

Handstands in the Shallow End

Chapter One

The viper red Plymouth Barracuda 426 Hemi Coup rumbled down the frozen drive in Ojibway Park. It was a four-star, A-number-one chick magnet, and after only three laps through the drive-in circuit—Richies, Chicken Coop, and the A&W—Gary had scored. His latest conquest was slouched in the bucket seat next to him. At twenty-two, he was the baby of the Cincinelli family and lived with his momma in an aluminum double-wide at Royal King Estates. He wheeled into his usual spot under the large Maple, about ten feet from the river.

“Want to get more comfortable? The back seat folds down.” He smiled and rubbed her back. His timing was off—she sat up.

“I’m cold.....got a cigarette?”

He glanced at the fuel gauge as he fired up the engine. It was a cold night, and he had exactly two dollars left for gas. The Hemi had been lovingly modified with Hooker Headers, AFB 4-barrel carbs, and a Mandral Bent Performance Exhaust, and sucked up fuel like a Hoover. He braced her hand with his as he lit her cigarette—then she was on her own. Trying to get it between her lips was like threading a needle in a cement mixer

as the car shimmied and bucked. They sat in the front seat smoking, staring at the fogged-up windshield—Gary watching the fuel needle drop.

“I gotta get going,” she said, smoothing her hands over her sweater.

“Sure. How about we smoke a doob first?”

She nodded, and he snapped off the ignition, circled the car, and opened her door before she could button her coat. He swept his arm around her shoulder and pulled her from the seat, holding her close as they stumbled through the dark. He fished a lighter from his pocket, hunched toward her, and cupped his hand around a tiny roach. That’s when he heard the gasps. He jerked his head around at the exact moment the body drifted by with the current, steam rolling into the night air.

Across town, Jeff Kilpi raked his fingers through his hair and snapped the sweat onto the cement floor. It was about thirty minutes before the shift-change whistle put them out of their misery. If hell had a basement, it would be here where the blast furnace melted dune sand into engine cores for General Motors. He wiped his nose on his sleeve, knocking the sand from his nostrils. His eyes and ears were protected, but the sand found its way most everywhere else. Jeff and Bill Murphy were shoveling their last pile of sand into the core molds when the foreman tapped him on the shoulder and motioned him out into the hallway.

A young police officer stood stiffly by the drinking fountain, his hand on his night stick. He nodded and waited for Jeff to pull his earplugs.

“Jeff Kilpi?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Jeff glanced at his foreman who stood with his arms folded.

“Do you have a wife by the name of Luanne Kilpi?”

“Luanne... yeah....why?”

“There’s been an accident. Your wife is at St. Mary’s.”

“What? Is she okay?” He felt his foreman step up beside him.

“What happened?”

“Don’t know the details....apparently, a couple of hippies were parked on Ojibway Island. They decided to walk down by the river, probably to smoke a joint. That’s when they spotted your wife in the water. The guy jumped in and pulled her out.”

“She’s at St. Mary’s?” He made eye contact with his foreman who nodded his head.

It had to be his Finnish blood that kept Jeff from freezing as he bolted from the Core Room into the icy night. He sprinted toward the back parking lot until he realized he had carpooled with Bill. Running toward the downtown lights, he zipped his nylon foundry jacket and pulled his collar up as he hustled down Washington Avenue, past Hoyt Park, and turned onto Jefferson. His mind struggled to make sense of it. It was November, for Christ sake, the river would probably be frozen if it weren’t polluted. When he’d left the house, she’d been in bed, asleep. He pounded through the East side of Saginaw, twelve city blocks, and arrived at St. Mary’s before eleven p.m. Luanne had been taken from Emergency to Intensive Care. He met Dr. Ruiz just outside ICU.

“She’s stable. You can thank our Rescue Team for that. Your wife coded in the ambulance. We used the paddles twice in the ER before we got her back. I think the cold water might have helped save her.....slowed down her body functions.”

“Can I see her?” His voice broke as he pressed his fingers to his forehead.

“Go ahead in. We hope she’ll regain consciousness soon, but we just don’t know.”

The room was dimly lit, a single florescent light casting a glow over her face, the monitors blipping and bleeping beside her head. Her dark hair was still damp and had been brushed back from her face. Clear tubing wound from her thin white arm and connected to a drip. She barely made a ripple under the sheet. He set a plastic chair by her bedside, took her hand, and cried softly into the mattress. His mind was a beehive, thoughts buzzing, circling around, but never quite coming in for a landing. He tried to take hold, pluck a string of reason and unravel the tangle inside his head. *Had he said goodbye to her when he left for work this afternoon?* He had been confused all week about whether to reach out to her or just let her sleep. She could have driven to Ojibway Park, or maybe she just walked over the Bridge. That didn’t make sense; she wouldn’t walk along a busy street in the seediest part of town after dark. She must have gone to Ojibway, fallen in the dark, and slipped into the water. Jeff’s heart jumped—what if she had been attacked and discarded into the river like an empty bottle?

He noticed her eyeballs rolling under her bluish lids.

“Lu...Luanne.” He stood up and slowly bent his head down toward her face. Her left eye twitched, and her lips moved slightly. “I’m here, honey. It’s me, Jeff....” He rang for the nurse who said the physical movements may mean she’s regaining consciousness....or it may mean nothing at all.

He pried apart the blinds and looked down on the city, the lights of the foundry in the sooty distance. It was like looking through the wrong end of binoculars—the world seemed tiny and far away. *Please God don't take Luanne too.* He returned to his post by the bed. All he could do was wait, his eyes riveted on her face for any small sign. The longer he stared, the more foreign she appeared. *How long had it been since he'd really looked at her?* He'd been afraid to—afraid of what he might see in her eyes. She was so thin, so childlike under the sheet, her face as pale as snow. He brought his hands to his face and sobbed quietly.

Dawn broke through the blinds, throwing bright stripes against the wall. He picked up *Car and Driver* and leafed through the glossy pages so fast they ticked like a time bomb. The 1968 models blurred as he fluttered his eye lids to fan back tears. His chest compressed like an accordion—like the time he almost drown in Coldwater Lake when he was seventeen, breaking the surface just as his lungs were about to explode, gulping air like a perch flapping on the bottom of the boat. He wanted that relief now, but no matter how many deep breaths he took, his lungs lay flattened in his chest

“Jeff?” she said weakly.

“Lu....Hi honey.” He stood again, leaning his hip into the bed. He reached to the headboard and rang the call bell.

“What.....?” she said.

“You almost drowned.”

“Drowned?” She closed her eyes.

He waited until 8:00 a.m., leaving her asleep as he took the elevator down to the lobby. He had been on the receiving end of bad news, and he had delivered it, but it never got any easier.

“Mom, it’s Jeff. I hope I didn’t wake you. Ah, Luanne had an accident....no, she’s okay. She is in the hospital, but she’s fine.....she’s going to be released soon.....no, don’t come down...she, she’s having tests and can’t have visitors. I don’t know exactly what happened. I don’t know any details, but I’ll keep you posted. She’s going to be fine.....yes, the doctor said so. We’ll give you a call as soon as we know more.... Don’t worry, Mom, she’s fine.” He clicked the receiver back on the hook and leaned his forehead against it. It had taken all he had to keep his voice calm, now he let the tears come. He took a deep breath and picked up the receiver for the second call.

“Mom? Hi. I... I’m at the Hospital....” He couldn’t do it, couldn’t keep it together. He felt five years old, sniffing into the receiver. He was so fucking tired of being brave, of sucking it up. “No, it’s Luanne, mom. She’s...had an accident, but she’s going to be fine.... No, really mom I’m okay, don’t come to the Hospital. Just a second.” He brushed his knuckles under his eyes and wiped his nose across his sleeve leaving a snail’s trail of sandy liquid behind. “Mom, don’t cry. She’s going to be fine....really. No, I don’t know any of the details. The important thing is that she’s okay. Love you too, mom.....I’ll call later.....bye.” How could he explain to them what he didn’t understand himself?

That afternoon, he walked back into her room from the cafeteria and found the gurney had arrived to take her to the eighth floor, Psychiatric. Her treatment was brief—they had no insurance. She saw the Resident Psychiatrist once, and was released

on Sunday.

Just before dawn on Monday, Jeff opened his eyes and listened. For a second he thought he heard Alexander's tiny plea to get up. But the house was quiet, broken only by the banging of the boiler kicking on the heat. He forced his arm from the warm quilt, stretched toward the window, and snagged back the curtain. A thin yellow wash reflecting off the Foundry dust softened the city. The hum of the furnace and Luanne's snoring relaxed him back into the blankets. It was too early to get up. He turned on his side, closed his eyes, and invited sleep. But the day pressed on his chest. He slid his legs out of the side of the bed and carefully lifted the covers from his shoulders so he wouldn't wake her.

The kitchen was barely ten steps, but the window faced west, a clearer vantage point for assessing the weather. The soft dawn had given way to a harsh morning. Saginaw was holding its acrid breath for the winter snow to work its magic. Too many gray days and frosty nights had left the city the color of weak coffee. He was relieved; there were no signs of snow. He checked the supplies he put by the front door: map, ice scraper, snow brush, Kleenex, and his black rubbers. Luanne's suitcase, the one she took to the hospital when she delivered Alexander, sat at the end of the couch. He needed caffeine. He had to kiss ass before his foreman finally gave in and let him off work today; but not before he had agreed to work the afternoon shift and half a graveyard. It was 4:00 a.m. when he slipped under the quilt—two hours later he awoke to his runaway heartbeat.

He pulled the can of ground coffee from the top shelf, measured six scoops into the mesh basket, added cold water, and plugged it in. He leaned back with his hips

against the edge of the counter and crossed his arms. The cold was creeping through the linoleum and his socks. Damn Michigan basement—dirt floor and no insulation. They had to wear slippers all winter to keep their feet from icing up. Alexander was bundled up from October to April *inside* the house so he wouldn't freeze crawling around on the floor, and later toddling through the drafty rooms.

Even though the house was old, he was proud of the work he and Luanne had done. The kitchen was no bigger than a large closet, but they bought a new stove and refrigerator in Harvest Gold, painted the cupboards white, and put new yellow Formica on the countertops. Luanne made curtains in a lemon yellow and lime print and gathered them on a café rod for the window over the sink.

Their little white house was on the wrong side of the river, and he wondered about the number of cars that pulled up briefly outside the blue Cape Cod on the corner—could be a drug house. Just after they had moved in, he was washing the old Mercury in the driveway when he threw down the sponge, walked over, and knocked on the door. A boney little man with a receding hairline and a thin ponytail cracked the door, and Jeff introduced himself. An awkward lead-in about the weather gave way to a friendly rap about the Detroit Tigers and the War. Before he left the porch, Jeff told his neighbor that he and his wife were concerned about their son's safety, and asked him to keep an eye out for any suspicious characters on the block. The guy smiled, raised two fingers in a vee and said, "Right on, Neighbor."

Not that Alexander ever went out into the yard unattended. Either he or Luanne—or both of them—sat with him in his sandbox, their knees up around their ears, or baby-stepped around the back yard playing tag. They talked together on the front steps

while Alexander rode his red tricycle back and forth in front of the house, the back wheels tipping up over the broken sidewalk. Each time he passed by—it could be dozens—he waved and smiled to them, and their hands flew up as if connected by an invisible string. Luanne wiggled her fingers and Jeff waved his flattened hand back and forth. Alexander cranked his tiny legs on the pedals but kept his head turned toward his parents until his dad said, *Howdy, Little Buddy* at each passing.

Rich brown bubbles erupted in the glass dome of the GE Electro-perk—a wedding gift from his sister. He hoped to lure his wife awake with coffee, and padded into the bedroom with the steaming brew jiggling in the cup.

“Luanne. It’s seven o’clock. Time to get up.” He smoothed back her hair and then shook her shoulder. She moaned, but didn’t move. It was the medication. She barely had been conscious since she got out of the hospital yesterday.

“I’m not going.” She pulled the pillow over her head.

“Now Lu, Come on now. I’ve got a cup of strong coffee here for you. You can jump in the shower when I’m done.” He waited for a response—nothing. “Okay, Lu, I’m going to take my shower now.”

Her hand jabbed out sideways from the blanket and waved over the night stand, finally striking the coffee mug. She turned it gingerly with her fingertips until she felt the handle. Like a steam shovel arcade game, she took hold and dragged the cup to the edge. Holding it in both hands, she pursed her lips to the rim and took a sip. Her hands loosened as she dozed off with the coffee cup perched on her chest.

If it weren’t for Jeff, she still would be lying there like a post mortem advertisement for Maxwell House. He helped her up and into the shower and then sat

on the bed and waited for her to finish. She pulled on an oversized red sweater and jeans. He missed watching the ritual—how she wiggled her jeans up to mid thigh and then fell back onto the bed, shimmying them past her hips and wrestling with the zipper, always followed by a few deep knee bends. Today they pulled up easily, and he was jolted again at the amount of weight she'd lost. When she came out of the bathroom with her hair combed, he went out to scrape the frost from the windshield and warm up the car.

“Do you want to lie down in the back seat?” He zipped his Barracuda jacket half way up and stood awkwardly at the base of the front porch steps. She looked at him like he'd just spoken a foreign language as she opened the front passenger door and got in. It was a three hour drive to Traverse City from their home in the middle of the mitten of Michigan. He drove as he always did, exactly five miles over the speed limit. His first stop was at the Sunoco Station in Skidway Lake. Coming out of the men's room, he gave his zipper tab a couple of quick tugs as he strode toward Luanne, who was standing at the door looking out into the empty parking lot. The sun had appeared through the thin grayness as a hazy orange ball. Fat flakes of snow began to drift straight down and settle on the blacktop.

“Want something to eat, Lu?”

“No, I'm not hungry” She hadn't spoken in so long, her voice sounded as if it was coming from somebody else. He bought a sandwich cut on the diagonal and wrapped in plastic wrap, a Snickers candy bar, and a Coke. She took a cup of coffee in a thick paper cup with punch-out handles and then forgot to drink it as she stared out the side window.

“You alright?”

“Yeah.” Storm clouds rolled into her eyes as they headed up I-75 toward Traverse City. Snow began to gather on the tree boughs.

“Let me know if you need to stop. The gas stations are few and far between.” He had given up on keeping the speedometer centered on exactly sixty through the hills. It was as if they’d driven into a snow globe, the flakes so large he could almost see the delicate artistry of each sparkly particle. The piney hills were blanketed, and the banks along the sides of the road suggested that plows had already made several passes. The expressway petered out just north of West Branch, and they were forced onto secondary roads that spilled over steep hills and wove through four-corner villages.

Thin waves of snow swaying low over the road created a kind of optical illusion—it looked like the cold pavement was steaming. He eased up on the accelerator as slush froze on the edges of the wiper blades and snow closed over the back window. As they worked their way north, the snow thickened and the wind shifted, driving white pinpoints directly into the headlights. He leaned forward over the steering wheel and squinted into the white-out. Muscles tensed along his shoulders and up the back of his neck. He snapped his head to one side and then the other to crack the stress from his vertebra. His left heel suddenly bounced nervously against the dimmer switch on the floor. They hadn’t spoken for the last half hour. He turned up the radio ever so slightly to hear *The Doors*. A road sign, half covered by sticky snow, said *Traverse City, 20 miles*.

“Well, are we getting close to the loony bin?” she asked.

