination and whether we were going on. Whether we had someplace to go after Gatlinburg.

I pulled at Mom's sleeve and whispered into her ear. She answered me with a smile. "Someone's meeting us at the bus Depot, Cris. A friend of mine from school."

I stared at her but said nothing. All Mom's friends were back in the small town near Pine Bayeux, where my father was a Deputy Sheriff. She hadn't made any friends in Taylorsville, just acquaintances. I rubbed at my forehead, a serious headache was starting to pound at my head.

"Head hurt?" she asked sympathetically. She dug through her purse for the bottle of extra strength Tylenol and pulled out a Vicodin. We still had a few left from the time I'd been to the ER, it was the only drug that could touch the pain. Knocked me out, though and gave me wicked dreams. Nightmares. I didn't wake up until Mrs. Creighton pulled into the hotel on the outskirts of the city and went in to confirm her reservation. She left Mom and me in the car and that's when Mom woke me with a shove and a pinch. I was normally not hard to wake, but the drug had really hit me hard. Even when I opened my eyes and stared blearily at her, I was sort of still stuck in my dreams. Mrs. Creighton came out and told us we had to make our own way as she was heading into her room for the weekend. She told us that the bus station was just a few blocks down the street, and she gave mom cash for the tickets. Mom tried to give it back, but Mrs. Creighton was insistent.

"I've seen how that leech stares at y'all," she mumbled. "I wouldn't leave a dog in his care. How you stayed for the last year just boggles my mind. Take it, Violet. If not for yourself, for the boy."

Mom nodded and helped push me out of the big old Subaru, grabbing our suitcase and backpacks. We walked down the street and Mrs. Creighton watched us until we were out of sight before she turned and went into the hotel. I never did find out why she'd driven all that way just to rent a room in the big city. I didn't think she was there for sex like some of the younger ladies I met at Mom's motel, but I was often surprised by what some people thought was attractive. Some of the men were downright ugly and I couldn't see why anyone would sleep with them. Even for money.

It took us a long time to walk but it wasn't because of Mom. More my fault, I was so lopy that I could barely put one foot in front of the other. Finally, she picked me up in her arms and carried me. She could do that because I was so small. Sometimes, the people who didn't know me thought I was only six or seven, not ten. I hated it, wished that I had grown twenty inches overnight.

The bus depot wasn't in the best part of town. They never were. They were almost always in the warehouse district, near the railroads where most folks didn't like to live because of the noise. I thought the sound of trains were cool, especially the mournful throb of the whistle and the clanking of the wheels on the rails.

The depot was in an old train station, one of those long narrow buildings painted green and white. The image of a faded greyhound was still painted on the front wall, but the name of the lines was something else. Coach-ways or Trans-America. We walked inside a glass-fronted door and a bell jingled on the handle.



There were old wooden pews in the lobby and not a single person waiting for the next bus.

Behind one of those booths like at the old movie theater sat a young dude with terrible zits across his whole face. I didn't stare, Mom had taught me not to be rude, but he had a big old black-head I was dying to pop.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said, and I read his name on his shirt front. Dewayne. "How can I help you?"

"Two tickets to Unadilla, New York," Mom said. He punched it into his computer and frowned.

"Oneonta okay? The bus don't go to Unadilla."

"That'll be fine," she said. He touched more keys, his fingers flashing faster than I could watch. He was a speedy typist.

"Bus leaves at nine tonight and will get in about 4 am on Thursday, ma'am. Two tickets will be \$297.32 for the both of you. Unless the kid's under ten. They ride free."

"Cris is seven," she said, and I nodded, holding up seven fingers. I resisted the urge to baby talk and play dumb. Although I enjoyed playing the fool, I didn't want to piss off mom.

She paid for the tickets with our rent money, it came to \$125.00 one-way. He tried to talk her into a round trip ticket because it was cheaper that way, but she said she had no intention of returning to either Gatlinburg or anywhere else in the South.

We sat in the lobby and watched the clock drag, we had nearly eight hours to wait. My stomach grumbled, and Mom smiled, asking Dewayne if there was someplace close by where we could eat cheaply.

"The MacDonald's is just a few blocks down the street, but I wouldn't walk there, ma'am. It's not a nice neighborhood around here and both you and the kid are...well, I just wouldn't go out alone. I could order a pizza for you; have it delivered and share the cost with you and the boy?"

My mother nodded, and I nearly jumped up and down in glee. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a real pizza. Mostly, we made do with the kind on English muffins or French bread. He ordered a pepperoni and an everything, said it would be delivered in twenty minutes which I spent glued to the front door. When I saw the truck pull up with the yellow sign on the top, I squealed in delight, opening the door so the driver didn't have to tilt the box. It came to \$9.00 for both and I was digging into the box before Mom had paid the driver. Dewayne gave him a \$5 tip but

from the look he gave my mother, he might have waived the whole cost. He was drooling as he left the lobby and almost fell over the curb as he got back into the car.

Dewayne laughed. I shoved nearly the whole tip of the huge slice in my mouth and said, “guys always act like that around mom. Crazy.”

“Hey, little dude. Take small bites so you don’t choke.”

I snorted cheese and veggies out my mouth and caught the good stuff before it could hit the floor. Mom slapped me on the arm and told me to behave, show some manners, that she hadn’t raised a slob or a heathen. She gave me two bucks to get a cold Pepsi out of the vending machine and a Dr. Pepper for me. Dewayne had a Mountain Dew, he opened the machine with a key and gave me back Mom’s change.

“Thanks,” I said and swallowed. We ate in companionable silence and when we were finished, there wasn’t a slice left nor a crust. I ate the ones that they left. Burped and said excuse me. He pointed to the bathrooms and said I needed to wash my face. I looked at Mom and she nodded, telling me that it was okay, no one else was there with us and she would be nearby if I needed her.

I went in, washed the sauce and cheese off my face and hands and then did my other business, making sure that I washed my hands again. We spent the remaining time playing card games and telling ghost stories. Before I knew it, I had fallen asleep on mom’s shoulder and woke only as she carried me into the waiting bus. It was huge, smelled bad as it idled and filled with smelly old people and farmers in overalls. I remember complaining as she sat down and set me on the seat next to her but after that, I went back to sleep and didn’t wake until we were in Maryland.

## Chapter 3

2016

I was so incredibly bored. An active child, being forced to sit for two days on a moving bus was torture. Mom tried to make it better by playing games and reading to me, but my head hurt. I was cranky, weepy, and felt really bad. Almost as if I was getting car sick.

At the next lay-over where they changed drivers and buses, she bought Pepto-Bismol from the little shop in the terminal. It came in plastic wrap, little pink circles. She gave me four, but I didn’t want anything in my belly. It felt like a volcano ready to erupt, the Mt. Vesuvius of all stomach aches. I knew better than to play the brat, would never have dreamed of swatting the pink pellets out of her hand but that’s exactly what I did. I watched her with round eyes and my mouth hanging open as the sissy pink lozenges sailed across the aisle and hit another passenger on the

head. An old lady with curly blue hair like the fur on Mrs. Lang's poodle, she swatted at it as if the pills were flies buzzing around her head. Mom jumped up and apologized as she picked the stuff out of the poodle curls.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "My son isn't usually like this. He isn't feeling well. He's never cranky. Cris, apologize to the lady."

I grit my teeth as a wave of yucky stuff rose to the back of my throat. "Sorry, ma'am. *Mom*—"

She recognized the look on my face but couldn't react fast enough as I spewed copious amounts of Dr. Pepper and Subway sandwich onto the bus's floor. The sour smell permeated the entire bus and overwhelmed the feeble air-conditioning. It drew moans of complaints from the other riders and the driver swallowed as if the smell was going to make him hurl, too.

Mom asked the driver if he could stop. He said no, not on the Interstate but there was a rest stop coming up in the next forty miles. He'd planned to stop there for fuel, toilet breaks and lunch. If I could wait until then, he'd give us an extra ten minutes before he had to leave.

He apologized and said that the company ran the bus schedules so close that to delay risked losing connections down the road. People would miss their next bus change which would screw up everything from bus transfers to connecting flights.

She nodded and set me on the seat closest to the toilet, way in the back of the bus. Which made the nausea worse, but I was close enough to run for the toilet when I felt it coming up. She went forward and tried to clean up my mess with paper towels and wet-wipes. She'd done it many times before – cleaning up after drunks at the motel.

When she finished, she came back and pulled me onto her lap, tucking my head into her chest. She smelled of cherry blossom and coconut shampoo. I was comforted to my soul.

"I'm sorry, momma," I whispered and closed my eyes.

"I know, baby boy. It's not your fault. You can't help getting car sick."

The blue-haired lady came back to us, holding onto the backs of the seats for balance as the bus swayed and rocked on the highway. I thought she was coming to use the toilets but as she approached us, she held out her hand. In it was a small, plastic wrapped square—sort of like a Band-aid yet it wasn't. It had something written on it—DERM.

"Dramamine," she told us. "A patch. I always use them when I'm traveling. I get car sick, too," she admitted. "They work. Might make him sleepy; he's six, seven?"

"He's ten," Mom said quietly. "Just small for his age. Is it safe for kids his age?"

“Says so on the box. One dose for twelve and under, two for adults.”

“Are they expensive?”

“\$5.95 at the Rite-Aid,” she smiled. Her teeth were very white. “For a package of ten. So, it cost 60 cents for each patch.”

She thrust it out and Mom took it although I suspected that she didn’t believe the old lady about the cost. She peeled the covering off and stuck it on my upper arm. I eyed it suspiciously.

“I don’t feel nothing,” I said, and the old lady laughed.

“You probably won’t for an hour. It takes 15 minutes just to get into your bloodstream.”

“How? I didn’t swallow nothing.”

“The medicine leaches through your skin into your blood. Takes longer than swallowing but it also lasts longer. In about 30 minutes, you’ll start to feel better. Feel sleepy.”

“How come you ain’t sleepy?”

“I’ve taken them so much that I’m used to the medicine. They just make my tummy feel better.”

I eyed her. Dressed in sensible blue short-sleeved shirt, pressed blue jeans and a long, quilted jacket, she looked like somebody’s Grandma. Except for the blue hair. Her socks were white, and her sneakers looked brand new, blue to match her jacket. She was the blue lady.

“Your hair real? Blue like that?” I asked. Mom shushed me.

The lady laughed, her white eyebrows raising to her hairline. “Sometimes, I dye it purple,” she confided in a whisper.

“No!” I goggled at her. I’d seen teens with hair those colors as well as an improbably red and orange but never old ladies in blue or purple.

“It’s called a rinse. Cris, is it?” I nodded. “My name is Penny Weismann. I’m heading to Trenton, NJ to visit my grand-kids. My hair is plain white, not silver or gray, that’s so boring. So, I have the hair salon dye it blue or purple with a colored rinse. It washes out after a few shampoos so if I don’t like it or want to change, I can do it easily enough.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Weismann,” I said. I held out my hand and she shook it.

Mom said, “Violet Smith.” She shook Mrs. Weismann’s hand, too.

“Your son has nice manners, Violet. So many children today have no respect for anything. Especially us older citizens.”

I didn't wonder why Mom hadn't given out our real last name. It was habit; she wanted to leave no trace for my Dad to follow. I knew that he was still actively looking for us, I'd seen posters in towns up and down the coast on my travels to pawn shops.

Mrs. Weismann was right. About 15 minutes later, I started to feel sleepy, so Mom cradled me next to her by the window. She'd cracked it an inch, so the fresh air had helped settle my stomach before I'd taken the patch. She left it open. I fell asleep to the soft murmurings of their voices as both ladies got to know each other. I knew mom would keep the conversation light of facts and subject.

I woke once with drowsy complaint when one of them got up to use the toilet. I was pretty sure that it wasn't Mom because whoever held me didn't smell like her. She smelled more of expensive perfume, skin cream and perfumed soap.

The first inkling we had of disaster was when the rear end of the Trailways slewed around, bouncing off something equally as large as the bus. Tires squealed, and pieces flew up against the windows, cracking some of the glass near me. Brakes shrieked, and the smell of burning metal gagged me. Horns interrupted my dreams and caused my head to throb. Mom's arms tightened around my waist. She was torn from me with a shriek that made my ears hurt.

In slow motion, I saw people go flying out of their seats to smash against the right side of the bus as it flipped onto its side. Windows cracked and shattered in a shower of red and crystal sparkles. People screamed almost as loud as the sound of metal tearing and a 45-foot, ten-ton bullet that was the bus shredded on the concrete grater of the roadway.

I saw and felt the bus land on its side and then the darkness covered everything, closing off the light shining in the windows. Except for the sparks that fizzled above my head where metal contacted other metal. The smell of diesel lay heavily in the air and tendrils of smoke began to curl in lazy tendrils down the aisle. Small flames sparked up near the driver's seat, cheerful and deadly reminders of summer campfires in the woods. I watched the red flowers in fascination as they danced into playful shapes, not realizing the dangers they represented.

I watched in disbelief from my seat, wedged between the jump seat and the restroom door, pinned beneath something so that I could not move as the dark came closer and closer. It was the side of a semi-truck as the bus slid into and under the trailer part. When I stopped thrashing around, I saw spots of black and gray flit across my eyes. I couldn't see anything.

The noise was the first thing I heard. The awful sound of ripping metal, crackling steel, and fracturing aluminum. But that wasn't half as bad as the sound of

human bodies being ripped and cut apart by the undercarriage of the 18-wheeler as we plowed beneath the frame of the trailer. I screamed as someone's head went rolling past me, so much more horrible than the hungry sound of the flames as they began to devour the readily available fuel spread out before it. Clothing, diesel. Human fat. The smell of pork roasting gagged me.

My head whipped back and forth. Striking the wall, the door, and the seat as I was smashed each time the bus rolled and spun. Blood poured through the air, a veritable rainstorm of thick red liquid. Pee and poop smells wafted to me along with the thick, coppery glittering blood as the lights from the trucks hit the wreck.

I tried to call for Mom, but my throat wouldn't open. I couldn't draw a breath to speak or even to gape my mouth to breathe. I looked for her, for the lady with the blue hair but my eyes wouldn't focus and there was something dripping into them, gumming them shut and running into my mouth. I gagged and spat out blood.

It wasn't until the bus stopping spinning and sliding that I could move enough to reach out for the jean-clad legs I saw lying just at the end of my row of seats. I pulled. By the hem of the jeans. Her ankles were thin and delicate with white socks covered in blood splatters and blue sneakers that didn't look so new anymore. They were covered in pieces of...*stuff*. They looked like Ms. Weismann's shoes.

I tugged harder and called her name. She didn't answer. I pulled again and wondered why she was so easy to drag and when I pulled at her knees, I screamed in horror. That's all that was left of her. Cut off just below the waist, the torn top of her jeans empty, except for bone and slimy ropes of twisted things that smelled awful. No blue hair, no arms, no face just two legs up to her hips. I went nuts. Fighting, pushing, shoving, trying to get free so I could look for my mother.

Placing my hands on the restroom door, I pushed back and up. Warmth ran down my chest and there was a sudden, sharp pain in my neck. Like a knife slice where you look at it, not quite sure that you're hurt until the iciness stops and the hot pain begins. I watched with dull apathy as blood spurted all the way across the side of the bus, hitting the one window that hadn't broken.

I started to shiver. I'd never been so cold before. I felt really tired and my head ached. It dropped onto my chest, I couldn't hold it up on my own, it weighed a ton. It weighed more than my whole body. It felt as if there was the weight of the whole darn bus on my neck. I faded in and out, each time I woke, I felt weaker and colder. Nothing looked right. Things looked as if they were stretched, misty, too far away to see clear. Like everything was under water.

Orange, blue, and white lights flashing across the new roof of the bus and drew back the dark. Voices called out stridently and there was movement followed by flashlights bouncing on the walls, the sides, and the floor of the bus. I heard the hiss of fire as it was doused by water. Smelled the sharp tang of chemicals from extinguishers.

I saw with wavering eyesight as a monster loomed out of the brightness, wearing a strange helmet and bulky skins as it inched its way toward me.

“DB, human body parts, dead body times 5, 6, 10. Body parts of three women, one male. DB,” the lead monster said.

“Any survivors? Dispatch says there are twenty-nine adults listed on the passenger manifest, one driver. One passenger traveling with a child under twelve.”

“No sign of survivors but there have been victims ejected through the windows. The driver was found three hundred yards back under an SUV.”

Radios crackled. The footsteps came closer. The flashlight illuminated scenes from my nightmares. There were people crammed up against each other, smashed into and through the windows. Blood and guts were everywhere. I thought I saw a trail of blonde hair and stretched my hand toward it.

“Holy Christ, what a mess,” the paramedic whispered. My eyes knew what he was before my brain had recognized his shape. No monster but a *helper*.

“Uh,” I managed to get past my locked jaws. I tried to call for Mom, but blood filled my mouth, made breathing difficult. There was something lying on top of me, covering me from his view as he searched among the pile of bodies. He passed by me twice as he stepped over Mrs. Weismann, turning around as he shined the flash under the seats. His radio crackled, and he spoke into his shoulder where his mic was strapped to his jacket with the wide night-glow stripes.

“Send for the ME. It’s nothing but DBs and body parts. A butcher shop in here. I smell diesel fuel and some smoke. No fire, I put out a small blaze that had started under the driver’s seat. Cigarette, I think. Man, it’s a mess in here.”

I raised my head and the stream of blood shot out again, hit the glass window and dribbled down, the drops making a noise that he heard over the dead silence. The man turned, and his eyes widened as he ran for the back of the bus, screaming into his radio.

He followed the blood to the corner, lifted off Mom’s suitcase and started shouting again. His hands wrapped around my throat and held it as if he could keep the blood inside. He pushed my chin down.

“Hang on, little guy. Keep your eyes open and on me, okay? Cap’n, I need LIFE FLIGHT here STAT. I have a six, or seven-year-old victim with a severe laceration to the external jugular. He’s bleeding out.” He went on, but I stopped paying attention as he picked me up. My body felt warm, my feet dangled below his arms. Suddenly, I felt like I was drowning in molasses. Sounds echoed in my head and his feet pounded on the floor as he leaped over the seats toward the door. I began to draw away from his face into a long, dark tunnel.

I floated above my body and watched with great curiosity as I was carried out of the wreck straight into an ambulance. There were more ambulances, cop cars, rescue units in one place than I had ever seen. Not even the big 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade had that many Emergency vehicles in one place at the same time.

They cut my clothes off and I lay naked. My belly was swollen as if I had swallowed a watermelon, my eyes were black and blue holes. My face had blood covering so much that you couldn't see the color of my skin. My neck wept blood from a jagged cut across the throat, pieces of glass still embedded in it. So skinny. I looked so skinny and pale, my chest not moving any more.

Two of the men dressed in black like the first man in the bus stuck needles into me, complaining that he could not find a vein. I watched him, a passive observer.

"No pulse. Can hardly find a vein, he has almost no pressure. BP is 40/20. Pupils fixed, dilated. Severe laceration of the external jugular. Pushing fluids and plasma expanders. Bag him. Starting CPR. When's that airbus getting here?"

"ETA three minutes."

"Any other survivors?"

"No. Looks like a Halloween butcher shop inside. Bodies and body parts everywhere."

"You know this kid's name? Were his parents inside?"

"No. I found him in the back wedged against the restroom door. By a pair of woman's legs. Only saw him because his arterial spray hit the window when he lifted his head. I heard it."

"Did he have a pulse?"

"Yeah. He looked at me. You have one now?"

"Thin and thready. Hey, little dude. Can you hear me? Hang in there, we'll get you better, but you have to fight, okay? There's a large hematoma on both the front and posterior skull. Crepitus in his ribs, fracture of the ankle, right tibia and right humerus. Belly is swollen, possible rupture of the liver or spleen. Swelling on L3,4,5. This kid is critical, requesting Life Flight ASAP."

The wind picked up, blowing their suits and brilliant lights spread out on the ground as a helicopter came to land on the median between the north and southbound lanes of the Interstate. State Troopers had closed off both sides and traffic had crawled to a stop. The entire area was lit up like a football stadium during the Super bowl.



I watched as people in gray coveralls ran from the bird and met the ones carrying the stretcher with me on it. I was hooked to many lines and machines which the paramedics carried over my head. I could not find my mother.

When the chopper lifted, I drifted away and followed, bound to the limp body in a way I did not understand.

## Chapter 4

1832

I sat on the big bay and waited for my Dad to finish counting out a small pile of gold coins to pay the shopkeeper. The old man waited with his hand outstretched as if my pa would run off without paying. Our indentured servant was loading 100 lbs. sacks of beans, flour and corn onto the wagon atop the cleverly constructed false bottom that was filled with Federal Reserve gold and notes. He was off to the side where he could keep an eye on me, and I could watch both my pa and him. I heard him curse, he wasn't supposed to say those words around me, but I'd heard them enough to know he said them too much. I giggled and echoed him. Shit-fire and damnation.

I wasn't supposed to know about the secret cache in the wagon but being a curious and nosy eight-year-old, I was into everything, so I watched from my hiding place in the big oak as Pa's helper transferred it from the government coach to his wagon.

"Find anything you want, Crispin?" Pa asked before he finished paying. "Rock candy? Molasses snaps? Sarsaparilla?"

I shook my head but looked longingly at the pocketknife in the display case. Dad saw, of course. He saw everything. The rows of goods laid out on bare planks, barrels loaded with foodstuffs, bolts of cloth laid on sheets of wood, and the sour pickles in a crock that gave off a vinegary smell. He saw the long counter with penny candy and ammunition stacked behind the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper was an older man, bald with sharp gray eyes and wattles, smooth-shaven save for a tiny mustachio and thick wormy lips.

"Got some suckers for your young'un, Cap'n Lacey," he said his eyes searching out the wagon hitched to a matched pair of Missouri mules. Dad had brought them all the way from Washington although they were not branded US Cavalry but had been purchased from the Loomis Brothers out of upstate New York. The Loomis Brothers were well known smugglers and horse thieves.

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