

Ethan Collins

Church Publishing

**Do
Not
Mix
with
Alcohol
Rx**



Do Not Mix with Alcohol

By Ethan Collins

Copyright 2026 ▲ Church

Image [Girl Drinking a Beer](#) by Ruby McMenemy-Taylor

Cover Image © Church Studio

Version 3

Preview published July '26

COMING SOON

All rights reserved.

This is a sample of a Work in Progress. This sample will be updated as the work progresses. For your convenience, this sample contains a version number. This is version three. A synopsis of this novel can be found at church-publishing.com.

Get acquainted quicker by saying “Hi:” fanmail@church-publishing.com

Synopses of other novels written by author Ethan Collins can also be viewed on the publisher’s website at church-publishing.com/authors/ethan-collins or wherever popular eBooks are sold.

Chapter One

*Attention all Thurston units, attention all Thurston units:
Box-alarm. Respond: Eighty-nine Cobble Hill Road for a
reported fire in-progress. Captain Powers is on-scene,
reporting heavy smoke. Occupants unknown.*

Men of Engine Company 3, asleep in Thurston, New Hampshire's North fire station, were jarred awake by that shrill call of duty, hours since retiring from the last alarm. Eyes opened slowly after a busy night responding to medical calls yet their hearts already raced; adrenaline-laced blood throbbed through these men's necks while pulling pants over their long underwear before they slid down that station's brass firepole.

"Fuck!" Mason belted when his bare heels slapped upon the ground floor where fire engines sat parked.

Firefighter/E.M.T. Mason Alexander Garnière was poorly informed he'd be connected to a fatality. Ace to his crew, Mason was in-line to make lieutenant. His big-breasted pinup tattoo who wore rabbit ears and shed one crimson tear from his cut-off shoulder contradicted management. Dressed in bunker gear, Mason resembled a hero. Mason shut his eyes as apparatus-bay doors climbed, unleashing a leeching breeze and a sunrise that flared off driveway ice. He turned from the frost and glare, and drew his heavy, fire-proof coat tight. Engine 2 drove out of that garage and Engine 3 rushed to stay with it.

"Rizzo, forget dressing- jump on," E3 Lieutenant Mark Tilson yelled from his shot-gun window.

Running with an outstretched arm, female firefighter Alexandra Rizzo almost grasped a chrome handle before her engine roared from the garage; but she was too late. Engine 3 left Alex behind and bewildered in a black cloud of diesel exhaust.

"7-4-9 from 5-1 E-3," Lt. Tilson addressed over the radio.

"Go ahead E-3," a dispatcher acknowledged.

"Engine Three is on the air to eighty-nine Cobble Hill Road."

"5-1 E-3 you are on the air to a box-alarm with fire showing at eighty-nine Cobble Hill Road at six twenty-three a.m."

Engine 3 operator Rainier Carson drove cautiously through powder on unplowed residential roads without sirens. A red ballet that reflected off falling snow from emergency strobe-lights calmed crews securing helmets and SCBAs ahead of their arrivals. Except for a metallic rattle and the grinding thump of axel-driven snow chains spinning beneath rear tires for traction, it was a tranquil ride to an emergency in the back of their fire engines.

Captain William Pierce blasted over the fire-ground radio frequency from Engine 2, "E-3, stop: Lay supply-line."

Mason Garnière, jumping out of his cab one hundred yards before eighty-nine, tethered four-inch hose to a yellow hydrant and used a spanner wrench to remove hydrant-caps. Rubber supply-line slid from its hose-bed while Engine 3 rolled forward. Lt. Tilson ordered firefighters Jay Patterson and Nate Salenté to dismount and screw their end into Engine 3 before Mason opened the hydrant. They then stretched an attack-line off Engine 2 to eighty-nine's entrance, adjacent to a door numbered ninety-one.

Billowing columns of opaque smoke violently twisted skyward from vinyl eaves of this one-story duplex. Robin Powers, the daytime captain who'd called 9-1-1 while commuting to work at North station, assumed Incident Commander. Powers ordered Lt. Robert Johnson and F/f Reynolds from Engine 2 to search the unburned unit ninety-one for trapped inhabitants. Powers ordered the crew of Engine 3 led by Lieutenant Tilson to enter unit number eighty-nine once the hydrant flowed.

Tilson's crew fell to their knees outside eighty-nine and donned face masks. Lt. Tilson ordered his hose-line charged by P/o Hought. Tilson opened the front door and intense heat radiated danger to firefighters crouched behind him. Dark orange flames approached from the living room. Visibility was limited, deadly fire was invisible to them.

"A shot to the ceiling," Lt. Tilson screamed at his pointed fist.

The quick burst of water F/f Patterson released vaporized inside the home. Flames retreated after a second shot to the ceiling. The fire-glow disappeared behind expanding steam before a final blast. The men ducked beneath this vapor that causes third-degree burns.

Lt. Tilson ordered his crew inside unit eighty-nine, "Advance!"

Jay Patterson sprayed a Z-pattern across the living room wall then doused engulfed furniture by hitting it with an open nozzle. F/f Salenté blindly crept forward, drew his axe, and bluntly reduced a coffee table to brilliant embers. Cpt. Powers ordered Mason to bust windows and ventilate smoke containing combustible gasses. Mason ran at the house with a pike pole and

swung its steel-hook through a bay window, shattering the glass. Thick, black smoke boiled through rising air. F/f Patterson let loose a fan of cold water at the window Mason broke and drifting smoke gushed outside to clear the room's haze before flames reversed direction. Tilson's crew stood-up with clear sight to pull an attack-line toward bedrooms and knock down any remaining fire.

Mason's radio crackled to life, "E-3 from E-2, where's our water supply?"

"Hydrant's frozen shut," P/o Carson replied.

"Pump your tank into Engine Two," Cpt. Powers conducted.

"Attention crews: Be advised of critically low water supplies." James Hight, the operator of E2 and their attack hoses, announced over the radio.

"Ace," the voice of Bobby Mattel tugged from Mason's shoulder, "Captain Powers wants you to search eighty-nine before Engine Two finishes pumping E-3's tank dry."

While tightening his breathing mask Mason wondered if it's wise to enter the burning building without a hose but, under his protective gear, Mattel's voice was ghostly apparent, "There's no waiting for water. Stay low and let's go, Ace!"

"Thurston Fire Department, is anyone home?" Mason shouted inside the home.

With no answer he swore he'd heard Bobby say, "The living room's vacant."

Mason's boots stepped awkwardly over smoldering beer cans, books, and ashy furniture debris. Measured respiration came to

life as bursts of air escaping through his regulator. If the thickness of black soot covering uncharred walls could indicate time, Mason estimated this fire burned for an hour before Captain Powers reported it to dispatch at dawn. Finding nobody, Lt. Tilson's attack crew cut Mason off from the bedrooms and turned a corner in front of them to the kitchen.

"Fire's out," Lt. Tilson cheered but shouted in the kitchen, "We have a body!"

Ace peeked into a bedroom attached to the kitchen and saw Lt. Tilson crouched above a girl on the floor under a window she'd partially-opened. When F/f Patterson lifted their victim by her armpits Mason saw a slender leg before Salenté grabbed her knees. Backing over this room's threshold with a lifeless figure that hung limp from their nervous grips to a deck behind the kitchen, Patterson's unfastened coat covered her face and Mason couldn't see her. His heart started to thump as aspects of his morning condensed into one sickening feeling of grief. Between extremes, snapped from sleep by freezing snow then warmed by fire concealed in smoke, Ace again realized an adrenaline rush. He instinctively threw his helmet, disconnected his respirator, and loosened straps securing a breathing-bottle to his back then dropped it. Before falling on his knees to administer CPR, Lt. Tilson grabbed him by his coat collar.

"Bring a stretcher."

"I can help you," Bobby Mattel whispered.

Rather than wheeling a stretcher through the burn Mason tossed boxes of forlorn electronics into a pile to pass a garage from the deck to the road and reassured himself, "She's going to be fine."

Lt. Tilson grabbed the gurney then closed the door. Ace, seeing Salenté crouched behind the girl's tilted-back head, peered through its glass with Bobby. With each calculated thrust he made upon the victim's chest, Patterson counted aloud- *one and two and three*. Seeing firefighters resuscitate a body clad in a t-shirt and turquoise-panties in the snow felt perverted.

Lt. Tilson called over the radio for more equipment. Paramedics met him carrying a defibrillator, duffel bags, and a drug box. One medic knelt to cover her mouth with a bag-valve mask; he repositioned the victim's head then cut open her t-shirt to stick electrodes on her ribs. Another EMT-P drew a syringe and plunged drugs into her neck to jumpstart her heart. Ace anxiously awaited the girl to awake to their emergency.

"Clear," technicians called before delivering a final shock from their defibrillator.

The victim's muscles contracted under stress of a fleeting burst of electricity and her spine buckled before collapsing into the snow. Mason couldn't read the ECG monitor from behind the door. He felt a lump in his throat while awaiting results, as if everything winter had frozen included hope.

Department Chiefs were on-scene. The State Fire Marshall stood by the mailbox with his notepad and a roll of yellow tape. A blanket wheeled by paramedics past firemen blocking the driveway was pulled over their victim's face. Two women stood in the snow, sobbing. Captain Powers helped officers restrain a young male fighting his way through their blockade. Police cars, fire trucks, and unmarked sedans littered Cobble Hill Road with flashing lights.

Mason felt connected to the girl loaded onto Ambulance 12. When its doors finally folded closed Mason wasn't ready to leave. He thought of asking permission to go to the hospital but his lips wouldn't open.

"I've been with her this whole time. Can I ride?"

Mason didn't say anything before a siren burst sent that ambulance away and Chief Bingham approached with Lt. Tilson to say, "Your crew is following Engine Two back to North station."

Mason nodded then Chief put a hand on Mason's shoulder to ask if he was okay and Mason thought, *"Why not?"*

"He's fine," Lt. Tilson interjected. "He's a rock."

"You're an island," Bobby congratulated him.

The road had cleared of this morning's ice. Their ride in Engine 3 back to North firehouse was quiet until Patterson recounted how he and Salenté had found a dead dog in one of the main bedrooms. Mason lowered his head; his recollection soon disappeared without any trace of mourning.

"7-4-7 from 5-1 E-3," Lt. Tilson radioed.

"Go ahead E-3," dispatch retorted.

"Per X-1, Engine Three is clear of the scene, returning to North out of service."

"E-3 you're clear of the scene, out of service at seven thirty-four."

Bobby showed Mason, alone at home, the newspaper report:

THURSTON- A former University of New Hampshire student died Saturday in a fire.

The girl, 22, who majored in nutrition before graduating from UNH, was found unconscious in a first-floor bedroom. She was taken by Thurston Fire Department paramedics to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. Fire Chief Rick Bingham said she could not be revived.

The early-morning fire was discovered by an off-duty fire Captain on his way to work. He is credited for saving the lives of three other residents of the Cobble Hill Road duplex. The fire remains still under investigation but officials believe it began with smoking materials left on the sofa.

"She was a beautiful girl," her father said.

"The death is a tragic loss for the University community," said Claudia Esposarà, interim dean of students at UNH. "We extend our sincere sympathy to her family and friends."

About 6 a.m. fire Captain Robin Powers was driving up Cobble Hill Road when he saw smoke coming from a window at 89-91. The one-story white ranch house is located in a wooded residential area and divided into two apartments. No smoke detectors were sounding when Powers arrived, he said.

Powers saw heavy smoke inside and knocked on windows and doors getting no responses. He opened the unlocked front door to number eighty nine. Without protective gear he was forced back out by the flames. He called 911 at 6:19 a.m.

At 6:25 a.m., firefighters arrived in two trucks. One crew entered two bedrooms in number ninety one where they woke up and evacuated two women and a man. The other crew took a hose into the living room at number eighty nine and extinguished the burning sofa.

The victim was found unconscious in eighty nine. A dog was found dead in a bedroom there, Bingham said. The man who lived in the dog's bedroom had left for work very early in the morning.

There was heavy fire, heat and smoke damage to number eighty nine. Because of the fatality the New Hampshire Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team held

a 'defusing' session at North fire station for any firefighter who wanted to come.

The Town of Thurston's last fire fatality was on Dec. 10, when a man died in a burning shed behind his Stagecoach Road home.

Copyrighted

Chapter Two

Mason Garnière wasn't always a firefighter. Before his melancholic tattoo of a lost girl- a love he couldn't forget, a passion in bunny ears he'd die for- Mason was an Economics major. Adrien LeRoux, riding in the passenger seat of his Jeep Wrangler, shared his sense of grandeur; Adrien was an Economist too.

Adrien was born in France. Adrien's mother was American. He attended high school on Cape Elizabeth in Maine. The two boys met a year earlier as sophomores, hailed from neighboring states, became best friends and were about to be roommates. Loyal, honest, and funny, Adrien could spin failures into accomplishments. For their second semester of junior year, Adrien proposed moving to Van Deter. It was a Victorian-inspired dormitory with hundred-year-old eave fascia and young girls- three girls to each guy. Dormers jut from Van Deter's fourth-story roof except for in the middle where two penthouse floors topped by a small lookout and spire rose.

When Mason and Adrien yanked open its double door student energy rushed them. But Mason was sucked across the lobby into a vista, muting academia, that rolled down the valley and ascended to the sky. The world had such scope that reality could be set between mirrors. The building didn't have a view; it offered an empire.

When one of Adrien's fingers poked Mason in the chest another directed Mason toward reception. A preoccupied receptionist had them wait. They could have spent eternity studying her locks, transitioning from brunet to chestnut to auburn.

"Mason, your key," Adrien snapped.

The receptionist said suddenly, "Room four hundred twenty is up and left."

"Are you high?"

"I'm tripping on that girl's hair," Mason answered upstairs.

"Did you get her number?"

"I thought you were there!"

Adrien smacked Mason who unlocked their door. Two beds, two desks, and a wooden bookshelf reflected from a parquet floor covered in so much lacquer that excess light is also what held two people in their tiny room.

"At least we have a balcony," Adrien highlighted.

"It's for show," Mason posited.

Dragging Adrien to step onto the faux balcony, a blonde coed seized their doorway. An apparition so exquisite inhabited Mason's mind that she couldn't be real. Her halo was rendered by fluorescent lights glowing in the hallway. Strawberry blonde hair cascading down her neck whipped at the cusp of her buttocks. Translucent freckles dotted pink cheeks and pink lips. She wore an oversized sweatshirt bearing some town name and whitewashed jeans. Frayed cotton had become a fashionable rip in her denim knee. Tall, thin, astonishing, Mason wondered how she'd appear in clothes matching her beauty.

"Aloha, my name is Aisha and I live down the hall. It's nice to find new faces in Van Deter."

"Nice to meet you too. My name's Mason and this is my friend Adrien."

Aisha stood by Mason who sat on his bed. Adrien crouched, tongue-tied, over electronics equipment and its wires. Aisha

confessed to being a freshman who moved-in last semester. She was innocent but was not shy.

"Where are you from?" Mason asked her.

"I'm from Seagusset Bay in Maine."

"You're a Sachem," he exposed.

"Know it?"

"No, your sweatshirt says *Seagusset Bay Sachems*."

"I know where you're from," Adrien, also from Maine, interjected, "We're neighbors!"

Aisha flattened her shirt to gaze at the logo on her breast then asked Adrien, "Is that your Play Station?"

"We're playing a game before dinner," Adrien replied.

"And is that stuffed bunny Peter Rabbit?"

"Given to me as a baby." Mason answered, "I love it."

"I know The Tale of Peter Rabbit because I'm in obsessed with bunnies. Nice to meet you," Aisha saluted. She turned to leave but spun toward Mason then asked, "I only know Nintendo but can I come back to play with you sometime?"

"Yes!" Mason exclaimed. He waited until she'd gone to credit Adrien, "Thanks for convincing me to move to Van Deter. It's awesome!"

"I told you, Mason," Adrien counted female to male students in Van Deter, "We'll benefit by living with three times as many girls."

Leading to his fateful day on Cobble Hill Road, that was Mason Garnière's first encounter of the girl who'd become the

most prominent part of his life before the death. Not anywhere near the last he'd see of Aisha, the next day Adrien invited Aisha and Erica from their fourth floor on a trip to the textbook annex. Mason offered a ride from Van Deter in his Jeep Wrangler.

"Call shot-gun," Mason whispered to Aisha on their way downstairs.

"Shouldn't Adrien get that?"

"I suppose..."

"Shot-gun!" Aisha shouted so loudly that her voice echoed in the stairwell.

Aisha sailed down remaining steps to pass Adrien through the double-door and widened her smile when Mason pointed to his red Wrangler. His car spared them from trekking across campus through snow but she loved Jeeps. When The University of New Hampshire's two parking-spots in front of its only academic bookstore were taken Mason inched his off-road vehicle over a curb to settle in a snowbank.

"We're not in a parking spot," Aisha commented.

"That's okay," Mason avowed.

They hunted for books before reuniting at its registers. Adrien held fifteen hundred dollars worth of used textbooks resold for a meager seven hundred and a wad of cash. Erica possessed a similar bundle as Adrien plus a credit card. Mason carried a psychology text and a few economics novels that could travel on vacation. Aisha clutched a pink notebook; *UNH* reflected from silver lettering on its cover. A journal was all she needed.

"That's it?" A stock-boy covering her register asked before telling her to steal it.

While Mason figured girls were accustomed to getting things for free Aisha tossed a snowball at his back. Snow came apart on his shoulder and ice pricked his face. Mason was determined to flirt back.

"You could've bought one of those notebooks at the campus giftshop."

"I know. But I wanted to come with you," Aisha retorted. "G-a-r-n-i-e with an accent r-e. Is that how you spell your surname?"

"Impeccable. How did you know where to place the accent mark?"

"I studied your vehicle registration," Aisha answered.

Aside from their encounter at UNH's textbook annex, trysts in the early weeks of Mason and Aisha's second semester were limited to a few words between classes or at their dining hall. Mason couldn't plan to do more than bump into Aisha who drove home every weekend to be with a boy she'd been seeing since Christmas named Nick. It seemed she really liked Nick because Seagusset Bay was a two-hour drive from campus. Despite being part of Portland's metropolitan area, Seagusset was famous to Maine; residents of several states traveled long distances every summer to visit.

Mason didn't encounter Aisha alone until the middle of February. Valentine's Day fell on a Wednesday. Aisha couldn't drive all the way to Seagusset Bay during the week. She accompanied Mason to a small party in Williamson Hall where freshman friends cynically circulated vats of candy hearts to savor. Hours after meeting his old roommates including Dan

Bell, a New York native, Mason and Aisha backtracked to Van Deter so closely together that shoulders brushed with each step. Both had the butterflies. Aisha slowed while passing the Chancellor's house. She tugged at Mason's coat until he stopped.

"I have something for you," she said.

"Really?"

"Ready?" Aisha asked while reaching to grasp his hand. "I wanted to give you my heart."

Bundled tightly withing the fur-lined hood of her corduroy coat, Aisha opened her fist into Mason's palm and released a candy she'd saved reading *kiss me*. When pink lips curved up to her smiling eyes Mason envisioned an angel. Gravity drew his head toward hers, and he could smell pheromones from her cheek when their lips touched. Awareness revolved around their embrace; they pressed tightly. They did not want to let one another go and they couldn't stop kissing. But Aisha eventually had to go home to Seagusset Bay. Friday afternoon they reached this crossroads when her rapping knuckles awoke Mason.

"I stopped to say goodbye," Aisha said. "I'm leaving for Seagusset Bay."

"Cool. Be safe there."

"I had a really good time with you last Wednesday. Can we do something when I'm back next week or are you busy with class?"

"You bet," Mason said, "I don't attend my classes."

Mason lay in bed picturing Aisha driving home to Seagusset Bay in her lifted truck. Chevy fans were flattened to encounter a nineteen-year-old girl with nearly matching strawberry-blonde hair behind the wheel of the twenty-five-year-old orange

antique. Seeing her rolling on thirty-three-inch tires resulted in marvel and her awe led Mason to ingest a sleeping pill. After drifting off, Mason dreamt he was in Beatrix Potter's Garden searching behind bushes and beneath flower-pots.

"What are you doing?" Mr. McGregor, the gardener, asked.

"I'm looking for Peter Rabbit."

"Peter is with his mother in the sand-bank underneath the roots of a very big fir-tree. Would you come inside and help me move my bedroom dresser?"

Hedges cloaked McGregor's nine-color home; yellow eaves, mint trim, purple corner boards, and blood muntin all hid its narrow, sloped staircase. Mason couldn't grasp The McGregors' dresser upright and risked tumbling downstairs. After bending-over for four flights- the same number as in Van Deter- his cramped fingers had become hooks.

"Stay for dinner? We're having rabbit stew," McGregor's wife ventriloquized through a paralyzed jaw.

"I can't. Peter and I planned mischief."

"Take these," Mrs. McGregor retorted then released confetti. "One piece per boy. Don't spend all your time on it in one place!"

Mason's closest friends placed her square pieces of paper under their tongues then plopped down waiting to be enlightened while everyone else refilled cups from a metal canister until they made poor choices, puked, or passed out. Mason remembered to dig through black-currant bushes in search of Peter Rabbit but crawled under them to unearth a bike. Behind tall maples blocking moonlight Thurston residents rested in bed, except for Mason who carved circles with his bike. Then, on an open

stretch beyond homesteads, a small rabbit hopped lippity-lippity from starlit forest into the middle of the road, blocked his ride, and stood.

"Peter," Mason coaxed, "I've been looking for you all night. Where's your blue jacket? That's the second one you lost in a fortnight!"

His rabbit asked, "Do you wish I were Aisha?"

Mason placed Peter Rabbit on his handlebars and they rode without pedaling. Gravity pulled them in a descent beyond Van Deter. Momentum built with each turn down the steep hill. It seemed like Peter Rabbit steered left, right, left while they spiraled downhill and the gust rushed at them.

"I have a crush on Aisha," Mason screamed.

"Aisha? That girl is crazy!"

"Peter, in her absences I realize I love her more than I love you."

"Open your eyes! Look out! You're operating on the wrong side of her road," his bunny called before oncoming headlights struck them.

Slamming on the spinning pedals deafened that car's horn. Mason swerved, the bike tipped over, and they slid toward its tires. Sparks shot from asphalt where it scraped the bike-frame until they soared over the roadside. The riderless bike hopped up and dove under that car. Mason woke wound in bedsheets to the screech of twisting aluminum, covered in blood. Mason realized that blood was night sweat. He found his room then reached for a shot of rum. For the rest of that night and remainder of this weekend Mason couldn't flee a racing heart.

Mason frequently checked Aisha's door to see if she'd returned to school. She didn't come back until Monday night. That's when Mason asked her out to dinner.

"I ordered a salad," Aisha answered.

Mason drove to the restaurant she ordered from, bought his own dinner, took her salad before it went out for delivery, then called her from their dorm's callbox. Upon waiting for her to come downstairs to meet some delivery-driver that wouldn't exist he set a table in front of the window with a view for two.

"I thought you left for dinner," Aisha recalled. "I walked by your room but you weren't in."

"I'm here."

"Where did you get two salads?"

"I was hungry so I ordered two salads. On second thought, I don't think I can eat both. Do you want one?"

"How did you know I don't want olives?"

"I got lucky."

"This is one of the most amazing surprises I can remember, mostly because it was so unexpected, but also because I'm having such a great time with you. This will be the best start to my week. I am really excited to be back at school."

"I waited all day for you to return. I missed you last weekend."

"You're cute. Earlier, I didn't mean you couldn't eat with me. I figured you were hungry and were going to the dining hall."

"My ex-girlfriend is getting married," Mason unloaded.

"Did you love her?"

"I did while we dated. She was two years ahead of me in school and moved for work after graduating. We broke-up when she started banging a coworker though. It's not who she's marrying and this isn't a major disappointment but her affair is a reminder that I'm alone."

"My best friend got married after we graduated high school and then disappeared from my life. I miss her," Aisha said. "I'm always the bride's maid but never the bride. My birthday is on Christmas Eve and no one pays me any attention because they like Jesus more!"

"My birthday is the 19th! We should do something together."

"How do you celebrate?"

"I started drinking at fourteen then toking."

"When I was young I was anorexic and I had to see a counselor. I hated her. When I was older, like seventeen, I started doing drugs at clubs. My friends and I would sneak in, take ecstasy, and then hook-up with older guys."

"What made you take risks?"

"I don't know. I never know anything about myself. My grandmother is bipolar and sometimes I worry that I'm going to turn out to be crazy."

"You are not crazy. You're beautiful," Mason marveled.

"I know. Nothing bad has ever happened to me, and people like me. But I still throw up when I don't feel good about my life, and I don't feel good often, so I throw up a lot! Last semester was my first time away at school and I was really scared. My roommate, who I barely knew, was in her boyfriend's

room all the time and I felt like I had no one to talk to. I needed a place to go instead of being alone in my room so I started talking with Erica. Because I can't be by myself I ran to Erica's room with everything bothering me in order to get out the frustration I have inside. I used to drink cold medicine to sleep and I left my door open to the hall so I wouldn't be alone at night; my Nyquil habit got up to almost a bottle per day. But that's not anything new because I've always been fucked-up. As a kid I stole lip-gloss from stores; I have every Lip Smacker ever made. Over winter-break I started seeing Nick. I see him mostly because I go home to Seagusset to be with my friends. I feel safer in Seagusset Bay than I do in New Hampshire."

"I feel better when you're here, like beside me," Mason said.

"Do you want a hug?" Aisha asked.

"Yes," Mason without waiting to wrap his arms around her.

"You should wear my ring." Aisha took the green stone set in a silver band off of her finger and slipped it over Mason's pinky then said, "So you never forget that you have a friend you can talk to and one who will always give you hugs."

Mason grew closer to Aisha than he was to Adrien. Although they spoke no more about their feelings or that Valentine's Day kiss, he thought that Aisha liked him too. On Friday, like clockwork, Aisha packed to leave for Seagusset Bay. For the first time, Aisha returned on Sunday afternoon and ran to Mason's door.

"You're wearing my ring!" She said, red and out of breath from the cold.

"Of course, I can't take it off. How was your weekend?"

"I missed you. I couldn't wait to come back. I'm miserable every second without you."

"I also missed you."

"I can't stop thinking about you and I decided that it's over with Nick."

"Terrible. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, we weren't dating long and I was unhappy. I dated Nick because I'm at home in Seagusset Bay."

"So, you're done...for real?"

"Yes," Aisha answered.

Mason said, "That means we can kiss!"

Aisha grabbed the back of Mason's neck and they crashed upon his bed, bound together. They fell asleep intertwined and, on Monday, cut class to chase intimacy. In love, the next day Aisha fondled Mason while her roommate lay in bed five feet from them.

"She's asleep," Aisha whispered.

"We should respect her."

"I love you," Aisha said, "And I want you inside of me."

Aisha put her mouth against his ear. He felt her moist, warm, excited respiration and couldn't resist. Mason gave-in to her. On Tuesday morning they couldn't stop smiling and didn't get out of bed again. At the dining commons Tuesday night, they couldn't take their eyes off of one other and it was obvious to friends that they'd got together. They held hands while walking back to Van Deter.

"Why do you have to leave and go home this weekend?" Mason asked Aisha.

"I have to go home to tell Nick that we're breaking up. It's better if I do it in person."

"I thought you did that last weekend!"

"I know, baby."

"*You know?*"

"I thought *you* think I did that! You thought I already told him."

"You've been cheating! Why didn't you clarify your situation before we made love?"

"I didn't want to disappoint you."

"I thought things were over between you two," Mason explained, "If I knew you had a boyfriend then I wouldn't have gave-in to you. If you're able to cheat on him then eventually you'll cheat on me too!"

"It's over between Nick and I. I swear, Mason."

Mason removed her ring from his smallest finger then asked, "Could it be over between two people when one person doesn't know it's over?"

"Mason, don't do this."

"It's been fun, bunny," Mason said then handed-over her ring and walked away.

Mason missed Aisha so terribly while she was home that he regretted how he'd said goodbye. They didn't speak during the school-week. But, she walked into Erica's room while he sat

there. A student who'd graduated from Kennebunkport high school named Tom, a more affluent town near Seagusset, slighted Aisha when she walked in. Mason beckoned her; neither knew what their status was but both undergraduates wanted to get away from Tom's puerility.

"Hey 'Gus," Tom called, "Next time you're in Mason's room look under his bed and check for all the girls he's hiding under it!"

"It's called SEAGUS," Aisha shouted then turned to Mason and whispered, "Thanks for getting me out."

"I wasn't sure if we're allowed to hangout," Mason answered, "I don't know where we stand together."

"I feel the same way. When I saw you in Erica's room, I almost didn't go in."

"Do you want to drive someplace to figure this out?"

"I'd like to. You're mysterious, Mason."

Miles from campus Mason asked, "Wanna shift?"

"The car?" Aisha asked. "I don't know how to."

"Grab here," Mason said while clamping her hand around its stick, "I'll teach you."

Mason depressed his clutch then nodded every time Aisha needed to maneuver the rod towering above his transmission into a higher gate. He exited state Route 49 and, at the top of a steep street, engaged four-wheel-drive. All wheels barreled up a trail that dropped two hundred feet to the Mad River valley. His Jeep bounced over rocks, fishtailing over leaves and snow, and came inches from rolling over that ledge to boulder-strewn rapids along with falling debris.

Five-hundred feet above the state highway trees thinned to a rocky plateau. From that expanse they surveyed forest starting with the White Mountains in the northeast to Dartmouth College in the Southwest of Grafton County. But Mason continued north toward a trailhead into Waterville Valley so narrow that branches slapped the windshield and scratched his door. He'd drive west through the woods to Cone Pond after a thirty-foot puddle.

Aisha bit her tongue after contending, "Dude, you totally can't cross that."

"We can."

Mason downshifted then feathered his gas for consistent momentum- too much and he'd spin the tires, too little and he'd sink in the mud. Beyond that rocky hill, their plateau, the bushes, and this slop, they stopped beside a crystal stream slipping into Cone Pond. They got out and slid between trees that caught their fall down vertical terrain following the bourn. When there was no more ground to stand on that gurgling stream sprung from their mountainside and crashed upon a green boulder embankment.

"How did you find this? It's like not even real," Aisha said when she caught up to him, "This is amazing."

"I stumbled upon it while exploring. It's where I come to think. Cone Pond is a watershed, part of the Pemigewasset River tributary after the Mad River settles into Campton. The Pemigewasset joins the Winnepesaukee in Franklin to form The Merrimack River. It's where we'll get water to drink all the way down in Plaistow if the city of Manchester ever runs dry, according to New Hampshire. I wanted to share this with you because nobody can find me here!"

"I think it's beautiful. And, I think you're beautiful," Aisha said then rolled up her sleeve to reveal their names tattooed on her forearm in pen surrounded by a heart. "When I first met you, I didn't believe you could be real. I told myself that I was never going to cheat on a boyfriend again and I thought I was happy with Nick, but you changed everything. That first day, when we went to the textbook annex, I immediately knew I liked you. I couldn't stop thinking about you and I wanted, I needed to be with you. Our first kiss was a huge deal to me because I liked you so much. That was something I really wanted. You make me happy. I have never felt so emotionally close to someone in my entire life. You have given me something I enjoy and appreciate. You give me confidence. You make me feel like a goddess, Mason. Above all, you are an incredible friend."

They stepped closer, staring into each other's eyes. Mason put his hand behind Aisha's head and Aisha put her cold hands under Mason's jacket to feel the skin of his warm chest. She pulled him closer, they pressed together between staggered legs and kissed.

"Aisha, I like you. You make me happy. You make the world look beautiful."

"You make me feel a lot less sick. I want to be your girlfriend, Mason. Will you be my boyfriend?"

"And Nick?"

"I broke up with him over the weekend, for real this time. I didn't love him. We weren't going out for long and we didn't see each other a lot. I want to go out with you. I want to be with you. Mason, be my boyfriend and I will never go back to Seagusset Bay again!"

Next Friday, Mason scrubbed lather from his skin with his eyes closed, the shower working his neck and shoulders as the water carried him away. When relaxed to meditation, past earthly perception of time, the curtain flew open to expose him and twisted this peace he had into a burst of paranoia that exited as a cry: *Aisha*. Aisha violated Mason's retreat in the men's room. In return, Mason visited her room swathed in a towel where Aisha's roommate was awkwardly preoccupied with his nude body.

"Hi sexy boy, I would have taken off my clothes and joined you but it looked like you were all done. Do you want to go out to dinner with John and another girl tonight?"

"Double date?"

Aisha looked into his eyes, put one hand on his shoulder, and swept dripping wet hair from his forehead before whispering inches from his face, "Baby, I don't think they're together. It's just fun."

"Where?"

"A Campton place called *Shizo* that serves Japanese food. You can get hand rolls and stuff."

"Hand rolls, Aisha?"

"That's raw fish rolled up with seaweed and rice or other things like avocado."

"Do they have beer?"

"Don't worry bunny, you will be fine. You'll love the food."

The foursome shared platters of sushi and sashimi along with a couple bottles of sake and, when conversation drifted toward post-dinner festivities, John suggested camping behind a

Buddhist temple in Woodstock. It was mid March in New England; sake must have hit them because everyone treated his suggestion as brilliant.

They backtracked to Thurston for John's tarp and warmer clothes, a stash of camping gear, blankets, and Mason's gallon of rum then journeyed northwest to the White Mountain National Forest where the Appalachian Trail crosses Woodstock. Mason, Aisha, John, and Kate hiked through woods dragging equipment in contractor-sized garbage bags. Deeper snow drifts forced them to carry their sacs, in a quest to find a dry clearing. They'd all lost hope before John advertised success from the other side of a railroad.

"Ahead," John insisted, "We can camp under that tree."

"It's uneven. It will hurt to sleep on top of big roots," Mason complained.

"These roots melted the snow," John defended while dropping his bag.

Defrosting roots wouldn't protect anyone from the freezing temperature so Mason ordered a fire. But it was an undertaking in pitch-black dark to find firewood; scantily collecting brush on top of freshly fallen snow, sticks under the snow were wet and branches from the trees were green. The girls weren't giving their operation much attention so Mason, gulping rum, ditched a gathering mentality to hunt. He found fifteen feet of dead maple leaning against a pine and returned to camp dragging the trunk over his shoulder. John helped him split the log while both girls circled stones and snapped sticks.

"Mason," Aisha revealed her pile, "Wanna light a fire?"

Mason's eyes kindled at her affection. Mason took a Bic from his pocket to light an inferno. The clique stretched their

blankets atop the tarp to play cards. Mason's belly was so soused in rum he thought that he should dance in the fire instead of playing. Mason twirled to his own rhythm until falling into those flames, still flailing his arms. Everyone was entertained until John's concern.

John heard voices in the woods. Mason jumped from the campfire to investigate. They found teenagers on the railway experimenting with hallucinogens. John scared them off to safety; as soon as he did, freezing rain poured from the sky, drumming against the ice-crusted snowpack. The forest rattled like a thousand maracas, echoing the urgency of shelter. John hoisted one side of their ground-covering up the tree. Ice ricocheted off the tarp and slush poured down its angled face. They tore open trash bags used to haul their gear and covered wet ground where their tarp had been.

John and Kate nestled in a sleeping bag upslope, against the tree. Mason and Aisha split a flannel blanket down-slope. Mason was beyond shelter, clutching Aisha so he didn't roll into the snow. Sleeping in every article of clothing but his boots, Mason was still cold and longed to sleep through the loud pattering.

After a half-hour of turmoil Mason whispered, "Aisha."

"Mmmm," Aisha groaned, pressing her head tightly against his shoulder.

"I'm sorry to wake you, baby, we have to move closer to the tree because my blankets are getting wet from water running over this tarp."

Aisha pulled her boyfriend to shelter. She cuddled him for warmth. Mason remained awake most of the night; he didn't pass out until hours after the others stopped stirring. Freezing rain ceased by sunrise yet Mason awoke to the fact that he was

dangerously cold. His socks and jeans were soaked, his shirt and hair were wet, his hands felt numb. Mason couldn't feel his feet at all. But Mason could smell the sweetness of Aisha's cheek before kissing her. Upon resting his blue lips against her head his teeth chattered uncontrollably. He silently thanked her for sparing him the ordeal of facing death alone.

"Aisha, baby," Mason whispered, "What time is it?"
"Please go to sleep!"

"I can't wiggle my toes or bend my ankles."

"Take-off your wet shirt. Move closer. Get under my blanket and I'll try to warm you."

"I wish we could go home now. John and his girl look warm, asleep."

"Let's wake him, frosty, and say we have to go."

"Can we?"

"John, Mason is wet. He he's blue, he feels freezing, I think we should go."

"In a half-hour," John insisted then rolled over.

"Wake up," Aisha called again. "We're going to take his car. You can sleep and you can walk home."

"Let's pack," John grumbled.

Mason rose and wrapped himself in Aisha's blanket. John and Kate gathered as much gear as they could carry in their arms. Mason's feet were far too swollen to fit into his boots. He tossed his boots on top of the tarp and dragged what they couldn't carry to his Jeep.

"You'll have to walk through snow," John enlightened.

"I can't feel it. Leaving them exposed is better than trying to jam them in."

But Mason couldn't keep pace. The tarp was cumbersome and his feet were covered in ice. Mason staggered and fell behind. Where jagged gravel lining the railroad cut Mason's bare feet Aisha ran from the track to empty her arms in his car. Mason lost sight of the group, stumbled, and fell. Aisha returned to find him covered in snow with the gear scattered around him. John drove his Jeep home and she held Mason upright in his backseat.

Mason changed into sweats at Van Deter then Aisha bound him in blankets. She left to shower then returned to sleep with him. His body was still cold when she examined his feet. Pink in the woods, the shade of his extremities had darkened to deep purple. Aisha woke him to ask if he could walk. Upon standing, Mason's lower legs throbbed with pain as if shards of glass were embedded under his soles. Gravity dragged blood into damaged vessels while he stood, swelling his feet to twice their size before Aisha's eyes.

"It hurts to stand upright," he said.

"Oh my God! You need to lie back down. Try sleeping and I'll bring you food."

"Thank you, Aisha."

"You are so cute. I just want to hug and kiss you right now. Lie down, close your eyes. Before you know it, I'll be caring for you."

His frostbite was a serious injury. He didn't know if Aisha was to blame but John was her friend who brought them camping. Aisha's affairs had to benefit her bond to Mason, not make him depend on other people. Mason was glad there was a beautiful

girl he had to rely on. While confined for ten days with his feet elevated on chairs three quarters of his days Mason fantasized about getting married. During that time Mason resolved not to camp ever again.

As winter gave way to longer days, the weather warmed and Mason couldn't remember any point in his life being better than his second semester of junior year. With a storm of midterm papers to turn in, he was forgetting the economist he was supposed to become.

Aisha needed a friend more than a boyfriend. Their relationship detracted from schoolwork, making it easy for Mason to abandon school assignments. During midterms Aisha wanted marijuana to cure her nausea so she complained about being sick.

"I didn't go to class today," Aisha said, biting her nails.

"Why not, honey?"

"I didn't feel good. I've been throwing up all day."

"Well, I have a midterm paper to write. I'll join you down the hall in a couple of hours."

"You could write your paper if I can only find weed."

"I'm out. You'll have to ask someone else."

"Could you at least make it in time to sleep over?"

Mason agreed but didn't get to Aisha's room before she fell asleep. Her door was unlocked, Mason tucked-in to bed beside her. In the morning Aisha's blonde locks were wrapped around her head and she looked radiant. But her appearance was more angelic than how she talked.

"I played with your penis while you slept," Aisha said.

"Could you tell?"

"I had no idea. Did my penis play back?"

"It didn't get as big as usual."

Mason interjected, "You look like a lion."

"Why because I'm ugly?"

"Lions are beautiful. With your mane and blonde eyebrows, you're my exotic pet!"

"A mane," Aisha growled, "So I'm a boy! By the way, are you going to class?"

Mason glanced at the clock then answered, "I have a two-thirty."

Aisha climbed on top of him to make love. It was their second time this morning but he had stamina. Aisha stayed on top. When Mason was ready to climax, Aisha tightened her legs around his torso. He wasn't wearing protection.

"I have to take it out," Mason said.

"Keep going," Aisha bit his ear.

"No, baby, don't say that. We'll regret it."

"They have things. Sorority girls do this all the time."

They stayed in bed for several hours before finally showering and walking to the pharmacy for emergency contraception. He missed his two-thirty class, and Mason realized love interferes with opportunity, discipline, and judgment. When desire overrides responsibility, there are trade-offs between people and priorities. An impossible amount of research remained to finish his midterms so Mason stopped loving Aisha cold-turkey in order to focus on long-term goals.

Mason barely managed to finish exams, skipping meals and losing sleep, after cramming day and night for a week. He planned to offset his misery by spending sunnier days with other friends. Aisha wasn't so lucky. Her fixation blinded her to spring. And, Mason found Aisha in the State of New Hampshire's one dark place- in bed.

"Meet me in the parking lot," Mason said to Adrien, "I'm going to see if Aisha wants to come."

Mason opened her door and flicked on a light to hear Aisha from under her covers, "Hi bunny, you finally came. I feel like I haven't held you in my arms in a week!"

"I've been busy with midterms but I saw you the day before yesterday. What are you doing in this stuffy room? Look outside. It's finally a t-shirt day!"

"Reading my book."

"Really, in the dark? Adrien, Erica, and I are going to town for pizza and to window shop. Join us."

"I can't. I've been throwing up all day."

"Do you have a fever?"

"No, I'm not sick like that."

"Then come to town. It's nice outside! We can get something to make you feel better."

"The only thing that will make me feel better is to have you in my arms."

"Aisha, I really want to take care of you but, because of midterms, I been stuck on campus for a week and this weather's a dream. Adrien and Erica are waiting for me. Let me take you to town."

"Go. You obviously care more about them than you do about me."

"It's been fun kid," Mason stuffed then hurried outside.

Adrien asked if they were waiting for Aisha. Mason didn't know why Aisha was sick all the time. He didn't think they fought. But Mason couldn't think of another way of explaining to Adrien why Aisha wasn't coming so he said they had a fight. When Mason returned, he found a note slipped under his door.

Mason Alexander,

I am so in love with you and you make me happier than anyone else on earth. It's 4:20 and you just left with Erica + Adrien. You probably don't even care that I just yelled out the window, "I'm done with this bullshit."

Even though you don't care, I yelled at you because - well, from my point of view - you go to bed really late (usually after drinking or smoking), sleep really late (I realize you do go to some classes by the way), and I really want to see you when I come home from school but it seems you always have something else to do. You make me feel like a chore.

Constantly, I feel that your pot smoking comes before me and when I go to talk to you, you either get angry with me because what I am saying is 'stupid,' or you are high and don't want a serious conversation...I just don't know.

I love you so much but also you can make me more upset than anyone else can. I honestly do not want this to end. You give me reason to keep living. I can't imagine my life without you but sometimes it just doesn't work.

There shouldn't be these serious problems after two months. I really attempted to change and I am continuing to make my life more stable and happier. You have helped me (seriously) in deciding that this bullshit about me being happy then sad all the time has to end. I love you so much but we don't work together sometimes.

Also, I seriously hope when you are reading this that you are not high and understand what I am saying. Please let me know what is going on as soon as you can talk so I can find out because I do love you so much and I want to be with you. If together we both decide that 'goodbye' is better than um...well I mean, I guess that's how it's going to be.

I'm sorry. But I love you and really want things to be cool.

I love you Mason Alexander Garnière

♥ Aisha ♥

"Adrien," Mason asked his roommate, "Did you hear Aisha yell at us as we left for town?"

"Nope, did she want to come?"

"Not really," Mason replied then passed him the letter.

"Wow," Adrien concluded, "It sounds like she really likes you, man. You should spend more time with her. You date the hottest girl in Van Deter and that comes with maintenance, son."

"Thanks for your economics lesson, Adrien. But Aisha's got it all wrong! I smoke pot while studying and I had a ton of midterms last week. Now that I'm around she's the one who won't hangout. You're making me feel as if I'm neglecting her."

"Hey," Adrien smoothed, "I don't know what you two have going on together."

Aisha came and said, "I want to talk to you about the letter I left. Did you hear me yell at you out the window?"

"No," Mason answered, "We didn't hear you!"

"I went into the boys' room and I could see you leaving. I yelled to you: *I'm done with this bullshit.*"

"I know, we read your letter!"

"I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry for acting crazy and getting upset about nothing."

"It's okay," Mason said, "Thanks for telling me there's nothing behind this drama."

Chapter Nine

The clock-radio read half past six. Nevertheless a boy and girl lying asleep in bed with matching blonde hair and blue flannel pajama bottoms couldn't have told you it did. Mason and Aisha were unconscious and equally unaware of a train pressing toward them from some distance. At this moment they had peace but, even if it meant confronting these bedfellows' dreams, the train was predestined to shake them.

Chugging mechanically, determined to intersect the couple, the racket grew loud. Velocity compressed sound traveling toward their ears ahead of forward speeding signals most compactly and its whistle's pitch sharpened to create a piercing crescendo of higher frequency noise. The locomotive screamed its highest note at their exact position along the tracks and that pair awoke when it passed their home on Sunrise Avenue.

Mason was jettisoned from slumber into reality. He listened to the faint rumble of horn trailing from that engine and screeching; the squeal of tons of steel dragging on steel had a crushing mass which couldn't be escaped. Semi-conscious, it took Mason time to determine where he was whilst metallic wails echoed within his head and anxiety they caused palpitated his heart. Unfamiliar in the world around him, Mason momentarily felt as he did when he first came into it. To confront shocks of cold, hunger, and fatigue in utter darkness, Mason opened his eyes toward Aisha.

His apparent disturbance had also stirred his girlfriend. With a frown, Aisha pressed a pillow over her ears, moaning and kicking. Although as that train vanished its whistle became inaudible the current clatter of its rail-cars was ever near. A monotonous beat of moderately intense bangs repeated over and over again, without end. *Clank, clank. Clink. Ca-clank. Ca-*

cluck, ca-clunk. Clank, clank. Clink. Ca-clank. Ca-cluck, ca-clunk.

Mason laid his head upon Aisha's chest and muttered, "That fucking train."

Aisha's eyes remained closed while massaging an ache pounding from within Mason's head wedged between her breasts which started at the crux of his neck and crept up to his crown before circling in either direction toward his temples. He concluded this was not a good way to begin his last shift before a vacation and his body didn't feel good about the circumstance either.

When the last car on that long freight train finally passed Mason spoke again, "I'm gonna close my eyes to see if I can get another couple of hours' sleep before work."

Aisha nodded in agreement, herself all ready to snooze. Behind closed eyes Mason let his mind drift. His headache started to fade and, upon reaching a state of relaxation, his neck tingled. Once his mind meditated devoid of conscious control he couldn't discern whether he was asleep or awake because his subconscious jazzed. He drifted, fell, and disappeared into the darkness of rest. But ten minutes later a radio alarm hit him hard, arresting his descent into sleep's abyss with the inelastic force of a taught rope. Mason glanced at his clock; it read seven. Fully aware he couldn't shake this discomfort a second time, Mason sprung from bed and that headache returned to life with his body.

"Fucking train," Mason muttered again then began dressing for work.

Mason removed a cold steel ring piercing the cartilage of his upper ear then pajamas before reversing this process to wear

similar clothing but jewelry. He pushed one leg then his other through heavy canvas slacks, raising those around his waist; then Mason pulled a navy tee over his head, wrapping that in his uniform button-up. Slipping into boots, Mason left his shirt untucked and his shoes unlaced. He'd complete dressing at North station before starting his duty shift today.

Mason had been a respected member of the Thurston Fire Department for nearly two years now. He worked as a probationary firefighter while enrolled in Emergency Medical Technician training which culminated in Firefighter II and EMT-B certifications. Then Mason apprenticed for a month and got assigned to Ambulance 14 at North station. Thirteen months after graduating from FASTEMS front-line medical response was an extension of Mason's duty-shifts. A five-man crew staffed Engine 3 and two of those five firefighters made hospital runs in the ambulance. Although he performed well in EMT classes he missed many of his tour of duty's routine fire calls and wasn't enamored by medical responding. It was greater work; fire emergencies were sporadic but medical aid was constantly requested. Throughout daytime shifts A-14 responded twice as much as the engine did and at night that ratio crept to upwards of three to one.

Each medical call was completed by its own stack of paperwork. Mason never preferred these assignments but his captain stuck him on North's first-due ambulance every shift. It wasn't just the work, tedium also concerned him. Ambulances are referred to as buses because they transport patients from emergency scenes to a hospital. More than half of all calls Mason responded to were mundane so, as months he staffed A-14 multiplied, Mason alarmed his occupation as *fireman* grew to be that of a dignified chauffeur.

Mason spent most of his second year diagnosing patients he transported from Thurston. He broke their complaints into two

principal types of problems, medicals and traumas. An overwhelming amount of medical calls were for old folks that had difficulty breathing and he loathed caring. His treatment was to take their vitals then administer oxygen yet some problems required keen detection in order to determine medical priority or prescription. And while repeating the same patient interviews each night over again, call after call, Mason saw himself becoming a zombie-like Barbara Walters.

"What's your name?" He would establish a rapport.

"Are you taking any medications?"

"What did you eat today?"

"Do you have allergies?"

"Can you describe your symptoms and their onset?"

This was the beginning of a search that dredged on. When investigations ended in a reasonable hypothesis Mason's ride to hospitals got spent monitoring patients' conditions, surveying their comfort, and watching vital signs like breathing, blood pressure, and heart rate. He hated his role in this social context, validating ailing strangers' diseases; as a result of his extreme dislike, Mason preferred unconscious patients.

Trauma was more compelling. A range of traumas starting at splinters soars through lacerations and avulsions then peaks at decapitation. On trauma responses Mason's adrenaline fix was directly correlated to the volume of warm blood on-scene. After a fibula breaks skin conversation becomes superfluous and action necessary. But serious trauma rarely presented and he never got to work cardiac arrests, which had both medical and traumatic causes, unless stumbling upon one of those out of the blue

without being dispatched. His partner was a paramedic trained to analyze ECG reports plus administer various heart medications which relegated Mason at a code to the driver's seat.

In any case driving to scenes was the sexiest aspect of his medical duty. Thurston's Ambulance 14 was brand-new. Despite being as big as a rescue rig A-14 had sports car acceleration and European handling. Plus GPS navigated, radio transmitters controlled traffic signals, and wheel mounted toggles coordinated a psychedelic lightshow and intimidating siren array. But as this could be behemoth machine accelerated with a presence that ordered obstacles from EMTs' paths eight hundred foot-pounds of torque sucked drivers into their seats. Agilely sprinting around winding roads with a turn of the head, racing to scenes never felt legal; with tons of iron behind the cab it felt impossible. Responders felt paradoxically intoxicated and sober while street signs, telephone poles, and pedestrians whipped through their fields of vision. Caution was exercised when Mason drove because his job was public safety yet once arriving on-scene being an EMT sucked.

Mason lacked the taste for being an Emergency Medical Technician. He was self-conscious in front of patients plus bright lights and sterile atmospheres inside medical buildings were institutionalizing. Although he couldn't blame nurses, administering a majority of patient care while doctors received all the credit for their patients' recoveries, hospital staff also belittled field counterparts for minor procedural missteps. And Mason felt helplessly dumb when he delivered the dead. Unlike deceased dragged through flames while brave men risked their lives, when a person died in their sleep or in a car crash there was never an adversary to fight or to blame for defeat.

Dying to play with fire, Mason's wish was finally realized after a nine month stint responding in A-14 when Thurston Fire Chief Rick Bingham commissioned all his department's front-line

ambulances to respond at a paramedic level. Mason was a basic; the chief's mandate bumped Mason from North station's vanguard ambulance to its reserve one. Twenty-two months after graduating from RIFFA he was finally able to staff the engine again but not as *probie*.

Besides fighting fire Mason spent the past two months of two years on the force shadowing mentors, his captain and other senior members of his crew. During routine responses he got educated about public presentation, access, and authority. He learned on a case by case basis who to call whether the power company, water company, or DPW. Mason tackled electrical systems, regulations, flooding, and cats in trees. And some fire department emergencies were so rare they had to be apprenticed because odd experience passed individually from fireman to firefighter.

During downtime at the station Mason studied pump operations, driving a fire engine to the scene to produce the men who fought fires' water supply. Speeding the vehicle's engine through an externally mounted throttle, the apparatus transmission drives a pump that discharges water at calculated volumes and pressures. Power is set as an RPM and rates rely on factors from nozzle specs to hose diameter and hose length to target elevation. The best pump operators could reach spots one hundred yards uphill using deluge guns on first aim with zero static hydrant pressure.

Everyday Mason learned more he began to carry himself like a professional fireman. Developing confidence, Mason no longer stood behind officers awaiting orders. He could now step forward and lead. But if Mason wanted to be a leader then his hiatus from the medical profession could not last forever. An opportunity to ride the engine exclusively was a catch-22; although existing personnel were exempted from the chief's

requirement paramedics address all local calls for medical aid, a consequence of his mandate was that Mason wouldn't be promoted to lieutenant unless he certified as an EMT-P. And in order to deliver a high level of service the Town of Thurston planned to expand the ranks of its fire department.

Thurston Fire would elevate the positions of several personnel this year so the sooner Mason returned to the medical field the better it was for his career. Yet Mason tried not thinking about enrolling in a paramedic course and he neglected any plans to; aside from upgrading his medical skill to paramedic, two years on Thurston's fire force left Mason in a relatively comfortable position.

After buttoning his uniform shirt Mason returned to their bedroom before work to kiss Aisha goodbye. Mason's sensitive lips pressed against her forehead did nothing to interrupt his girlfriend's sleep. Despite getting up when that train passed before his alarm sounded at seven to leave a note in the bag he packed last night she appeared unaware Mason reluctantly left.

Aisha would eventually also get out of bed for school and finish a short assignment she never started then spend today in classes hoping intently to pay attention to her professors not to dreams. During these two years she and Mason called Sunrise Ave. their home Aisha's study habits and grades improved dramatically. She no longer looked at her degree as a means to an ends and actually began enjoying her coursework. The nutritional substance of foods that crossed her path became suspect to her education and Aisha created hypothetical diets for model people based upon given body mass and genetic predispositions as indiscriminately and whimsically as a young girl unknowingly designs imaginary friends.

Aisha grew passionate about nutrition education and loved teaching children about what foods were good for them, kinds that were bad, and which were a bit of both. To this end she volunteered at a local Head Start program presenting lectures and experiments to preschool-age kids that made fruits and vegetables fun.

With an outstanding week of class before Aisha's senior yearend, a wild period before responsibilities appear evocative college graduation had Aisha laden with final exams. A huge determinant of her semester marks, they significantly affected her standing in UNH's College of Life Sciences and Agriculture's nutrition program. Despite a demanding workload her B.S. was nearly complete and its yield was material, she already landed her job as a dietetic technician after schooling. Yet Aisha wanted to become a registered dietitian; regarded internship programs in the way of becoming an RD were highly competitive so Aisha needed to emerge from her dietetics curriculum successful by the end of next week.

Mason and Aisha's devotion to one another had begun to bear reward. Results of their relationship surpassed expectations. Accomplishments were a result of their commitment; both individuals conquered together whatever had previously precluded them from achievement on their own. Mason had sanctity, security, and sanity. No longer seeking refuge from revelation or escaping society for solitude, failures stopped haunting Mason and he eluded anxiety. Alcohol and drugs used to evade depression disappeared so fast he couldn't remember ever living with them. And Aisha realized her full potential so dissatisfaction was too insignificant to be an ingredient of her sickness. The pain she felt was no longer hunger, her ecstasy came without chemicals, and the game she played was no longer to pretend being insane. For once Aisha's nails were long and painted and for the first time in her entire life toilets

flushed only after she needed them to pee. Aisha loved him and Mason loved her more.

After kissing Aisha sleeping in bed on the forehead Mason arrived to work at North station with the bag he'd packed last night a half an hour early. From a niche containing his fire kit, Mason removed his bunker boots to set beside Engine 3 then laced his station boots ahead of running into anyone from the department's administration. Mason greeted Lieutenant Tilson while emptying that bag within a locker in their bunkroom and found the note Aisha wrote to him this morning.

"I setup my gear so when Salenté shows let him know SCBAs are full of air and the equipment on Engine Three is accounted for. Now I'm going to read last night's incident log," Mason told Lt. Tilson then went downstairs to the captains' office where he also read Aisha's note:

I love you, baby. I had anxiety about finals and graduation this morning. Then you put your head on my chest and I felt so much better. Really, you were like magic.

I'm writing you a note so you'll know I'm going to the library to study after classes. I hope to see you tonight before you go on vacation to ask if you'll do something and I hope you aren't out with your fire friends by the time I come home. I'll leave around 6 but you can call my cell-phone anytime. I'm staring at you. I love you. You are so cute when you're sleeping!

Your bunny,
Aisha

In the captains' log Mason read about a dumpster fire Engine 2 extinguished Sunday night at Long Meadow, that community filled with students Mason didn't want to rent in with Aisha because its apartments were too small. But there were no smoky odors, sounding alarms, or electrical faults overnight that could reactivate a fire response in a location they'd need familiarity with so Mason didn't brief his crew on the

incidents. And they experienced few fire calls during their day-shift Monday.

A-14 was called out several times and Engine 3 tailed that ambulance to its scene twice, once for a lift assist and a second time to get a first-hand look at a minor car wreck. But when Mason was reading Sunday's log station Captain William Pierce told Mason in his office that he wanted to see him pump. So Lt. Tilson took Mason along with F/fs Patterson, Salenté, Rizzo and P/o Carson to lunch in Engine 3 for Mason to practice the operation.

By one thirty, when sun was at its highest point in the springtime sky, firemen including Alexandra Rizzo appeared at Grant Farm with massive submarine sandwiches on their laps. Pump Operator Carson angled his engine into a turnout coated by pea stone that deterred weeds from covering the hydrant after Farm Estates Lane was built so they could ditch their drill lines without blocking traffic. Alexandra Rizzo chalked its wheels while he dressed the hydrant, connecting a short section of four inch supply-line between Storz couplings to an inlet on its front step. Then, once confirming its parking brake was set, Carson shifted the fire engine first to pump then to drive before Mason placed his half-eaten sandwich on a side-step and pulled a tank-to-pump lever in order to circulate water.

Lt. Tilson ordered F/fs Patterson and Salenté deploy a preconnected attack-line. Mason throttled the engine until registering twelve hundred RPMs then closed tank-to-pump. When Mason opened the outlet Salenté bled air from his nozzle. And after Salenté closed his nozzle pressure building on its gauge spiked so Mason set a pressure relief valve to 150 PSI. Ready to water dock weed, helping green Grant Farm Estates' thirty acre frontage plot, Patterson pulled hose to prevent Salenté's nozzle from recoiling when he let the stream rip and Mason grabbed his

sandwich to finish eating it. Mason stood watching gauges, chewing his Italian hero, while Alexandra Rizzo placed an empty five gallon pale in the field. Then Mark Tilson ordered a second evolution.

For that Lt. Tilson designed a hundred foot master-stream line with nozzles attached to each end of a Y connector, a smooth-bore and a combination one, instructing Cason to fill the pale Rizzo set in the meadow from a gun mounted atop Engine 3. Mason closed the engine's outlet, pulled tank-fill, and circulated water from tank to pump so its centrifuge didn't overheat. Patterson yanked two and a half inch line he flaked from his shoulder off E-3 while Salenté connected that to a discharge and grabbed the Y plus two nozzles to meet him with. P/o Carson righted his deck gun and F/f Rizzo helped Lt. Tilson repack broken attack-line until Salenté called over the radio for water. Mason urgently multiplied hose lengths by given pressure required for GPM flow then added losses due to friction in each one of the nozzles plus the Y, RPMs to idle the pump over hydrant pressure at, and force need to power the top mounted gun.

After a few twists of his wrist Engine 3 roared up to speed and whistled. Mason opened the rear discharge, Patterson opened both nozzles, and Carson aimed his gun toward that pale. With Salenté sitting on line feeding the Y he pointed toward sky and Rainier's deck gun spraying high into the air Mason watched a farrago of spouts falling back to Grant Farm, listening over the radio for orders from Tilson. When orders were to close a line, especially caring to keep water from the deck gun streaming at a constant trajectory, Mason adjusted the throttle. With all steams closed Mason circulated water from tank to pump or ensured there was pressure on hand to articulate a fog without overshooting the gun if the combination nozzle reopened.

It was summery and felt nice to be outside. The team made an effort this afternoon so Mason could practice pumping but it was an uneventful time because no calls were dispatched before repacking equipment in preparation to return to North. Engine 3 got parked on the apron to wash it and lines they'd pulled during practice evolutions with soap and water, removing dirt from fireproof cloth protecting their rubber hoses. And when Monday's nightshift arrived at 17:30 for an 18:00 duty shift Mason's tour made room for it to checkout their apparatus. Mason left the driveway to shower so he didn't stink when Aisha returned home from the library at six.

"I heard you practiced pumping," Richard Stevens, the coming night's captain, said about soapy water dripping from E-3 as Mason entered the station.

In its bathroom Mason shed his uniform then strolled undressed toward a communal shower, ensuring his duty pager was turned on loud so it would be audible during his bath. Tense when comrades bathed beside him, Mason was glad to monopolize the shower room and turned three showerheads on. Lathering shampoo in his hair, Mason washed his face separately from his body then after drying off he swaddled his ass in a towel and sauntered to a mirror, slathering gel on his face to shave. When Cpt. Stevens came in to piss the bathroom's door opened swiftly; startled, Mason leapt and that jerk left a slash on his cheek. Casually clotting blood with a tissue, Mason shuttered again once his pager shrieked a series of tones and beeps, alerting carriers to a dispatcher's radio broadcast of a box-alarm.

"Is that your shift or mine?" Mason asked Captain Stevens.

"It's your tour's PPE on the engine," Dick said at 17:49.

Mason ran from that bathroom to put-on pants plus a t-shirt then hustled to Engine 3 where he donned protective turnout gear against the backdrop of an ascending overhead door. Mason climbed into its cab before his engine left their garage, cinching down straps that secured his SCBA, seated beside Alexandra Rizzo on fold-down seats between Nick Salenté and Jay Patterson. Lights and sirens fluttered, six tons of metal and water accelerated up the street and adrenaline pumped through Mason's veins to cause mild nausea.

The box alarmed all tours on Mason's shift. When they arrived Engine 1 was on-scene, plugged into a hydrant, and its crew investigated the call. Because this fire ignited on a weekday Chief Bingham and Assistant Chief Alden were both on-scene. Amidst the shift change there was a third engine and two ambulances en route. Thurston enjoyed emergencies.

The basement fire that originated in recently upgraded electrical wire which would prove to be faulty could have been disastrous if it wasn't contained to the wall because heat building below-grade radiates toward firefighters. Chief Bingham approached Mason, standing outside the cab of Engine 3 for air, to say occupants exited the house safely and order their return to North. Leaving the scene just past his shift's end, Mason wouldn't play with fire or earn overtime. He appeared inside the station at six thirty so after collecting his belongings, changing out of his uniform, contributing to the incident log, and saying goodnight to Dick Stevens' tour Mason arrived at home on Sunrise Avenue around seven fifteen. Aisha had returned from the library at five to six; assuming Mason ignored the note she put in his duffle bag this morning, she was in already in bed.

Mason made a scotch to help him think about Thurston's rate of fires. This was Thurston's thirteenth working fire in May, an astonishing figure for the town of just thirty-four thousand

locals. People knowledgeable about a rise in the per-capita fire rate wondered whether an arsonist preyed upon their town. As the first arriving engine company at the previous box, the twelfth burn this month, forced entry into a vacant structure acetylene tanks exploded, blowing those firefighters from their feet to the ground. When Mason arrived flames ripped through the building's roof thirty feet into the air. In light of dangers posed by the explosives department personnel executed an exterior attack but fire inside burned so hot it took three engine companies and two ladder trucks six hours to extinguish the blaze from its surrounding yard. When flames finally surrendered a lone exterior wall left standing waited a week to be knocked down by two maintenance workers operating a frontend loader. That fire, lacking cause, took its place among open cases under investigation, quietly adding to Thurston Fire's cadre of arson theorists.

Speaking of arson amongst firefighters is taboo in the preoccupation's proximity to these men's occupation. Mandated to eradicate the prospect that passionately engaged them and sustained their way of life, the psyche of firefighters was suspected for fire-raising. Although experience cautioned flagrant judgment, the thirteenth fire this month sparked by insulated wiring fueled paranoia that had everyone at Thurston Fire peaking over their shoulders or pointing at each other's backs.

Yet Mason eluded their hunt for an answer. Every year Mason was allotted four weeks of vacation from work by the Town of Thurston and his dismissal from box-alarm number thirteen began a week-long holiday. Clear of responsibility, Mason dropped his tumbler into the kitchen sink then went upstairs to put his uniform away in their bedroom closet and pack for a stay at his parents'. When Mason entered the bedroom he found Aisha reading beneath her bed lamp. Mason mumbled hello but didn't say

anything else to interrupt her studies. As he hurried out over their bedroom's threshold Mason got caught and, while twisting to discover his shoulder strap had hooked on its door handle, Aisha asked whether he'd be in Thurston on Thursday.

"Did you get my note?"

"Yeah but there was a box at six," Mason softly responded.

"What are you doing for your vacation?"

"I planned to save money by doing nothing. Instead of hanging around the house I thought I'd give you space to study for semester reviews by visiting my parents in Plaistow."

"Do you remember reading I want you to do something?"

"I can't, they're expecting me. It's a two hour drive and if I leave now then I can get to Plaistow before ten." Mason answered, yanking his backpack's strap and pulling the door shut with it.

"No, not now! Are you coming to Amy's sorority party on Thursday?" Aisha yelled through that door, "I have to tell Amy if it's a yes so sisters know how many guys to cut a playlist for."

Mason untangled himself then popped his head through the bedroom door and said, "I don't get it. They want me to strip for them?"

"It's a date auction party. When an MC introduces you to girls bidding for a date you just walk a stage."

"And you're encouraging this? Sorority girls are crazy for firemen! Aisha, the one who takes me home will want sex for what I cost. Tell the MC to include in my introduction that I give head."

"There will be no sex, believe me. Despite great head, you're not worth *that* much!"

"Who's the MC?"

"David Miller."

"Great, I can tell Dave myself," Mason triumphed.

"So that's a yes!"

"Wait, where does all this money raised go?" Mason asked, "If I say yes then can I get a tattoo in Plaistow?"

"It's your body and it's for Amy's sorority. Come on, I have to know what Amy's answer is. Will you do it for me, *yes* or *no*," she posed before concluding, "I'm interpreting your smirk as a *yes* so make sure you're home by six on Thursday!"

"Good, it's a great excuse to show off my new tattoo," Mason rejoiced, hurrying out that door.

Mason jumped in his Jeep, headed to his parents' house in Plaistow where he slept for the first three nights of his staycation before returning to Thurston to be auctioned off. He'd arranged an act on the phone with Dave Miller and organized his attire so, sitting behind-stage before being called, Mason felt an eternity pass while swigging vodka from its bottle. Inebriation ensured an uninhibited performance that would afford sorority girls' highest bid.

When MC Miller cued Britney Spears' cover of *I Love Rock and Roll* Mason swaggered on-stage wearing turnout gear and his fire helmet. A beat thumped, bass was heavy, and the audience was full of anticipation. Mason tore his coat off, baring his chest except for where suspenders covered his nipples and his new tattoo of a pinup girl wearing rabbit ears. As Mason slipped one suspender off his shoulder, down his arm, over his gyrating hips girls screamed but Aisha couldn't ignore the tattoo revealed. Mason dropped the second suspender downstage when men in that audience taunted him to take it all off.

Pushing both hands down his pants Mason flexed his muscles, licked his lips, unzipped his fly, and then threw his helmet on the runway. But trouble brewed when Mason had to remove tall rubber boots before stripping his bulky fireproof pants. Mason bent over then lost balance and fell from the raised stage. He tumbled over and crashed onto a concrete floor, having only liquor that pumped through his veins as a cushion. The crowd gasped yet Mason was too drunk to whimper. Stunned, he squirmed. Stuck without realizing a carabineer that secured a life-line to his bunker pants was hooked on stage scaffolding, fastened to the stage with pants around his ankles, Aisha ran from that theatre embarrassed for her boyfriend.

La vie continue! A sympathetic onlooker rushed to Mason's aid and helped free him from his bunker pants. Mason leaped on-stage wearing boxer briefs covering his groin. The music had stopped but Mason pledged to give these girls a show so he reached into his underwear and fondled his penis. But when Mason put one leg atop a table after removing his shorts and stuffed a girl's head into his crotch spectators' enthusiasm lead to ferment. Miller struggled to react.

"Look at that," Dave heralded the big-breasted pinup girl grasping a fire pole erected up the front of Mason's shoulder, "He's got new ink of the stripper he's aspiring to be. Do I hear ten dollars?"

Mason raised his arms and circled in place shouting, "Come on, you know you want this."

"Five dollars," Miller asked, trying to withhold laughter, but no one accepted his pleas. "A dollar, any admirers, seriously...will someone take this firebrand off the stage so we can continue auctioning decent men?"

The act wasn't worth ten cents. Amy draped a sheet over Mason then rushed him home. Mason awoke hours later with messages drawn on his face while he lay unconscious. The ink included a heart with an arrow through it, what looked like a penis, and indecipherable smudge-marks. When Mason reached for a glass of water to soothe his pounding head he found dozens of Polaroids capturing him with closed eyes and a clownish grin. Mason sat confronting this photo shoot he couldn't recollect in the living room Aisha entered.

"Hey, sweetheart," she greeted. "You bared everything last night. Where'd you get that tattoo of a woman?"

"It's you," Mason said, lifting a short-sleeve to reveal the girl wearing rabbit ears on his shoulder. "I got it from Jason at Iron Works Tattoo in Portsmouth. He's thirty minutes from Plaistow."

"You think I look like *her*?"

"Baby, you're not mad at me?"

Aisha gave Mason a huge hug and answered, "No! You were adorable last night. Don't you remember any of it?"

"I can recall falling off that stage. But that's about the lot of my recollection."

"Yeah, I'm not talking about being embarrassed. Thank God I left before you rubbed your balls in a sister's face. It took four people after you tried running back on-stage to get you home last night. I meant here at our after-party you were jumping around, were dancing, and cute. We had so much fun with you!"

"I wish I remember it," Mason expressed regret before Aisha handed over a dollar, leading him to ask, "What's this for?"

"I heard no one bid on you last night and I want to buy a date."

"I didn't attract one dollar?"

"You scared the shit out of them!"

Guilt stricken and grateful for Aisha's security, Friday night Mason planned a surprise romance for that dollar she bought him with. He didn't say their four hour drive on Saturday was to spend the weekend in Massachusetts' Berkshire Mountains. And Aisha was mystified at the door of a dilapidated house opposite a long gravel driveway when they were greeted by name in Becket. Such familiarity eased her insecurity; she wasn't even frightened by an unseen dog barking at them on the front step in darkness. Inside Aisha found Bob Dylan, Rambling Jack Elliot, plus a dozen other musicians photographed during their performances here at Dream Away Lodge.

Ushered through its dining room to be seated at one of four guest tables, the couple was presented a bottle of wine and served dinner without ordering. Following four courses, Mason rested with Aisha on a sofa before the fireplace, unwinding to the beat of patrons' banter. Later that night they relaxed in their honeymoon suite while drinking digestifs in its hot tub. But Mason didn't soak in the bath below his nipples because he couldn't get the new tattoo on his shoulder wet. Then they slept together and Aisha enjoyed her date.

At four on Sunday afternoon Mason drove them home. Aisha clung to him; wide-eyed, she kissed Mason when they arrived in Thurston. Before turning onto Sunrise Avenue Mason slammed his brakes and swerved into North station. In one last twist on his vacation he parked behind that firehouse.

"What are we doing here?" Aisha asked him.

"Wanna have sex?"

Aroused by her naiveté, Aisha answered *yes* then whispered on their way through the backdoor, "Where do we do it?"

Mason pointed between engines to Ladder One and answered, "In that basket."

"Won't we get caught?"

"My brothers are asleep in bed. I hope there're no alarms!"

Mason climbed the rear of that truck. He pulled her up then crawled along the ladder's rungs and Aisha followed him over the cab to its basket. Aisha sat in that bucket removing her pants while Mason opened his fly then knelt to push inside of her. Diamond plating dug into their flesh as the massive truck

bounced to their rhythm of thrusting. Each fornicator fueled the other's desire and soon both bore bruised shins and cut knees to prove their lust for sex.

That signaled the end of Aisha's senior year. Mason sat in UNH's Wildcat Stadium during commencement with Bobby Mattel snapping photos of Aisha in her white cap and gown. After her rite of passage they skipped town, heading south to New Hampshire Agricultural Society's Deerfield Fair. Aisha's face glowed, telegraphing an accomplishment. When sun began to set on Route 4 West behind them creating milky blue sky to the horizon she looked more beautiful than ever. And Mason lowered stereo volume as an excuse to check her out.

"Are you excited?"

"Yes, but I wish we had something to make me feel yummy inside."

"What do you mean? I don't feel like drinking but if you want, you did just graduate from a four-year program, we can stop at the package store to pick-up spirits."

"No, I brought my reward," Aisha disclosed. "I'm thinking now I want something softer than what I have. I wish we had weed to smoke."

An anonymous crowd milled in a dirt lot where they parked, on sidewalks, and at the fairground's entry. Mason turned off his Jeep, disabled its lights, and removed the keys. With a hand on Aisha's thigh, Mason complied with her commands thinking he was going to get a kiss. But instead of affection Aisha licked his ear then slipped her fingers into his mouth. Mason's eyes shot open and, upset she'd damned him to a solitary celebration, he

lunged for her. Aisha withdrew, opening her own mouth revealed two stubs smaller than peas.

Aisha whispered, "Don't swallow."

After paying ten dollars apiece the turn-style wouldn't be the only passage they traversed together. Mason didn't know what to expect except for their rebirth. The agricultural fair had chickens, baby lambs, and fattened pigs destined to be hams and the first attraction they visited was filled with animals. Yet livestock weren't very exciting so they left for a barn full of rabbits.

Aisha released Mason's hand and ran inside after exclaiming, "Bunnies!"

There were assortments of breeds, colors, and sizes. Some rabbits were too furry, many were fat, and a few were a kind that populated laboratories with red eyes. Aisha picked a kit up from a basket and petted it.

"Can we take this home with us?" She asked too seriously.

"I don't think they're for sale."

"That doesn't matter," Aisha retorted then hid the bunny in her sweater.

Mason worried about fairground security yet Aisha didn't care about consequences; if rationale for raising hundreds of rabbits didn't sink in, she would have taken them all home. As she reluctantly put the bunny back into its cage Mason wondered if Aisha's obsession with rabbits was because she'd been one in a previous lifetime. He wondered if he was a bunny before he was a boy then perhaps he was Peter and that's why Aisha loved him.

That lingering notion they were both rabbits a long, long time ago began this trip:

Approaching a haunted house, unsure of what it'd be or what they'd see, they paid a small sum and waited in line anticipating a frightening of the highest degree. They hoped to scare away responsibility and fill their hearts with illusory anxiety but their trip hadn't yet peaked, ghosts didn't seal them in that dungeon, they saw no doom, had not fun, and departed its entrance. After exiting they weren't at a fair anymore; they abandoned the funhouse for a bizarre ballet.

Regular, habitual, cheap no longer, children passed in a whirlwind of circles round and round, bucking on carousel horses. Oh what the couple saw, oh how their visions grew! Horns emerged cynical from attendee's heads, lips were stained red, and strangers' despairingly derisive glances got misread.

Vendors peddled cheap collections, stoned and drunk they inveigled credulous locals into trials of swindle but once a year. Carnies magnificent in their art persistently gypped patrons dry of green. Frying oil saturated the air, teenagers groped in darkness, and neon lit sky through networks of utility wires.

Canvas sacs were filled with children instead of brown potatoes. Classic, military recruiters enthusiastically sold boys into a world of death, despair, and domination with hummers decommissioned for entertainment centers jacked up loud to create sensory hypnosis. Toy soldiers popped pow-pow-pow as youngsters dodged by.

Mason and Aisha passed barnyards, rides, concessions, and a demolition derby track to the rear of the Deerfield Fair. At the end of their road they found whitewashed plywood stenciled with orange and black letters that read: *Take Your Picture with a Big Cat. Snap Your Photo for a Donation to Save the Tigers.*

"Wanna play?"

Aisha's eyes glimmered through the haze of a light stoning, her pupils seemed as big as her whole head when she cried, "Yeah!"

So Mason beckoned an attendant seated behind high powered halogens and said, "We want to be pictured with these lions."

"Which?"

"Can we take a picture with those?" Aisha asked.

"They can't come out."

And, while picking up a baby jaguar, Aisha chose, "This."

Mason pointed to lionesses, a fully grown Siberian tiger, and different colored panthers stalking them from behind a massive metal cage. While re-latching several gates she opened to the corral where a sixty pound adolescent tiger tied down by heavy chains posed with a beautiful orange coat and kittens of varying species cavorted below it that attendant directed them to sit. Mason was proud to be a part of the family Aisha created by cradling the jaguar with a baby bottle protruding from its mouth on her lap. Mason wrapped his hand around her waist for a flash of light from their attendant's camera to capture this moment. Then she disappeared.

There wasn't another soul in that hold except Mason, Aisha, and those cats. The couple played with their sleepy kitten for a dozen minutes and, high, Mason stared through widely gapped steel bars separating them from the man-eaters. Aisha stood but, realizing they hadn't paid for their photo, she lingered inside the pen. Then a short man of modest stature with a shaved head and light-colored scruff approached from blackness behind that photo booth. He greeted the couple familiarly, made small talk

about New England for a few minutes, and acted like they were friends.

"Should we leave?"

"I don't know. It's exciting to be here and that chic didn't ask us to pay. I had fun," Aisha reasoned, "I feel like we should pay."

"Wanna help us feed them?" The skinhead explained, "Their owner met a guy at a loading dock who'll deliver three hundred pounds of chicken thighs. Sit back down, he'll be here shortly."

Mason and Aisha relaxed on folding chairs in a restricted area drinking canned Miller Light from a blue cooler. A second handler who joined those three disclosed fruitful stories from when he was a roadie working for AC/DC, relating recklessness to random children he'd fathered in various cities across The United States. That man turned then growled at somebody.

"These girls had to get access to the band somehow. And we didn't use condoms. Hell, I don't know if they're all mine but who's counting? What a crazy life! You...SCRAM," he shouted in a throaty voice. "Carnie freaks always lurk in the darkness but, as long as we've got these pussies here, they won't be a bother. So I settled down off the smack and I travel around the country minding these cats with Bill."

That statement about carnie freaks prompted Mason to keep a keen eye out. It's when Mason saw someone next to a tiger transport fanning through a wad of bills so dense they held it with two hands on the hood of an old Camaro. The baldheaded handler walked to that Camaro then returned carrying pails full of fresh poultry. That was Bill leaning back on the windscreen

of his car and he glanced at Mason before entering the big cat cage.

"Bill's back," the baldheaded one said, "I should help carry chicken."

"He's going in there!" Aisha exclaimed.

Big cats ranging in size from two to over six hundred pounds lunged for the chicken Bill held. But Bill hoisted those buckets high above his head while slapping the cats on their noses and commanding *NO*. The cats obeyed; eight sat patiently around that man while he lobbed chicken quarters they caught midair in their jowls. An appetizer, forty pounds of poultry got scrapped to thirty ounces of bone in a matter of seconds then Bill grabbed another bucket and started over.

Hungry for the main course, one lion nipped at Bill's chin. Then the largest, a Siberian tiger, stood seven feet tall to put its paws on Bill's shoulders. That tiger's weight bore down until Bill's knees buckled. All the while a panther charged; Bill rolled, knocking the tiger from his back before that panther tackled him. At last a lioness dashed across the pen and bit Bill on the ground, tearing off his shoe.

"Oh my god!"

"Oh, look there's a wrestlin'," the baldheaded one laughed.

"They're not hurting him?"

"No, Bill helps them when they're sick," the handler explained to Aisha.

Bill emerged from that cage alive. More importantly the rolling stones accepted local friends. By now the trip suffused both their bodies with numbing euphoria and comfort around these drifters convinced the couple they'd been traveling all their lives. The handler who'd also toured with AC/DC showed off by reaching a hand into the cage. Mason sat beside the Siberian tiger watching him place his full fist inside the lioness's mouth so Mason stuck his hand through cage bars too and petted the tiger's thick, coarse coat with long, broad strokes. Speaking to it in verse, Mason was totally unaware of his vulnerability. Mason treated the six hundred pound animal like a friend that agreed to journey the jungle with him someday.

No one remained in that closed complex when time came for goodbyes except carnies so their baldheaded companion agreed to escort Mason and Aisha through desolate grounds. A devil of dust kicked up behind them and a funnel of abandoned flyers whipped into the air. Like façades animating drab skeletons, without flashing neon light, milling crowds, sprockets whirling kids or a melee of sound the magic was gone. The fair had died; Mason found it difficult to formulate speech, waiting several moments anytime he did for Aisha to answer, hence they walked in silence.

"Was it real?"

"I don't know. Are you okay to get home? I wouldn't know where to go...or how," Aisha trailed.

"I love you," Mason replied. "You mean the world to me and that doesn't say it all. I don't know what I would be doing without you."

Aisha put her finger over his lips and took his hand before posing, "Sure I'm here?"

Mason clutched his breast pocket and roared, "We forgot to pay for our photograph!"

Next Friday, after finishing his shift, Mason drove the long way home up and down hilly roads through a forest. His Jeep's roof and doors were removed and Mason's left foot rested on the doorframe, disinterested in its clutch. Evening sky covering the valley burned orange. Exciting the range of third gear, his right foot pressed the accelerator and the Jeep strove for hillcrests then, off gas, the engine braked away from troughs.

Mason transitioned from work to leisure through spirited motoring when a pager beneath a shirt on his passenger seat activated. Muffled by clothing, Mason didn't hear any alarm over the winding engine or whips of wind in his ear but noticed that pager's flashing light once it vibrated free. Mason slowed, raised the volume, and listened to the dispatcher radio a second alarm. He squelched the pager then threw it back on his seat where it bounced before vibrating to announce a third alarm. Mason removed his left foot from the door jam, dropped his Jeep into second gear, and squealed a u-turn back to North station.

Mason jumped into Engine 4 after grabbing his turnout gear with Jay Patterson and Jack Moran. They arrived at Delta Upsilon behind two other engines for a fully engulfed living room where smoke poured from the fraternity's roof. Duty crews from Engines 2 and 3 were attacking fire on the first floor when men from fourth arriving Engine 1 entered the rear of that dwelling for search and rescue as Mason's pulled a line over glass shattered on the front lawn upstairs.

Despite a town-wide response, fire migrated through the house faster than the department could contain it. Fire that reached to the second floor blazed in bedrooms above the living room. When Engine 5 arrived its crew disconnected the home's propane

tank, dragging that away from flames lapping through a kitchen window. Mounting a two and a half inch master-stream line and one thousand gallon-per-minute cannon to face the fire and suspend its spread, Ladder One set up an exterior attack. Still, fire crept out of walls and ripped through the floor in unsuspecting places. Mason and his crewmates were surrounded on the frat's second story by the inferno.

Three bursts of compressed air bellowed from horns, sounding an evacuation. Ravenous combustion devastated the building's structural integrity and this fraternity buckled under weight of the ladder's pounding water cannons. A commotion ensuing outside was barely audible to firefighters illuminated by flashes of heat in places where thick smoke blackened light. Mason tapped crewmates on their backs, urgently signaling toward the staircase. They reversed direction down the hallway to find stairs had collapsed but a contingency for escape beckoned them from a bathroom. Mason's crew fastened life-line ropes around its toilet using carabineers attached to their bunker pants and bailed from the window to ground twenty feet below.

Crossing a backyard, away from slanting floorboards and shooting flames, hot water poured on heads of those men through a rainbow of mist emanating from Ladder One's basket cannon. These men threw their breathing masks to the ground and dropped to their knees. Mason wiped sweat, soot, and grease from his eyes. He coughed. He threw up in his mouth and spit that out. Then Mason turned his head to discharge black, bloody mucus from his lungs. Wheezing to catch his breath, Mason leaned against a tree and emptied the contents of his stomach. Bile spilling over his lips stained that tree's bark yellow. Fight over, Mason conceded defeat.

About the Author



Author Ethan Collins' Cessna 172

Ethan Collins works as a pilot for a national air carrier. He resides in Arizona with his wife plus two children, Jack and Stacy. When not in the cockpit Ethan has a passion for writing. Collins pens stories that hinge on difficult relationships. *Do Not Mix with Alcohol* is this author's second novel.

Writing is a hobby for Collins whose marginalized pen lolls below a busy work schedule and love of family. But as pilots train to be meticulous planners, Ethan plots a third (children's) story set in West Africa to be published for his daughter Stacy's kids to enjoy.

Collins was discovered on a transatlantic flight after author Cosmo Starlight read the pilot's short stories and pledged to forward them to ▲Church. His first book *The Diamond Party* began as one of those but evolved into a novel about boys who take advantage of girls, men who take advantage of goodwill, and a society dependent upon evil to get things done.

Thanks for reading a sample of "Do Not Mix with Alcohol."

Get acquainted quicker by saying "Hi:" fanmail@church-publishing.com