

Lost

Cutter Slagle

The metallic, nauseating rust smell still filled his nostrils. And the images of the way the drippings all seemed to slowly twist, flowing together as one, creating a large, sticky pool of scarlet stuck to him as if they had been glued there. Blood, it was all he saw, all he knew.

Bryce thought he might vomit. He clutched tightly at his aching stomach. His blue eyes burned, and he suspected that they had swollen into big, red mounds due to all of the crying he had done. But he didn't cry now. No, Bryce had no more strength for tears. His nose, raw and scabbed from excessive blowing, screamed out, begging to be soothed with some sort of silky lotion. And even though he had showered earlier that morning, his blonde hair felt rough and stiff.

One word, a question really, kept spinning hastily around in his cramped, dust filled mind. How? Bryce thought. And then, how can they possibly think that I did this?

He closed his eyes, and then opened them again quickly, his surroundings had not changed. Same cold draft in the small, rectangular room that made him wish he had had a coat to go over his thin sweater. Or in the least, a pair of gloves.

The table in front of him had seen better days. Large, metal, with lots of scrapes and cuts, as if someone had run out of paper and decided to use the flat top as their drawing board. The only two chairs the room occupied were coarse, uncomfortable, and seemed that if someone bigger than two-hundred and fifty plus pounds decided to have a rest, the seat would instantly turn to wood kindling.

The floor was dark green linoleum—cracked, dirty, and tainted with what appeared to be coffee and maybe mud. The walls were an off, messy white color, and if Bryce stared at them too long, they seemed to violently close in on him.

Besides the red plastic cup of ice water sweating and adding character to the table, and standard black video camera blinking red, relying on the medium height tripod to stand, invading his every move, the room was empty.

Except, of course, for the wide, streak stained mirror to his left where no doubt from the other side *they* sat, watching him.

Suddenly, the windowless door opened, causing Bryce to look up. Not a stranger, Detective Gellar walked in. Tall with a midnight skin tone and a look of intensity about him so in tact that every time he sighed, the words "No nonsense" seemed to fly out, had at first been very intimidating.

Bryce tried to form an accurate time line in his overworked head. Had he met the man at the scene one hour ago, or two? The fact really didn't matter now, but he recalled reaching out with his own trembling right hand, and taking the detective's large one, shaking it, and being painfully frightened.

But not anymore, Bryce thought, trying to smile in recognition as the man took the second seat that was positioned across the table. The misunderstanding had quickly been cleared; Detective Gellar was here to help.

"Kid, you doing okay?" The detective leaned in, asking the question, and Bryce was immediately hit with a refreshing mint scent. "I know this is a lot to handle, especially for someone your age. I mean, if I was seventeen and going through this, I don't know . . ."

If the man finished his sentence Bryce didn't know it. Gellar's words seemed to grow legs and run off, and Bryce just couldn't keep up, couldn't concentrate.

Finally, he answered. "I'm fine, kinda cold."

"Can I get you anything? Jacket, coffee? Perhaps some hot chocolate?"

Bryce shook off the detective's offers. Unexpectedly, they seemed forced, fake, as if Gellar was now trying too hard to play good cop.

Bryce wasn't about to fall into the trap. "No, thank you. I'll be fine. I'd really like to finish up here, go home."

"Well, it's going to be a while." Bryce didn't like the way Gellar tapped his foot when he spoke or the emotionless expression on the man's worn face when he said, "Home may not be an option."

"W-w-why not?"

"Let's just go over your statement again." The detective dodged the question, causing Bryce to see red. Calm down, he warned himself. Whatever you do, don't lose your cool.

"I already told you everything I know."

"Well, that's not good enough, Bryce. I need you to think back to—"

"I already told you, I can't. I don't remember."

"Bryce," when the detective spoke, it was all seriousness, all cop, and Bryce was almost frightened again. "In order for me to help you get of here, you're going to have to remember what happened."

"I can't!" Bryce didn't recognize the wavering voice that echoed throughout the interrogation room. The advice he had given himself moments before wasn't sticking, being composed was just too difficult of a task.

"Think back to before, concentrate." Gellar tried, but the relaxing tone the detective possessed took the opposite effect, causing Bryce to run his dry hands through his untidy hair, pull frustratingly, stand, pace for a minute, and then slam back down to reclaim his seat.

"Stop beating around the bush," Bryce ordered. "What do you want from me?"

"I want the truth," Gellar said. "I want to know if you killed your father and your little brother."

Bryce didn't respond. He felt his bottom lip quiver, and then the burning sensation that tugged at his eyes which could only mean one thing: a fresh batch of tears.

He raised his palms, pressed them intently into his hollow face, and tried to concentrate, to remember.

Had he murdered his father and younger brother? Bryce knew the answer to Gellar's question, thought he did, anyway—hoped he did. The obvious answer was "No," of course he hadn't butchered them. How could he have? They were his *only* family. But so far, no one would believe him.

"Okay," Gellar started, breaking the eerie silence, and Bryce shockingly became grateful for the act. "Let's take another tactic. Tell me about this morning's events. What happened when you got up today?"

Bryce leaned back in his seat, becoming alarmed when the chair made a *creaking* sound. He straightened up, folded his hands on the table, and began focusing on the question he had been asked.

"This morning," he whispered, pinching his eyes closed once again and feeling his face wrinkle. "This morning, I-I-I woke up at six." That was easy; he woke up every morning at six, well, through the week anyway. The buzzing alarm clock flashed into his thoughts. The ringing, so annoying, so earsplittingly dreadful. Bryce remembered reaching out; trying to turn it off, but the device had fallen from his nightstand, and when he had gone to retrieve it he had bumped his head. It hadn't hurt; he thought back, the thump, hadn't even caused him to bleed.

Next, he reflected, after placing the square box back on the stand and being hypnotized by the bright, red numbers, for what had seemed like hours, he had thrown back the heavy comforter to his bed, and shuffled across the chilly hardwood floor.

Bryce then distinctively recalled forgetting about slippers, and dressed in a blue long sleeve shirt and plaid pajama bottoms, leaving his room, passing his little brother's room where Mikey was still sleeping and walking down the stairs toward the kitchen to get breakfast. He shared his revelation with Detective Gellar.

"Was this your normal routine? Getting up at six, having breakfast, while your brother slept in?"

Bryce nodded. As far back as he could think things had always been that way. "Dad and I would have cereal, toast—something simple like that. And then I would get ready for school, and he would wake Mikey, get him dressed and take him to the sitter's."

"So, just you and your dad," Gellar emphasized, but Bryce wasn't quite sure as to why. "How long would you spend in the mornings eating breakfast? Twenty, maybe twenty five minutes?"

"Yeah, I guess," Bryce answered quietly. "Eating breakfast and talking." A yearning from deep down within his core wanted to yell out, see where the detective was going with all of this.

"And what did you two talk about this particular morning?"

Bryce sighed heavily, ran his fingers through his hair nervously. He pondered the question, knew it was important that he remembered. Details were going to be the only thing that could save him right now.

"Umm," he started, thoughts racing so fast he feared they might collide, sending his head to explode. "Nothing overly important. School, his office . . ." Bryce trailed off, looking up at the water damaged ceiling as if it might spit out the answers for him. And then, "A doctor's appointment. Yeah, Dad said something about making a doctor's appointment."

"For himself? Was he sick?"

Bryce cleared his throat, contemplating. "N-n-no, I don't think so. Maybe."

"Maybe it was for you or for your brother?"

Bryce shrugged, the small gesture exhausted him. "He said something about more meds."

"Was your father medicated?"

"I don't know!" Bryce screeched impatiently, aggravation becoming consuming. "Can't you check that?"

"Sure." Gellar nodded, but Bryce noticed it wasn't to him; it was to the mirror beside him. And then Bryce understood that the detective's signal was for someone watching beyond the mirror to check out the information.

"How about your mother? Can you tell me about her?"

"Why?" Bryce asked, a pitiful laugh escaping him. "Do you think I killed my mother too?"

"Bryce, believe it or not I *am* trying to help you."

Bryce waited a beat, and then in an almost mute whisper, said, "My mother wasn't well. She killed herself four years ago, right after my brother was born."

"I'm sorry," Gellar stated, and for some unknown reason Bryce actually believed the man. "Was it postpartum depression?"

"Possibly, I can't really be certain. I was twelve and all I really remember her telling me is that she just wanted the headaches to go away."

"What comes to mind next, Bryce? What happened after breakfast?"

This was the complicated part, Bryce thought. This was the part of the story he had worn his brain thin trying to bring to mind what had actually taken place. He had a blank, gaping hole where nothing specific came to mind. But the reason why? Bryce didn't understand.

"School, I think. I usually get home from school around three, before my dad and brother. My dad leaves work around five, picks up Mickey, and is normally home around five-thirty."

"But that didn't happen today, did it Bryce?"

"W-w-what do you mean?"

"Do you recall going to school today? Or seeing your father and brother leaving the house this morning?"

"Well, I . . ." Bryce reached down deep, tried desperately to grab onto something concrete, something precise. "Not exactly, but—"

"Bryce you weren't seen at school today and your father never made it to work."

Bryce tilted his head, looking up at the detective he tried to make some sort of connection. When he finally did, he fought hard to believe it. "T-t-that can't be. I mean it doesn't make any sense."

"Bryce," Gellar spoke, and Bryce made a note of his easy manner. "Your father and brother were murdered between seven and eight this morning."

"No!" Bryce shrieked, gripping the edge of the table securely for support. "I swear it, I swear it! I didn't kill my family!"

"Do you remember waking up this morning, Bryce? The policemen knocking on your door around nine, pulling you out of your father's bed?"

"I-I-I . . ." he let his words fall, using every effort to think back, to remember. The smell, the warm wetness that had spread over him like a blanket. The blood, of course, the blood. And the footprints, there had been footprints!

"Yes, I remember!" Bryce stammered, jumping to lead feeling legs, but managing to balance himself. His chair fell backwards clanging to the hard ground. "I remember!"

"You remember the police taking—"

"No, yes, but—I was attacked, I had to have been. It all makes sense now. This morning someone must have broken into the house, while I was getting ready for school. They must have k-k-killed—" he couldn't bring himself to say the words. He may be innocent, but his family was still gone, and he was inevitably alone. Bryce felt a heavy lump form in his throat, but he had to tread on.

"I probably got hit on the head, knocked out or something. That's why I'm having trouble remembering, and assumed why I had gone to school like any other day."

"Bryce—"

"But why wasn't I killed too? Why did they leave me to suffer, to—" the weighty tears broke loose, and began falling down his already gritty face, taking the form of a flood. Bryce didn't swipe at them, didn't try to stop them, but instead, welcomed the breakdown and release.

"Bryce, I think you should sit down."

Bryce turned, looked at the detective through a curtain of dampness, nodded in acceptance, and then retrieved his chair from the floor. Placing it upright, he took a seat, and began clearing his eyes.

"Bryce, we—"

"There were footprints at the scene. In my dad's room, in the blood. Whoever put me in his bed must have walked back through the blood. That's proof, right? Someone was in my house."

"Bryce," the detective's voice was suddenly quiet, monotone, Bryce thought. As if what he was about to say he didn't particularly want to, and Bryce wasn't one hundred percent sure he wanted to hear it. "We saw the footprints, studied them."

"And?"

"They matched your shoe size, your boots."

"That can't be," Bryce said, struggling not to look down at the brown boots he felt ambushing his feet. "That doesn't make any sense."

"And the knife," Gellar stopped, and Bryce silently begged for him not to finish the thought. "The knife used to stab your father and brother was found in the bathroom, with your fingerprints on it."

"No!" Bryce roared, not knowing where the voice came from, feeling as if it belonged to someone else. "There has to be a mistake. Someone is setting me up!"

"Why would someone do that, Bryce?"

"I-I-I don't know! But you can't possibly believe that I would be capable of doing this or have any motive to."

"Bryce, your father and brother were repeatedly sta—" a knock at the door interrupted the detective, and Bryce immediately began looking for answers.

A dream, this was all a dream. Well, not a dream, but a nightmare. A horrible nightmare which had caused him to sleep through his alarm. And now, the gentle rap at the door was just his father, waking him up for school.

"Bryce," the detective called out. Not a nightmare. "Excuse me for a moment; I'm wanted in the other room."

Bryce nodded, showing his acknowledgement with motion instead of words. Gellar left, and Bryce gently put his head down on the table. He was no longer cold, but burning up, feeling as if his skin were logs to a high flamed fire.

Nothing made sense. He couldn't concentrate, couldn't remember. Abruptly, his mind began to swirl. Thoughts coming, going, images turning black. Tiny, uneven jigsaw puzzle pieces quickly formed, filling his brain, but none of them seemed to fit together. They couldn't form a clear, cut picture.

"Bryce," the door opened, and someone entered the room, called out. But who? He wasn't sure. "Bryce, I just got word that you're father wasn't the one who was medicated. Bryce, are you alright?"

He looked up from the table, smirked, and then tilted his head slowly toward the stranger. "Who's Bryce?"
