Rabbit Hash

By

Eric Christy

Copyright © 2017 Eric Christy

ISBN 9798395679413

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form, by any means without the prior written consent of the author. This is a work of fiction; and as such, all names, places, events, characters are fictitious or represented in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, or events therein is purely coincidental.

There’s a little bit of Kaylee in all of us.

Chapter 1

The Ohio River flows twenty miles south from Cincinnati to the quiet little town of Rabbit Hash, Kentucky. The early-morning sunrise reflects golden sparkles over each ripple of the mighty river. Near the river’s crook and just down the road from the general store, a small plot of land sprawls up from the banks and opens into a flat clearing bordered by a forest-lined valley. A modest cornfield lies adjacent to a gravel driveway, just nearly out of eyesight of the nineteenth-century farmhouse to which it belongs.

A crow perched atop a majestic oak one Saturday morning and watched the cornfield below. A small red pup tent silently stood on a small strip of grass between the driveway and the patch…resembling an impromptu checkpoint to the farmhouse. A gentle summer breeze blew up from the river and through the dwelling, magically breathing life into an otherwise stagnant old house. Much like all of Rabbit Hash in the summer, the living room was hot, humid, and hazy. The oppressive humidity from the mighty river lent itself to a relaxed way of life for the small town. Nothing big, nor exciting, ever happened in Rabbit Hash, which was OK with its residents; all, but one.

“Kaylee,” yelled a shrill country voice from inside the house, “…lunchtime…come in, ‘Hon.” A blond, middle-aged woman screamed for her daughter while sitting on an old tweed couch with one leg draped over the arm. She sat before an old wooden console TV, watching a cable news channel, and smoked. The smoke from the cigarette rose into the lazy, late-morning air before blowing through the window sheers. The small parts of a rustic statue turned and clanked in the wind, breaking the silence of the living room, fed only by the warm glow and slight murmur of the TV.

From a crow’s-eye view of the small cornfield adjacent to the farmhouse, an ambitious young girl jetted from the tiny pup tent, nearly wobbling and spilling over herself in excitement, as she ran across the lawn into her house to eat lunch. The long curls in her golden hair bounced with each step, while a big toothy smile was matched only by her piercing blue eyes. She was a curious young girl of eight years; at such a young age, she was already showing signs of outgrowing the blasé, daily life of Rabbit Hash, Kentucky.

She appeared in the farmhouse doorway, showing every molar in her mouth. She didn’t say anything but stood silently until her mom invited her to eat.

“Well, what are you waitin’ for, Darlin’?” asked the mother as she rose from the couch and pulled her panties through the bottom of her cut-off jeans. “Let’s eat.”

With that, the young girl—like a puppy learning to walk—excitedly passed in front of the TV through the living room into the kitchen. She climbed onto a stool, fixed her ocean-colored eyes on the television in the other room, and chomped on a small stash of baby carrots.

“So what’s my little adventurer up to today,” inquired the mother. As if hypnotized by the television’s glow and murmur, the little girl didn’t respond to her mother’s inquiry; but rather, she just stared at the TV and blindly chewed up the carrots, like a wood chipper. A news segment about philosophy and existentialism hummed from the old wooden console, capturing the girl’s attention.

“Princess, I asked you a question,” reiterated the mother. Still not responding, the girl picked up a half-sandwich with both little hands and bit into it. She sat motionless, chewing her sandwich and eying the program while not blinking.

 The mother, who was about to intervene with the television by asking another question, was met with the shrill, ungraceful voice of her daughter, who posed the mother a question:

 “What’s the meaning of life, Momma”?

 The mother, cracking a smile in the corner of her mouth, jokingly responded to her daughter’s big ideas: “The meaning of life is to mind your mother and answer her when she asks you a question.”

 With that, the mother walked over to the little girl and kissed her on the forehead after pushing a lock of golden hair from her curious face. The little girl sat, still not blinking, chewed her sandwich, and watched—or maybe not—the glowing TV in the other room. She joyfully swayed her right leg and beat it against the stool, not having a care in the world.

 “Oh, I almost forgot, I boiled some fresh corn for you. I want you to eat a piece,” announced the mother as she hurriedly scuttled across the kitchen and pulled an ear of corn from a pot of water. She brought it over and placed it in front of the girl. She took her eyes off the TV and glanced down at the cob.

 “Thank you, Mommy,” the girl replied while climbing down from the stool. She picked up the plate with the corn on it, grabbed an apple with her other hand, crossed the living room in front of the TV, and left through the front door.

 “Hey, where are you going?” playfully antagonized the mother.

 The girl kept walking, as if focused on something far more significant than a plate of corn and an apple.

 “Kaylee the Adventurer is back on duty,” the mother overheard her daughter saying as she stepped off the porch into the bright summer sun on her way to the pup tent; or, “Kaybase-1,” as she called it.

 “This just in from our newsroom,” a voice broke over the glowing TV. “A manhunt is underway for a serial killer and rapist, who recently escaped from San Quentin State Prison in California. He is considered armed and extremely dangerous. We’ll have more as the story unfolds…now back to our special, *Existentialism in America*.”

 “That’ll be the most excitement I’ll see all day in this town…a breaking news story,” muttered the mother under her smoky breath before getting up, pulling the cut-off shorts down from her crouch, and lifting her firm body from the couch.

A loud crash at the kitchen window suddenly grabbed her attention and pulled her into the other room. She studied the window but noticed no signs of trauma other than a few scuff marks. As she turned, something caught her eye on the outside window ledge through the glass. She glided along the wall until reaching the back entrance. She cracked open the door just wide enough to scan the wall's perimeter and notice a dead bird lying on the ground under the window. She covered her mouth in despair and briefly stepped out; but, quickly jumped back in and locked the screen door. A loud flurry of bird cackles hung over her house, echoing through a faint breeze that blew up from the river and cut through the tree branches.

Kaylee performed surgery on her doll out front under a hazy, late-summer sun. Inside the pup tent, her dog—wearing a surgical mask—was her assistant. He blankly looked at her with loving eyes while gripping a chopstick in his jaws.

“Scalpel,” Kaylee demanded as she stretched her arm to the dog’s snout and peered down at the doll. She breathed through her mask and repeated the words while shaking her hand under the dog’s face: “Scalpel.” She gazed at the doll, rattling her head in frustration and authority. The dog looked bafflingly at her hand and then licked it; thus, dropping the chopstick, or “scalpel,” in the process.

“No, Tobey! You are my assistant, and you give me my scalpel when I ask for it, OK?” she demanded. She pushed his butt back to the ground and pointed him toward the doll on a box.

“Let’s try this again…scalpel,” she directed. The dog just looked inquisitively at her hand, which was stretched under his nose, and was shaking this time.

“Tobey! Scalpel!” she demanded, waving her hand under his face in frustration, not taking her eyes off the doll. The sudden aggravation in her voice must’ve startled Tobey as he lowered his head and ran out of the tent with “scalpel” in his jaws.

“Hey!” she yelled out, swinging her big grin and thick, bubble glasses toward the fleeing dog. “Tobey!” she pleaded.

“Kaylee!” another voice called.

“Mom!” Kaylee exclaimed, all resulting in a cacophony of exclaim in front of the pup tent near the cornfield before the farmhouse.

“Kaylee,” her mom cried out. “Come in, Precious.”

“I can’t, Mommy. Tobey stole my scalpel, and now he’s burying it,” answered the little girl.

“Kaylee, come in, ‘Hon,” the mother reiterated as if she didn’t hear her daughter’s ramblings.

An aerial view of the compound showed a precocious little girl giving up the fight, not only with her dog, but also with her mom. She sprinted into the house, per her mother’s orders, while Tobey buried the chopstick on the cornfield’s edge, near a stool that held the untouched leftovers of Kaylee’s corn and apple.

As day turned into evening, the mighty Ohio River flowed south through the Midwest; past Cincinnati, and past the sleepy little town of Rabbit Hash, Kentucky. All of mankind’s guilt and troubles flowed past the village, as well; thus, nourishing its shores and inhabitants. No one could see what was about to happen: not a precocious young girl, nor her tired mother; and, especially, not the decaying bird carcass behind the house. For, it is now dead.

Chapter 2

The following day, Kaylee sat in the kitchen, eating breakfast and watching the news-network channel from the big console television in the living room. She looked at her toast before chomping on it between glances at the TV. She re-focused her attention on the back of her mother’s head, which was in the foreground of her view into the room. Kaylee was familiar with her mom resembling a couch at the end of the kitchen table, from which the back of a cigarette-smoking head popped up to accommodate the long leg draped over the armrest. Occasionally, she would comment on the news stories, if anything, to break the solemn, quiet tone of the house. Kaylee sat, studying her toast, while the cackling of commercials accompanied the warm glow of the TV.

 “…this just into our newsroom. The hunt for the escaped San Quentin inmate is now underway in Utah.” Kaylee bounced her eyes from the toast to the TV. The back of her mother’s head sat quietly and smoked.

 “…new surveillance video from a hotel outside Salt Lake City reveals the inmate. His trademark handlebar mustache can be seen from this gritty recording.” Kaylee studied the recording while kicking the leg of the wooden highchair. She still demanded to eat breakfast every morning from the solid oak highchair that she sat in as an infant. Even though she was a petite eight-year-old, she was still too gangly and awkward for it. “It is unclear when the footage is from, but we do know it’s recent.”

 “…and now back to our special, *Fate and the Celestial Bodies*,” the voice announced before fading into obscurity. Proclaiming that she was finished with her breakfast, Kaylee jumped off the highchair and landed flatly on her feet.

 “Easy now, Pumpkin,” reverberated from the motionless smoking head on the couch. Paying little attention to her mom or anything else, Kaylee started circling around while mumbling under her breath: “It is Kaylee’s fate to follow the footprints.” She spun in patterns—pretending to be Sherlock Holmes—around in the kitchen, along the back wall, and finally out the back door; in which a brief moment of silence was abruptly ended by a blood-curdling shriek, loud enough to cross the river into Indiana. Her mom jumped off the couch, panicked, and raced to the back door, where she found Kaylee standing over the dead bird, not acting like a world-renowned detective but rather a frightened little girl.

 Later that day, Kaylee stood, facing the ground, at the edge of the small cornfield outside her pup tent. She hovered over a freshly dug hole with her trusty dog assistant by her side. A cigar box, which contained the remnants of the bird, sat on the edge of the hole next to a pile of loose dirt. She closed her eyes and mouthed a prayer—the way adults do—before bending over to place the box in the hole. She pushed a handful of dirt into the depression, gradually covering up the box. She also felt sorrow—the way adults do—knowing that the bird died alone, without its family or friends. A small tear dropped from the child’s face onto the soil of the newly earthed grave, nourishing the dirt with good…instead of evil.

 As Kaylee stood back up and wiped her eyes by sticking a finger under her glasses, she lost her balance and fell backward. Luckily, she grabbed onto the stool that acted as a watchtower outside her tent, but knocked the plate of corn and apple onto the ground. Before Tobey could get to it, Kaylee reached for the corn cob and pulled it close to her little body. She looked perplexed through the dirty glasses as she held the corn to the late-autumn sun and wiped the dust from her specs. It had been eaten by someone…or something!

\*\*\*

Kaylee was lying in her tent with an arm draped over Tobey when she heard a car pull into the driveway on the other side of the cornfield patch. She and Tobey jumped out of the tent, inquisitively ran to the last row of corn, and peeked around the corner. An older-model Ford pickup truck sat in the driveway, facing them. There was no one in the truck; for a moment, an eerie silence surrounded the vehicle. But then—after some banging and clanking in the rear of the vehicle—a strong, square-shouldered, olive-skinned man appeared from the back. He wore cut-off sleeves, a baseball cap, and a wooly mustache over his rugged lip. He walked toward the corn patch—as well as, Kaylee and Tobey—while carrying a cage.

 “Oh no, Tobey!” lamented Kaylee. “He’s coming for you!” She made a break for the tent with Tobey in tow. They both retreated to the vinyl shelter before zipping the front closed.

 “Over here, Junior!” a woman cried out from the farmhouse. Kaylee’s mom emerged, wearing cut-off jean shorts and a T-shirt tied into a knot in the front, exposing her tan belly. Her dirty-blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail, revealing small tufts of moussed-up strands tucked behind her ears. She sauntered down the front steps into the warm sun to greet the handsome man. He walked toward the house along the perimeter of the cornfield, carrying the cage and flexing his big muscles. The horny mother met him halfway.

 “Just put it over there,” she said with a warm smile, pointing to the corner where Kaylee and Tobey had been a moment before. “Thanks, Junior, for bringing that over,” she continued while greeting the young man with her eyes. “I think there’s a raccoon in the corn patch,” she elaborated. “It ate poor Kaylee’s lunch.”

 “It’s alright, Hon’,” Junior retorted with a broad, country grin. He had the build of a football player. His erect nipples poked through his snug T-shirt, which stuck to him because of the warm, moist Midwestern air. He had a little swipe of motor oil on his stubbled chin, probably from working on a truck or tractor. The pup tent stood silently, right next to the two attractive adults.

 “Maybe, if this works,” she added, “I’ll make you dinner sometime.” Junior blushed at her advances. She was slightly older than him and a little more confident. They talked for a minute longer before she grabbed his arm in an affectionate parting gesture. He walked back to his truck with a cowboy’s gait, taking off his hat and wiping his brow as Kaylee’s mom checked out every inch of the man’s muscles. She blushed as she turned to the house and stumbled back, quietly professing her desire for him.

 A slight rustling from the tent broke the lazy silence as Kaylee unzipped the front door and stuck her head out. Tobey followed, so that two curious heads protruded from the temporary dwelling. They both watched as the rusty pickup truck drove away. There was a subtle humid haze about the air, which mixed with the truck’s exhaust to create a cloud of suspicion over the heads of the two super-sleuths. Just then, Tobey started up with a low growl under his panting breath. Kaylee looked down at him, over at the cage, and then up the road to the truck as it drove off. “Yeah Tobey,” she announced. “I don’t trust him either. There’s something about him.”

Chapter 3

 Under the early-morning sun, Kaylee sat on the picnic table outside her house, intently looking down at something. With the Ohio River behind her, blowing fog onto the dew-ripened hills of Rabbit Hash, the young girl clutched two long, straight sticks in the form of a cross. The longer piece of wood was tapered on both ends—sharpened to a point. She tied them at the intersection with jute twine, making the two skinny limbs tightly perpendicular. She secured the string with her teeth, with her mouth nearly touching the furry bundle. She stared down at her work with satisfaction through her glasses. Her glances of pride briefly turned to inquisitiveness as she quickly chewed on a bit of residual fiber with her front teeth before loudly spitting it onto the ground beside her. The abruptness awoke Tobey, who was sleeping at the table's base. “C’mon, Tobey…let’s go build us a scarecrow,” revealed Kaylee. “That should scare away that raccoon.”

 The two galloped over to the corn patch, right outside the tent. She gallantly drove the cross into the ground by swinging it over her head and then downward. Tobey’s fur blew at the impact. Kaylee then started acting like a robot: “Kaylee 2000 will take this shirt and…mmmmm…zzzzzzzzz…stuff it with hayyyyy,” mimicked the girl in a robot voice. Tobey let out a few warning barks at her.

 With that, Kaylee removed a shirt that was draped over something huge and bulbous—all the while, making mechanical, humming noises with her mouth and nose. As her tiny arm stretched stiff and upward, like a crane, she pulled the shirt from the bulb to reveal a large, fully-carved pumpkin. It stared at her with a fearful, blank stare—as if it died while seeing something awful.

 Suddenly, as if changing the channel on the radio, Kaylee started talking in a British accent: “OK, Tobey…let’s start talking British,” the girl exclaimed. “I’m going to take this parka, and affix it to m’ lad’s shoulders,” she continued in an unusually good Cockney accent for an eight-year-old girl. “And now I’m going stuff m’ lad’s trousers wit’ hay,” the girl added while bending over and grabbing a handful of hay from a small pile that she had laid there. She started stuffing the shirt—or “parka”—with straw while humming “God Save the Queen.” Some fell beneath the shirt before she tied a knot to keep it all in. It started to fill out and look more like a torso.

 As Kaylee tied the sleeves around the horizontal stick, her curious eyes focused on the two-toned pickup truck that pulled into the driveway, about fifty yards from the end of the driveway. Her noisy tribute to England slowed down as she shifted her attention to Junior, who jumped out, wearing tight jeans and cowboy boots. He shot a couple of warning glances her way before heading towards both her and Tobey, who assumed a taut, cautious stance next to the girl. Both were apprehensive.

 “Howdy, little girl,” he said with a smile as he approached them. “Is your momma home?”

 Tobey let out a few warning barks between growls while the girl didn’t answer him. They both just watched him walk by. She palmed the pumpkin that was lifelessly sitting on the stool outside of her tent while the muscular man walked up the driveway to the house. He rang the doorbell.

 Suddenly, Kaylee picked up the pumpkin and slammed it onto the torso while pieces of the gourd fell to the ground from the entry site of the sharpened end. She had a furious look on her face, which made Tobey recoil a few feet. “Checkmate,” she said to herself in a daze, looking his way. He turned around to see the commotion but quickly turned back when her mom answered the door. “I don’t have a good feeling about this, Tobey,” she declared with a predisposed countenance.

 On the other side of the house and down the embankment, the monolithic river flowed around the bend like a giant snake…big enough to eat mankind, or at least Rabbit Hash. Shards of light twinkled off each bouncing wave, resembling the vast celestial bodies of the night sky; but, in the daytime. Occasionally, pieces of driftwood would eclipse the sparkling light show. They would bob up and down while quickly flowing down the river, past the town, through eternity. Despite nearly sinking at times, the saturated pieces maintained a steady course and didn’t change much. They never wanted to.

 A little later in the day, around twilight—when the sun goes down, and lights start to brighten the windows of houses—a gentle breeze blew up from the river and broke the still air. The wind blew against the newly born scarecrow, tilting its view a few degrees; so that its terrified lifeless stare was now facing the house and piercing through the half-covered bathroom window, which was lit up like a stage. See-through sheers blew with the wind, obstructing a direct view into the room; but upon further review, one would observe typical bathroom fare, such as a fern to the right—surrounded by porcelain and tile. It was a clean, white room, and still…except for movement to the left of the panorama. Through flashes of blowing fabric, a man’s chiseled buttocks stood like the Statue of David in front of the toilet while a woman sat, bobbing her head just below his flat stomach. She gripped his muscular butt, like handlebars, for leverage and balance as the two bodies in motion were in perfect rhythm and harmony. Most of her face was covered by the man’s backside, except for her one eye, which obediently looked up at him in a drunken daze. The wind picked up as the scarecrow looked on, and the swaying sheers flickered and flashed the scene, like in a movie theater. The bobbing increased in intensity until the woman’s face was finally motionless, pressed against the man’s body by his hands on the back of her head. Through his hairy arms, her one eye gazed up at him with the anticipation of a hungry diner, eyeing the server who finally brings the meal. She momentarily suckled him, like a newborn, until eventually, their heart rates regressed, and the sheers grew limp and relaxed. The day's climax came and went with the dying uncertainty of the night, falling over the old Kentucky farmhouse.

 As the overnight hours instilled darkness in every corner of Kaylee’s room, the little girl slept in her bed with Tobey wrapped in a ball on her feet. Her tiny head rested, full of all the dreams that couldn’t be reenacted during the previous day. Her whole world was a dream, fueled by the exceptional imagination of a special little girl and her protective mother; sleeping was only a physical respite, not a mental one. She slept soundly that night, and only tossed and turned a little bit when the wall against her—which adjoined her mother’s room—began to shake, as if an earthquake suddenly and momentarily shook the wall. The glass in the picture frames rattled over her head, prompting Tobey to raise his tired head, tilt it sideways, and inquisitively watch the pictures shake. The shaking intensified and then suddenly stopped. A picture came crashing down, suddenly waking Kaylee from her sleep. She responsively raised her little frame vertically, rubbed her sleepy eyes, and looked around. The room was dark and still enough to satisfy her interest; thus, she laid back down, closed her eyes, and drifted back to sleep—dreaming the impossible dreams of solving the world’s crimes, as only a special eight-year-old could do. Tobey laid his head back down, too, regardless of the smashed picture of her mother lying in pieces on the floor behind her bed.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Kaylee awoke to a sliver of sunlight beaming across her room and over her sleepy eyes. The room was dark and still as Tobey lay in a ball on top of the sleeping child. She rested there for a minute while her custom-built brain re-booted itself.

 Suddenly, the sound of the front door opening and slamming shut prompted Kaylee and the dog to sit up and gather their senses. The clicking of cowboy boots down the concrete stairs and fading away resonated through the outside wall. The little girl slid out of bed and crept over to the window. She grabbed onto the cold, marble sill with her tiny, pointed fingers and hoisted herself up on tippy-toe to get a good look outside. Like a conqueror, Junior strutted down the driveway into the rising sun to his rusty old truck.

“I had a dream about him last night, Tobey,” revealed the little girl. “I dreamt that,” she continued while watching him drive off, “he was laying on top of my mom—choking her—while calling out to God…praising him.” She then slowly turned to Tobey with a concerned look. “He must be one of those religious fanatics, Tobey!” she exclaimed. The dog just growled and let out a woof to add his two cents. “What are we going to do, Tobey?” she said to herself as she walked in circles through the twilight of her room, processing her newly found revelation and a way to overcome it. Frantic inaudible chatter emanated from her tiny, anxious frame as Tobey watched the pacing girl, moving his head in circles to follow her while still lying on her bed.

“…well, we’ve got to do something about this, Tobey. He’s going to kill my mom,” she lamented while preoccupied. She quickly walked over to her dresser and opened up the top drawer. A plan was coming together in her head as she dug around the drawer of mismatched socks and underwear.

“Ah-ha!” she exclaimed out loud while pulling out a pair of bent-up wire eyeglasses. “We need the tools that all great detectives have if we’re going to crack this case and save my mom,” she declared while bending one arm to lay flat and parallel to the heavy glass. She then turned the frame in two, between the lenses, and crimped it until the glasses separated; thus, giving her a crude magnifying glass that flipped around. She threw the other half away and then wrapped a bandage around the arm and lens to keep it steady in one solid piece. She then grabbed a baseball cap and flipped it on her head as she reached for a plastic pipe that blew bubbles. Her big, lazy eye looked at Tobey through the magnifying instrument, blew some bubbles, and said, “let’s go, Boy!” as the two left the room on a mission.

In a single-file line, they left her bedroom. With Kaylee in front, she walked with her head down and followed an imaginary set of footprints with her magnifying glass. Suddenly, as they wandered into the dining room, the aroma of French toast filled the air. Her mom came from her sweaty bedroom with a big smile as she saw Kaylee.

 “You’re just in time for breakfast, Hon’,” her mother declared. She had a heavenly glow about her.

Kaylee stood and looked at her mom with her big, magnified eye before putting the handmade instrument in her pocket. Tobey just sat quietly behind her, letting out a yawn and then a sigh.

The little girl circled the table before climbing up her high chair and sitting before a plate of steaming French toast. Tobey sat at the foot of the chair, occasionally looking up for a handout; while her mom sat on the couch, facing the TV, and lit a cigarette. The little girl quietly chomped on her breakfast, frequently turning to look at the warm glow from the television beyond the back of her mom’s head and the steady stream of smoke that emanated from it.

“Now on the Morey Show, the top five signs you’re in an abusive relationship,” the TV foretold as the regular programming abruptly interrupted the senseless chatter of a commercial. Another voice continued: “…he never let me have friends. He was in total control of my life.” The little girl looked on while chewing the syrup and toasted bread with her mouth open, listening to what the woman said. As the show jumped to another commercial, Kaylee regressed back into her head and applied what she had just learned to her own imaginative world. She finished her breakfast by pushing the last of the gooey syrup past her toothy grin, all the while trying to hide that the wheels were turning in her head.

“Are you finished, ‘Hon?” her mom inquired as she rose from the couch and approached her daughter. She grabbed the sticky plate, pulled the cap from Kaylee’s head, and rubbed her on the noggin; thus, messing up her hair.

“Does Jr. let you have friends?” Kaylee nervously inquired while her mom walked away.

‘What’s that, Hon?” her mother asked in the kitchen, only paying minimal attention to the question…a defense that she developed in response to having such an imaginative child.

“Nothing,” Kaylee responded, deciding to keep a low profile to help protect the integrity of the case, as she saw it.

“C’mon, Tobey…let’s go!” commanded the little girl as she climbed down the high chair. “We have work to do.” With that, Tobey loyally followed Kaylee through the kitchen. She reached into one pocket and pulled out the homemade magnifying glass. Her mother said nothing while shaking her head in disbelief at the girl’s outrageous imagination. “Stay in the yard and be home for lunch,” her mother warned.

By jumping down the front steps, and not *walking* down them, Kaylee proved she was still a little girl and not wholly a world-renowned detective. With her loyal dog by her side, she set out to find the truth behind Jr.; and if he was a threat to her mother. She mindlessly walked down the driveway with her big, lazy eye leading the way through the thick, round glass. Stopping for a second to inspect the newspaper, she stepped over it, turned the corner, and headed down the street into oblivion; and into town. She wasn’t quite sure what she was looking for; but, it wasn’t, apparently, a newspaper with the words, “I-70 Killer sighted in Kansas,” emblazoned through the protective wrapping.

Chapter 4

As the barber pole spun around, the blue and red stripes raced from the top of the plastic cylinder to the bottom. The soft glow of the twirling colors—capped between two steel butts attached to the fading brick façade of the town’s barber shop—mirrored the happenings of the quaint sidewalk-lined shops on Main Street in downtown Rabbit Hash. Faint images of cars and lazy-gated pedestrians played like small-town matinees in twirling red-and-blue circles. On this particular day, the movie stars were a wild-eyed preteen and her dog, walking down the sidewalk, as if following something along the ground. Their image stopped right in front of the barbershop before suddenly drowning in the violent crimson splatter that spewed and dripped from, especially, the spinning red stripe.

“Good day, Little Girl,” exclaimed Gus, the local barber, with an outstretched waiving hand, gripping a cotton towel between his thumb and forefinger. He smiled and greeted Kaylee while he polished the pole with vinegar and cherry juice from an old, faded spray bottle. The trail stopped momentarily for her and Tobey on the sidewalk in front of Gus, while she inquisitively blew bubbles from her pipe and studied something on the ground through the homemade magnifying glass. Tobey followed the drifting bubbles, staying close to Kaylee, while they eventually fell to the ground and popped.

“It looks like you’re looking for something,” declared the barber to the little girl.

“Not *something*…but *someone*,” retorted the girl without paying much attention to Gus’ presence.

“Well, that sounds important,” humored the old-timer. “Who, pray-tell, are you looking for?”

“Junior,” she quickly replied in a matter-of-fact tone. Gus looked at her playfully, but he was a little puzzled.

 “Junior?” he replied inquisitively. “What do you want with him?” He belted out a laugh.

“I need him for questioning,” she said with authority while shifting her attention to the barber himself.

“Oh, is he in trouble?” the barber played along with her. She peered back at him with all the seriousness of a grown-up.

“That’s not for me to decide,” she insisted, “but for a court of law.” Tobey let out an affirmative yelp at Gus.

The old man smiled awkwardly at the girl, finished the cleaning, and returned to his shop. “I think he’s down the block…on the end….around back,” the barber disclosed before abruptly going inside. She stood and watched Gus shut the glass door, peering at him with a big, lazy eye through the ingeniously-crafted spectacle, while Tobey wanted to press down the sidewalk to the end of the block. Her faithful sidekick moved a few steps and then looked back at Kaylee…and then at the barbershop.

The little girl turned and muttered contemptuously, “down the block, around back,” while blowing bubbles from her pipe. She reasoned that, whatever Junior was capable of doing, perhaps it was beyond the understanding of a barber…or rather, a grown-up with smelly cleaning spray.

After a brief pause to fidget with her pipe, Kaylee methodically and silently cruised down the sidewalk, peering through the glass with her magnified eye while being led by Tobey. Hesitantly, she stopped when Tobey slowed down to sniff the concrete.

“What is it, Boy?” the girl inquired. The dog milled around and then barked at Kaylee, signaling something to her. The dog was almost pointing at the façade. “You’re right, Tobey! We should go to the police first,” she exclaimed while the dog joyfully pawed at the glass front door, engraved with the words: “Rabbit Hash Police.” She opened the door for Tobey, and he went in.

There were two uniformed police officers behind the counter, just relaxing from the lack of excitement and crime. They were pleased to see her, knowing they’d seen her around town.

“What can I do for you, Miss?” the one officer mused while tipping his cap at her. The other officer took notice of Tobey and rose from his computer to drop a piece of beef stick he was eating in front of the dog. Tobey broke character and lavishly chomped at the gift.

“I’m looking for Junior,” she replied in a soft calculated voice, trying to sound like Clint Eastwood.

“And what is Junior’s last name?” asked the other officer with a serious countenance as he lowered himself in front of his computer and typed “Junior” into a search box on his screen. The other officer smiled and winked at him as a list of a dozen possibilities popped up on the screen after a few clicks. The girl stood and waited silently, peering around the lobby, studying it from wall to wall.

“You know, Little Lady,” the first officer intonated, “I know Junior. He has a history with us. I’d stay away from him if I were you.” Both Tobey and the girl took a step back and caught their breath while they heeded the officer’s warning. “He’s a bad man. Just stay away from him,” he reiterated, knowing that whoever “Junior” was, the officer was doing him a favor. “Now, why don’t you just move along,” he suggested with a smile.

“No! You don’t understand!” she barked at him with a slight lunge. “He beats my mom in the middle of the night and makes my wall shake. I hear her crying out to God while he pounds on her, over and over again in rhythm!”

The sitting officer let out a quick and shrill laugh while the other smiled and shifted from side to side, trying to keep his composure and not laugh.

“Well, I’ll tell you what…how ‘bout if we just come by and keep an eye on your house. Will that work?” the cop inquired softly and sweetly while bending down to meet her small stature. He didn’t know where she lived.

She rolled her eyes and sighed in disgust while turning to the door. The two cops turned to each other behind her back, hissing and cackling while trying to hold in their laughter. “He pounds on her!” the sitting cop cried out in muffled laughter to the other, who was pushing and slapping the head of his hysterical partner. The door closed entirely behind the little girl and her sidekick—both convinced that Rabbit Hash’s Finest would be useless to them in their investigation. They continued down the sidewalk.

“*Down the street and around back*, the barber said,” she thought aloud while reluctantly glancing down the sidewalk. “I don’t have a good feeling about this, Tobey,” she continued. Her sidekick let out a yelp, and the two walked side-by-side down the pavement to the very last shop on the street.

As they approached the last business on the street, they stopped momentarily to inspect the building. It was painted green and blue with a large bay window in the front and a pig-shaped sign that hung directly over them, showcasing the word “Fleischerei.” A faint chopping sound, like two blocks clapping each other, emanated from the back of the eighteenth-century row Brickhouse. Kaylee peeked around the corner first and then motioned Tobey to come join her. She checked the length of the building to observe the back end of a van before pulling out her homemade monocle to inspect the brick for fingerprints. They started towards the back, being careful not to miss a clue, scanning the wall and then the ground before moving on. The chopping sound became louder and more pronounced as the two reached the end of the building. They both peeked around the corner.

About ten feet down the back wall, a horrid chopping sound mixed with loud classic rock music emanated from an open door. Kaylee tried to look in, but couldn’t see anything; so, she cautiously moved towards the door, extending her head and neck closer to the ominous hole. She was just about there, when…

“Crack!”

Just then, a thunderous chop shook the rear of the building while a severed pig’s head rolled from the open door toward Kaylee. Both she and Tobey jumped before she shrieked and nearly fell over herself, trying to flee the horrific scene. They bumped into each other and then disappeared behind the building’s corner. A young, chubby pasty-skinned boy came out to retrieve the head. He picked it up like a bowling ball, holding it tight to his flabby belly. He peered off into the distance, momentarily mesmerized by something; but then regained his composure once the onset of rain dampened his doughy cheek and forced him back inside the mysterious doorway.

Kaylee and Tobey made it as far as the middle of the street—at its end—under a canopy of trees that sheltered them from the oncoming storm. Their panic started to subside, as they bent over to catch their breath.

“We have to do something, Tobey,” exasperated the little girl, “Or the next head that’ll roll will be my mom’s.” Tobey let out an agreeable yelp. “Let’s think,” she declared in between gasps of air. “We’ll need to catch him, and then question him…how are we going to do that?” she pondered. With that, Tobey pointed his snout and barked at the nearest building to them on the other side of the street. “Good idea, Boy! We can start at the hardware store…and then go from there!” revealed the young detective. The two stepped off the curb and into eternity. The sleepy little town of Rabbit Hash was about to awaken.

With a click of the old, wooden door of the hardware store, the young girl and her dog retreated from the sidewalk as the clouds dimmed, swelled, and then dropped rain upon the citizens of the town. They scattered here and there like cockroaches behind the giant storefront windows that started to streak from the precipitation. The wide-eyed wunderkind entered the store, totally noticeable; not because she was with her dog, but because of her child-like pretense of the world—a feature that all grown-ups think is cute or annoying.

“You can’t bring that dog in here,” barked a voice from behind the counter in the center of the store as Kaylee and Tobey ducked down the second aisle. They stopped in their tracks. “You can’t bring that dog in here,” the voice reiterated.

Kaylee motioned for the dog to stay, as she rebutted with an attitude: “Why not?”

“Because it’s a dog,” the faceless war of words continued.

Without hesitation, Kaylee stormed out from the aisle towards the counter. A heavy-set red-haired woman, wearing too much makeup, sat on a stool behind the cash register. She watched Kaylee as the young girl approached her.

“First of all, he is not a dog. He is my partner,” she said matter-of-factly. “And we are looking to trap a man. A very bad man,” she continued.

Upon seeing and listening to the precocious preteen, the woman behind the counter changed her countenance from strict authoritarian to a soft, understanding being, capable of compassion. She felt that perhaps Tobey served another purpose.

“…and we are looking for a net to capture him,” Kaylee’s chatter became apparent.

“What did this person do?” inquired the woman.

“His name is Junior, and he does bad things to my mom. He pounds on her,” the young girl bluntly announced. The woman sadly looked around for her escape.

“…and leaves balloons in the garbage…,” the chatter went on, as the poor cashier blushed and then let out an awkward gasp. The chatter continued: “…and they are clear, funny-looking balloons. He could at least leave colorful ones. C’mon Tobey,” the irritated girl ordered while moving past the embarrassed store clerk. “Let’s find us a net!” Kaylee ordered.

The two circled the circumference of the store, gathering ideas, under the giant backdrop of two wall-sized, leaded-glass windows—streaked by currents of rainwater that dissected the happenings of Main Street. Large, skinny figures shrank and expanded, occasionally getting so large that the store bell rang, and the door opened. The two sleuths made it to the garden tools before Tobey stopped and sniffed the shovels.

“I think you’re onto something, Tobey,” she admitted to the curious canine. “We could dig a hole and trap him that way.” Tobey barked at her in agreement. “Good work, Boy! Let’s do this!”

With that, the young detective momentarily dropped her investigative character and changed into a plane, and sailed out of the store with her arms outstretched and lips acting like a propeller. Tobey galloped after her as they two jumped down the steps to the concrete, showing little regard for the patrons entering the hardware store. They sprung down the street on a mission, wasting little time to investigate their plan. For whomever stands in their way, beware of Kaylee Simpson, who’s sputtering and flying like a plane down the sidewalk with her partner: a dog.

As the two passed by the TV repair shop on their way home, the glow of a set in the window illuminated a tiny corner of cloudy Main Street. The words and image of a man in sunglasses, brandishing a shiny badge, provided the screenplay for the cacophony of rain and thunder that befell the small, Kentucky town.

“We recovered DNA from the victims, and we are having it analyzed. If anyone knows anything, please call the Terre Haute Police Department at…,” the image continued as the rain picked up. The image shifted to a man behind a news desk.

“There you have it. The manhunt for the escaped San Quentin inmate dubbed, ‘The I-70 Killer,’ intensifies,” the anchor relayed. “The bodies of a murdered family in Indiana have been recovered, and it is believed to be linked to this escaped convict. It is unclear how long they have been there. The bodies included one of a little girl…seven-years-old.” The glow of the TV persisted through the darkened streets. “And I believe we have a sketch of the inmate. His name is Harold Lee Stokes, and he is five-foot-seven….” The screen flashed a gray composite drawing of a chiseled mug hidden behind mirrored sunglasses. His angry scowl was bordered by a thick, boxy handlebar mustache. “Remember,” the anchor continued, “this man is extremely dangerous; so, please call your local police department if you see him.” A whirlwind of leaves danced in front of the window before shooting down the sidewalk and into the wind. The images of terror faded into a commercial for everyone in the nation, including the bored and unaware citizens of the lazy, little town of Rabbit Hash.

\*\*\*

A thick, early-morning fog rolled down the Ohio River from Cincinnati and saturated every hill and holler of the sleeping village. Three turtle doves bathed and splashed in a nearby birdbath, partially draped in the vaporous run-off from the river. Their playful banter was the only sound in the twilight hours when suddenly, every living thing was startled by the shrill cry from Kaylee’s house.

The girl sat up in bed, panting and all distorted—having just awoken from a bad dream. She looked around, trying to remember her familiar surroundings while forgetting the image chasing her. She tugged at the blanket and then surveyed the floor around her bed, trying to locate Tobey; but, he was strangely not around.

After a minute of silence, Kaylee heard faint whimpering through her bedroom window. By the time she could position herself to get a good look, the whimpering intensified to yelping. She looked out and saw poor Tobey stuffed into one of the locked raccoon traps. “Oh my God!” she cried as she leaped off her bed and out the door.

She quickly scurried to the cornfield, where the traps were set. She passed by the scarecrow and nearly stopped at the sight of the icon missing its head; but, she continued rescuing Tobey. Her small, boney hands quickly unlocked the cage; thus, freeing the scared dog. He licked her face profusely as he leaped from the hard wire mesh into the little girl’s arms.

“Tobey, who did this to you? How did this happen?” Kaylee cried out, looking around for any possible assailants. The dog continued to joyfully lick her face. She grabbed Tobey by the ears and forced him to look at her.

“Who did this to you, Tobey? Was it Junior?” The dog looked around for a moment and then barked. “That’s what I thought…,” the little girl concluded while glancing over at the scarecrow’s decapitated pumpkin-head. The two slowly walked to the massacre site and stood over the bruised gourd. The terrified face of the scarecrow was kicked in, leaving its ominous look justified, but without a witness to any further explanations. Kaylee remained motionless in solemnity until she turned to Tobey and revealed two words: “we’re next.”

For the rest of the night, Kaylee strategized with Tobey about how they would catch Junior. She concluded with Tobey’s affirmative barks that digging a ditch and covering it with bamboo would be the most effective means of catching her mother’s ill-intentioned boyfriend. She would then interrogate his motives for choking and pounding her mom in the middle of the night; thus, shaking poor Kaylee’s walls and scaring her.

The following morning, Kaylee found a shovel and pickax in the garage and put her plan in motion. With her faithful dog by her side, she marked a spot on the lawn under her bedroom window and started to dig. The cycle of the girl digging and Tobey fetching the clumps of dirt and putting them back into the hole was broken by a police car rolling down her driveway, turning by the cornfield, and then back to the main road. As it circled the cornfield, the slightly ajar passenger-side window gave up an urgent APB over the radio: “…he has been spotted in Cincinnati. Be on standby.” The girl and the dog watched momentarily and then continued to dig.

“Tobey, there’s one thing that’s for certain,” she professed while pushing the shovelhead into the dirt. “We have to go it alone, they can’t help us,” she said while nodding to the fleeting police cruiser. “We’re mavericks, Tobey. Lone wolves.” With that, Tobey let out a howl at the ominous storm clouds overhead while Kaylee swung a pickaxe over her head and into the hard, Kentucky clay. She whistled a monotonous gospel tune, and Tobey continued to retrieve lumps of dirt and drop them back into the hole. The police cruiser spun on the gravel off in the distance before turning on its lights and sirens and driving into Rabbit Hash’s unsuspecting sun.

Chapter 5: “Findlay Market”

Traveling north on the I-75 corridor through Covington, the rolling green hills of Northern Kentucky unfurl at the feet of the majestic Queen City. Cincinnati’s skyline represents royalty, as each shiny, jagged building on the horizon is a point on the queen’s tiara. Under the crown and behind the lush royal robes of the city’s streets, the historic Over-the-Rhine district housed German heritage and Italianate architecture. Therein, perhaps at its heart, lies Findlay Market—one of the oldest markets in the country and a regional multi-cultural hub, or a crossroads where diverse ethnicities from all walks of life intersect. It offers the chance for, perhaps, an Eastern Indian to cross paths with a special little girl from Rabbit Hash, Kentucky.

Pulling into the parking lot, Kaylee and her mom enjoyed their monthly visit to Findlay Market. It was quite a drive for them, but well worth it for the exotic mix of spices, meats, and cheeses. After Kaylee opened the door and jumped out of the car, her mom quickly looked around, held a small glass pipe to her lips, and lit it. As powerfully as she inhaled, she exhaled and rose from the car, expelling the skunky, pine-tree-scented smoke into the urban, electric air. She smiled behind her sunglasses, grabbed Kaylee by the hand, and the two walked into the busy market.

As the doors opened, Kaylee was struck with the robust aroma of garlic from the pizza stand, just inside the doors. A tall skinny African-American gentleman tossed dough in the air while twirling it around in circles. The diamonds in his earrings sparkled from the florescent tubes overhead, but his singing was nearly lost in the electric static of the market. A Pakistani family stood before the pizza booth, pointed to the board with chalk entrees and prices, and boastfully spoke to each other in their native tongue. Her mom, wearing a permanent grin from the overload of sensations, pulled her daughter down the market’s main aisle.

The normally-precocious, imaginative girl was too overwhelmed to be herself—yielding to the cacophony of the senses. She was out of her comfort zone; and, thus, passively existed in her surroundings, learning from them. She closed her eyes as the mother pulled her past the butcher; so she wouldn’t be subjected to the various bloodied animal parts that looked different from the beef patties and chicken tenders, to which she was accustomed. An older, caramel-colored man with bushy nose hair offered her something on a toothpick from behind the counter; but, she opened one eye, smiled, and kept walking with her mother.

After shuffling past pockets of humanity, the mother and child parked themselves in line at an Italian booth. Long strands of fresh spaghetti draped over the electric mixer before being placed in take-home bags. Fresh sauces boiled in tall pots on a stove behind the counter while a petite red-haired woman with a thick accent helped each customer. Although there was certainly enough stimulation at the current vendor to keep a child interested, Kaylee’s innocent glances kept wandering next door to the tobacco shop and the mustachioed man who worked there. He measured bagfuls of snuff and twisted them at the ends before giving them to the other gentlemen, who adorned mustaches at the other end of the counter. T-shirts that read, “Have a Handlebar Day,” with a set of waxed, curled whiskers hung from the ceiling. Kaylee’s mom pulled her forward and spoke to the modest proprietor of the Italian booth. The little girl stole one last glance at the burly man next store before leaving with her mom and a bagful of fresh pasta and gravy. The gentlemen woefully sang songs a cappella while tossing bags of tobacco back and forth amongst themselves as Kaylee was pulled from them.

A short while later, Kaylee sat on a bench with her mom and ate Vietnamese pho. She watched all the people walk past her, noting all the differences to herself: kids laughing and playing, others talking to themselves, and a whole assortment of languages and dialects. All come from afar to get the best spices, foods, and wares while soaking in the humanity of each person’s soulful story and then taking a piece of them home. Like spitting images of each other, mother and daughter sat and watched the show around them: the rich and affluent, the poor and downtrodden, and everyone else in between. “You don’t get this much excitement in Rabbit Hash, do you?” the mother whispered into Kaylee’s ear while leaning against her.

Chapter 6

As the day faded into night, the farmhouse lit up like a beacon—inviting any saint or soul to its doorstep…a deliverance by river or road. Behind shiny glass plates, Kaylee peered into the twilight through binoculars and beneath a crooked army helmet. Tobey was tentatively by her side, also wearing a helmet; but his was straight and not cock-eyed. “All we can do now, Tobey, is just wait,” she said while surveying the landscape with her equipment. One of the lens covers was still on the binoculars. “Junior will come and fall right into our trap,” she continued. “Then and only then will we learn his true intentions with my mom.” Tobey let out a yelp in agreement with her.

As the night progressed, the room became more luminous—making Kaylee’s posture within her room seem more like that of a weathered sea captain, commandeering her ship, rather than a precocious preteen. With every window exposed to reveal the little girl’s command station, she waited for Junior to come for her mother and fall into her two-foot by two-foot hole, loosely covered with twigs, just below her window.

Darkness fell over the hours between dusk and dawn, as stillness added a sense of magic and melancholy to the sleeping sounds of the tiny river town. Kaylee was tucked away in her bed with the lights off, while Tobey was curled up in a ball at her feet. Both slept peacefully, breathing in unison, dreaming their respective dreams.

Suddenly, there were two quick pings at the window, followed by a faint twig breaking. Tobey raised his head into the dark room, displaying his sleepy, inquisitive silhouette in front of the big, full moon. He raised his floppy ears and looked around in a slight panic. After a few quiet minutes, he settled back down—feeling confident that all was well.

At that, Kaylee let out a gasp and started shaking her leg. He looked up again in concern as the little girl convulsed harder and harder. “No, no,” she mumbled in her sleep while her petite body trembled under the covers. “Please don’t,” she exclaimed with her eyes closed, shaking her head. Tobey rose into a crouching position, jumped off the bed, and looked around. The low murmur became louder and more frightful, sending the unconscious girl into a kicking fit. “Get off me…get off me!” she pleaded to the cold, dark room. Finally, with one last burst of life, she screamed into the night, as the room started spinning: “Nooooooooo!”

\*\*\*

The early-morning rays of sunshine broke through the blinds and inched their way up the little girl, highlighting the disheveled blanket intertwined with her twisted body, like the wreckage after a storm. The chirping of birds awoke Tobey, who was curled up in a ball next to the bed. He was sleepy and hesitant, but he rose from the floor and stretched out his weary body, letting out an exhaustive yawn. He sniffed around the open window and then followed a scent across the room to the little girl. He thus began to lick her face.

As if she was holding her breath, she suddenly opened her eyes. Barely moving, she looked around the room, not knowing where she was. Tobey licked and licked, forcing the girl to sit upright in the bed. She wiped the drool from her face and looked around before Tobey jumped up in bed to obediently sit beside the girl. She seemed concerned and suspicious of her surroundings, as if she awoke but was missing something. “Kaylee! Rise and shine, Darling,” her mom cried out from the end of the hall. “We have to go to town today!”

Kaylee sat in a booster seat, fastened to the back seat, while Tobey sat beside her, panting and looking out the window. It was a bright, sunny ride into town, leaving much scenery to enjoy. While the mom and Tobey watched the trees go by, Kaylee was not. She gazed out the window and anxiously kicked her leg against the seat. She was contemplating something.

The girl’s mom, who had been periodically glancing at the girl in the rearview mirror and noting the change in personality, said, “Are you feeling OK, ‘Hon? You’re being kinda quiet. Is everything alright?”

Kaylee didn’t even flinch but continued to blankly stare out the window. She was now playing the role of a concerned eight-year-old girl.

“Kaylee?” her mom interjected.

Suddenly, the girl snapped out of the daze, looked at her mother, and revealed: “I had a bad dream last night.”

“Oh no, Honey! Do you want to talk about it?” the mother asked. Kaylee just looked away, pressing her face against the reflection in the window. She was quiet for a moment before starting to describe the dream:

“I dreamt that I was asleep in bed when I heard two taps at the window and suddenly woke up. I walked to the window and opened it wider to see a bright light emanating from the cornfield. So I climbed out of the window and proceeded to the field.”

The other two quietly listened to the girl as the sunny wind blew against their ears. The little girl continued:

“When I got to the edge, I was accosted by the scarecrow; but, this time, his head wasn’t kicked in. He was angry-looking, and his mouth was outlined by a prominent handlebar shape. He started choking me to the ground, and I couldn’t breathe.” Her voice became quick and panicked until, finally, she stopped. A tear rolled down the shaking girl’s cheek in the window’s reflection.

The mom paused for a moment before comforting her child: “It was just a scary dream, Darlin’. You’re awake now. We’ll go to the hardware store, get some paint, and you can help me paint my bedroom.” The mother just kept looking forward and driving. The words blew backward on Kaylee’s ears: “Besides,” she continued, “nothing like that ever happens in Rabbit Hash.”

“Something bad is about to happen,” Kaylee whispered under her breath as the mother pulled in front of a painted brick building that was the hardware store.

It was very calm and stagnant in the shop. But, it was somewhat subdued outside, as well. The mother was quickly swept up by the young man who worked there, leaving Kaylee and Tobey to fend for themselves. Kaylee wandered in a daze through the aisles while Tobey sat in front of the long, leaded-glass window next to the front door under a glowing TV. He watched Main Street, as if it was a fish bowl.

Suddenly, several police cars whizzed quickly past the shop with their lights and sirens turned off, followed immediately by several black town cars. Tobey’s head flashed from right to left, trying to follow what was unfolding. At that, the front room of the hardware store dimmed, and the wind started to blow outside. Something enormous eclipsed the sun.

Just then, an announcement came over the TV from above. A tentative news anchor glowed from the screen and paused before speaking:

“We have some breaking news to report. It appears that the nationwide manhunt for the escaped murderer, Harold Lee Stokes, is coming to an end; as he has been reportedly cornered in a cornfield in Rabbit Hash, Kentucky—a town about twenty miles southwest of Cincinnati. We have crews on their way now.”

The idle chatter filled not only the front of the hardware store, but every storefront on Main Street, as the residents of Rabbit Hash stood silently in slow-motion with their mouths open, watching the events that unfolded on TV. Their motionless bodies stood in the windows, like mannequins, oblivious to everything—especially the black helicopter that grazed the tips of the trees as it flew by. The voice on the television continued:

“This just in…we have audio of the scene which is unfolding in Rabbit Hash regarding the manhunt for Harold Lee Stokes. Let’s listen to it now.” The news anchor played the audio feed, a loud mix of gunfire and yelling. The voice on the glowing box faded into the background while Tobey sat under the TV and jumped at the gunshots. Kaylee, wandering the aisles, mumbled under her breath, as if praying quietly to herself. Her eyes trembled in the back of her head. Likewise, her mother and the young man, on whom she was hanging, were equally oblivious to what was happening around them. She flirted with the young man while he helped her pick a paint color. “This is for my bedroom…maybe you could come over and help me paint it,” she cleverly conveyed to him with a smile.

Their chatter faded into the background as the news glowed from the front, and the anchor’s voice, once again, filled the brick walls:

“We now have confirmation that Harold Lee Stokes has been captured in a cornfield in the tiny river town of Rabbit Hash, Kentucky. It is unclear whether he is alive or dead, or how long he has been hiding there. Once again, Harold Lee Stokes, the murderer and rapist, who escaped from San Quentin in California and led authorities on a country-wide manhunt…dubbed the ‘I-70 Killer,’ was apprehended in Kentucky about twenty miles south of Cincinnati. We will keep you posted, as we learn more.” A commercial broke the monotone and faded into the room.

“Thank you for all your help, Bobby,” the mother said with a smile as she loaded several gallons of paint in the back seat. Tobey climbed over the cans and onto the back seat before Mother shut the door. Bobby stood on the other side of the car, holding Kaylee in his arms. She was sound asleep and draped over him like a robe. The mother opened the door, lifted her out of his arms as she looked into his eyes, and placed her child in the back seat. She shut the door, pushed herself close to the young cashier, and handed him her phone number. They gazed at each other as she sauntered to the other side of the car and opened the driver’s-side door. She mouthed, “Call me,” before disappearing into the car, starting it up, and driving away. Bobby stood and waved to her as she sped off. His slender build wasn’t dissimilar to the light pole to which he was standing next; but certainly much younger.

The drive home was quiet and peaceful, like the calm after a storm. It was sunny, and the trees were a vast, lively prism of green hues. The sun beat down on Kaylee’s mom as the wind sang softly in her ear. Kaylee was asleep in the back, she just met a new love, and she didn’t have a care in the world. Cows passed her on the right side of the straight road, so she turned to get a quick glimpse, missing the steady line of police cars returning to town. Tobey barked at the last one, a K-9 unit, which prompted the mother to keep her eyes on the road.

Kaylee woke up as the car pulled into the driveway, triggering Tobey to scoot closer and lick the little girl’s face. “Oh, my God! What happened here?” exclaimed the mother, looking through the windshield at the cornfield, which was turfed up with tire tracks. Large patches of corn were missing from the field, while shell casings littered the border. Blood gleamed in the sunlight across cornstalks, grass, and mud.

The car stopped at the end of the driveway, and the three emerged and moved closer to the scene with Kaylee, who was shaking off the sleep, trailing the other two. Tobey was incessantly sniffing around the field while the mother looked at the massacre, trying to figure it out. After a few minutes of silence, the mother looked at Kaylee, squeezed her hand, and said, “Someone must’ve come by and got that raccoon.” They turned around to head into the house. The mother added, “Well, thank the Lord, too. At least we don’t have to worry about that raccoon anymore.” Tobey stayed behind to sniff the scene before being called by the mother. The three disappeared into the house, one by one: first the mother, who never found excitement in rural, small-town living…then her precocious, unique daughter, who perhaps found too much excitement…and finally the dog—maybe the most in-tune of the three.

As the door shut, a gentle breeze blew through the top-heavy cornstalks, slowly knocking them against each other. Some were still damp with blood splatter, making them sticky. The torn-up soil was littered only with sparkly shell casings and certain other pieces of indiscernible debris. Something blew across the field and stuck to one of the stalks. It was a drawing, hanging upside down, of Kaylee—sleeping—sketched from outside her window. It stuck for a moment before blowing further into the field and eventually down the bank and into the river.

\*\*\*

Later that day, Kaylee and Tobey sat on a picnic bench overlooking the river. The waves sparkled like shards of broken glass from late-afternoon sunshine. The cascade of shimmering light was occasionally eclipsed by pieces of driftwood, just passing by. However, every once in a while, a piece became lodged in the muddy banks in front of Kaylee’s house. Even then, most break free eventually; but, on a very seldom occasion, one will get stuck and die there. Kaylee was watching one such at that moment.

The tranquil, lazy view of the winding river was suddenly broken by the sound of a truck pulling into the driveway. It was moving slowly, unsure of its surroundings, before pulling between the cornfield and the house. It was the young kid, Bobby, from the hardware store. He jumped out of his truck with two handfuls of tools, looked around, and then walked to the cornfield. He threw most of the objects on the ground, except for a pole and hammer, to which he used to affix a “No Hunting” sign. Kaylee turned to look at Tobey and then back again at Bobby. Her face grew with suspicion. “What’s this all about, Tobey?” she asked while sizing the young man up. The mother tapped at the window, drawing his attention. He shuffled his feet up the driveway and quickly disappeared into the house.

Kaylee jumped off the table, pulled the bubble pipe and her handmade magnifying glass from her jacket, and walked in a line toward his truck with Tobey in tow. “Yeah, I definitely don’t like the cut of his jib,” she mumbled while looking for clues. Her big lazy eye was amplified through the glass as she blew bubbles into the air. Some would pop, some would drift and change shape, while others would stay the same. One drifted higher and higher over the sleepy little town of Rabbit Hash, where nothing exciting ever happened.