

Chapter One
(Our Narrator)
Dropped on the Head

They say if you get dropped on the head as a baby, you'll never be right again. It used to be a joke, don't know if it still is, but when somebody does something stupid or shocking someone might say, "What? D'ja get dropped on the head when you were a baby?" Everyone would laugh and think it was such a stitch, except the poor guy who may or may not have had his little baby head smacked in by linoleum or parquet or whatever they make floors out of these days.

Point is, if anyone said that joke to Mikey, they'd probably get a punch in the head. Having been dropped more than once as a baby, he doesn't find that joke funny in the slightest. Or at least he didn't when I knew him. He might now. Mikey's changed a lot since the days when I

knew him, around the neighborhood. We were pretty tight for a while, but not so much anymore. I guess that's why I never saw any of this coming.

Usually when you tell a story about someone, you start with their birth or maybe when you met them. In Mikey's case, though, neither of those will work. I've known Mikey forever; he's always been there. Our moms were friendly for a time when we were little. My mom thought Mikey's mom was "a little fruity," as she put it. That day I do remember. I was standing there in Toughskin jeans with reinforced knees, feeling as sad as I can ever remember. My Mom told me I couldn't play at Mikey's house anymore. Apparently Mrs. Goretti had said something terrible, something that made the whole town turn against her. She said she knew better than Pastor. Nobody knew better than Pastor Simms.

My Mom said we were a good Christian family and that it would be "wrong to exclude the boy." That meant Mikey could still come over and play at my house; I just couldn't go over there.

Mikey, unlike his Mama, quoted Pastor at every opportunity. My mom said he was the most obedient boy she had ever met, and even said I would do well to take a page out of Mikey's book. I didn't really know what that meant at the time, since Mikey never had much in the way of books. I knew she didn't mean his Bible, and as far as I knew, the Bible and

schoolbooks were the only books Mikey was allowed to read. He kept those magazines, but he hid them. Later on I figured it out. My mom just wanted me to be more like Mikey and do what he did. Ha!

Mom was around for the fire, though. That was terrible. We had fire safety week at Sunday school. I think I was in second grade, maybe third. Mikey didn't go to school with everyone else, only Sunday school. They taught us about family fire drills, and the importance of smoke detectors, and how to properly call 911. They had just started 911 back then, and people didn't really know how to do it properly.

Mikey came back to church and said his family did practice fire drills. They had a meeting place outside, so they'd know if everyone got out of the house. He said he'd put new batteries in all the smoke detectors, and that they had a new fire extinguisher for the kitchen. Teacher gave him a gold star. I didn't get one. My mom said that kind of planning was for hysterics afraid of their own shadows. She said if you were careful, no fires would ever happen. People used to say that a lot back then. Turned out, Mikey's family didn't really do anything for fire safety. Mikey made it all up.

Later there was a big commotion, with lights and police and fire trucks, outside Mikey's house. His dad was gone by then and it was just Mikey and his mom and sister. Jeanette was three years older than Mikey,

and sometimes acted more like a mom than a sister. She was in her bathrobe with her hair wrapped up in a towel when the fire happened, and everybody ran outside to see what was going on. Jeanette was really embarrassed and didn't want anyone seeing what she called her *nudity*. She was far from naked in her long bathrobe, but if you looked really close you could see part of a boob.

Mikey ran through the house screaming, "FIRE! FIRE!" and making sure his mom and sister were safe. Nobody asked him how he knew about the fire, or how he had learned to spray the base of the fire with the extinguisher, or why he didn't call 911.

I asked him if he'd set the fire. He said no. But he never explained what had happened to the lighter I kept by my fireworks. He said my mom must have found them. But if she had, she'd have taken everything and not just the lighter. Mikey had to have stolen it.

I never told anyone about Mikey starting that fire. Somehow I thought I'd be in as big of trouble as he'd have been. Besides, a guy doesn't rat on his best friend, especially if no one got hurt. And that time no one did get hurt. Now I know I was setting myself up for a pattern of apathy that would lead to—I'm getting ahead of myself. Point is, I should have done something about Mikey years ago. I didn't. Now I have to put it right.

Chapter Two
(Mikey)
A Terrible Task

My new friend from the movie theatre screamed an awful lot on the ride up here. Truthfully, I'd be glad to be rid of her. She yelled and cried about everything, every nice thing I said, every funny joke I made. Even when I asked how she liked the burgers and ice cream I bought her, she screamed like I was murdering her. What kind of kid doesn't like cheeseburgers? I love them; always have.

Of course I didn't want to kill her. I never want to. It's sad. But there was no reason for her to mess everything up, with her screeching and crying and carrying on, when nothing was even happening. I went to a lot of trouble to make today nice.

I went to a lot of those Barnaby movies ... Teal and Tammy Barnaby, the twins. They were so pretty and hey did all those fun movies in exotic

locales. London, Paris, Hollywood ... those twins got to go everywhere and have all kinds of fun adventures. That's where I met my new friend. She was all alone in the theatre; said her mom was going to pick her up later. Can you imagine leaving a tasty young girl like this all alone in a dark movie house? Mama certainly wouldn't have let me go to the movies alone at that age. There was no telling what kind of pervert a kid could run into. At least I wasn't after little boys, like some of those faggot-ass nut jobs out there. I may not have obeyed every commandment, but I knew enough not to be a homo.

This time, Teal and Tammy were in Malibu trying to meet their favorite actor, who was only in town for spring break. They ran all over the place in bikinis and sundresses and spaghetti straps and no bras. It was a fun movie for families, and in fact, the audience was mostly moms and weekend dads, with little kids clutching festive bags of popcorn, tiny mittens clipped to puffy winter coats.

I love to watch movies with those twins. Such beautiful girls. It'll be sad to see them get all old and ugly and wrinkled and gross. I hope they don't live long enough for that to happen. Fame can kill people pretty early, sometimes. Then they'll be forever young to me, just like this one I've got right here. She'll never age another day.

"The nice thing about this house," I tell her, while I secure her straps to the dining table, "is that you can scream bloody murder and no one will hear." Her eyes turn all wide and scared when I say that, so I tell her it's just an expression.

It's not as if I enjoy killing them. But if they're not going to even *try* to like me, I can't let them go. If one--just one of them--would be sweet and quiet and do what I told them, none of this choking and cutting and whatnot would be necessary. And I really wish it weren't. I don't really have the temperament for it.

She's squirming on the table. I don't know if she knows I tied her to a board so I could move her around. She looks really scared and I almost want to knock her out, to stop her from being so upset. I want to at least give her a chance. It's the middle of winter, but she's sweaty and bleeding a little. I'm not sure what happened to make her bleed, but I take a wet cloth from the bathroom and wipe her face with it.

"There, there, young miss. That feel better?" And, suddenly, she won't look at me. I start to see the Red when the girls won't look at me. I used to think seeing red was just an expression. Turns out, when women are trying really hard to make you mad, they release a chemical that makes the Red come over you. "You little bitch! You're not going anywhere, so you

might as well get used to the idea of looking at me. What am I, so ugly you can't even look at me? LOOK AT ME!"

Her eyes snap to attention and fix themselves on my face. I knew they would. Sometimes it takes a little louding to get these girls' attention. Mama always called it that--*louding*. Got my point across okay. The girl is looking at me, finally, and I figure it's time.

She's wearing a corduroy shirt that buttons up the front. She squirms harder with each button I undo, but I know she's not going anywhere. The poor girl is tied up too tight. I have to cut her flowered jeans off, and I'm worried that she'll pee herself and ruin everything. They do that, sometimes, I guess out of fear.

I leave her bra and panties on; I like to reach in and around instead of having them all lewd and naked. I think it drives them crazy to feel my hands outside their clothes, knowing I could reach in any second I want to and give them a thrill they'll remember always. I slide the board across the table and swing it around until her sweet little face is next to me. I lean down, smoothing her pretty blonde hair back as I whisper to her.

"Kiss me, little one." She shakes her head violently. "Kiss me like you love me, and then I'll let you go." My hands are sliding up and down her torso. She must love it; she must love me. She must, by now. But she's

resisting. I won't have it. I can't. Resisting after all the trouble I've gone through to make this moment perfect? All alone in a big, beautiful house, safe and warm when it's so very cold outside. A romantic fire in the fireplace, and all she can do is complain and cry and shake her head like she doesn't even care.

I kiss her anyway, because I can. She holds her mouth shut really tight, which I have to admit is very cute. But when I stop kissing her, she spits in my face. For a second, I'm so mad I can't even see straight. She's doing it; the Red is coming. I'm squeezing something, and it might be the girl. So much Red. I can't see anything. Somewhere far away I feel her stiffen under me and stop moving. When the Red subsides, my hands are around her tiny throat. She's not crying or spitting or squirming anymore. She's still very pretty though.