

An conversation between best-selling and award-winning author Colleen Coble
and Erin Healy, author of *Hiding Places*

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Colleen: I love stories about old inns. Both *Hiding Places* and my novel *Tidewater Inn*, which you and I worked on together a couple of years ago, feature a family-run hotel. Fess up, now—did you get the idea for your novel’s Harrison Lodge from me?

Erin: Great minds think alike, my friend. I promise I didn’t steal! But oddly enough, my real-life inspiration has more in common with the hotels of your books *Tidewater Inn* and *The Inn at Ocean’s Edge* than with the Harrison Lodge of *Hiding Places*. In the 1920s my great-grandparents bought an inn on the beach in Southern California, The Pierpont Inn. They restored and expanded the hotel, and it remained family owned and operated until 2000. These are the Gleichmanns I referred to in the novel’s dedication. I lived on the property for two years as a child.

This picture was taken in the early 1940s behind the Pierpont. That’s Great Nana in the center with her children, my nana and uncle.

Colleen: So are the Harrisons anything like the Gleichmanns?

Erin: Not at all, I’m happy to say! Unlike Kate, I got lots of love from my family.

Colleen: *Hiding Places* has a lot to say about how broken families can be. But also, it’s about how we sometimes protect family connections even when they’re unhealthy. Why do we do that?

Erin: If I were a psychologist I might have a more educated answer. But my gut-level, emotional answer is that many of us hope that *our* family might one day live up to all the potential of what a really great family could be, in spite of our glaring or destructive faults. We tend to feel hopeful about the notion of families, whether that be the ones we come from or the ones we are trying to create. Also, “family” is the label we often give to the group of people that makes us feel most secure, even if that security comes at a price. Not all families are related by blood.

Colleen: Like Charlie’s “street family.”



Erin: Exactly.

Colleen: I've never heard of a street family. Are they the same thing as a gang?

Erin: Gangs usually organize along racial and geographical lines. They have more adult members. But street families are typically made up of homeless youths who are seeking safety and survival in numbers. Their "families" are governed by really strict (and sometimes capricious) rules, hierarchies, and work roles. It can be an effective way for an underage person to be protected on the street, in spite of the inherent dangers.

Colleen: How did story about Japanese Americans come to figure in a story about a tiny Colorado lumber town?

Erin: I had historical and personal reasons for including that. On the historical side, during my research for *Hiding Places* I learned that Colorado had been home to one of the ten Japanese American internment camps established during World War II. I also learned that the Colorado governor of the time did not share the prevailing, hostile views of Japanese Americans during this time (a view that ultimately damaged his political career). A significant number of Japanese Americans came to the Denver area during the "voluntary" relocation period. These details lent me an important plot point.

As to the personal side, I'll drop in this photograph of me and my mother taken back in the seventies.



We're at my great-grandmother's home, which was on the hotel property. We're sitting on a sofa Great Nana purchased in Japan in the 1950s, along with the carved end tables and the triptych hanging on the wall. Though you can't see them in the photo, the table lamps were white ceramic geishas. Today an aunt has the triptych, my parents have the lamps and tables, and I have the very threadbare, desperately-in-need-of-new-upholstery sofa. (My beloved book group sits on it once a month and turns a blind eye to its shabbiness.) For me these bits of furniture connect me to a small bit of my family history, which is something the Harrisons forgot over the years as they became absorbed in their individual dramas.

Colleen: So did you write the discussion questions at the back of the novel?

Erin: I'll admit to mine if you admit to yours!

Colleen: LOL! I'm going to pose one of your own questions to you. It's partly about Kate, the 11-year-old star of *Hiding Places*. "What makes young children such a powerful force in a family unit?"

Erin: Aw, you play tough. In those back pages I always ask the questions I don't know the answers to! My own children are always causing me to stop and try to see the world through their eyes. I'm always forgetting what it was like to think like a child, to see grown-up issues the way a child might see them—which in my experience usually involves a lot of simplicity and honesty and hope. In *Hiding Places*, Kate doesn't have any agenda. She just lives out of who she is as a generous, clever girl who wants her family to be happy. What child doesn't want her family to be happy? Kate's uncomplicated way of being and loving draws her great-grandmother out of self-imposed shadows. I truly do think children are gifted with this kind of power. Grownups, unfortunately, are also strong and can overpower a child's natural strengths.

Colleen: True, we have to be so careful not to squelch that in them. Is Kate modeled after you, the child-Erin who lived at the hotel?

Erin: The only thing Kate and I have in common is that I loved to try to eavesdrop on the adults. But I wasn't as good at that as she is. I could *never* hear what they were talking about.

Colleen: Did you have a favorite hiding place at your family's inn?

Erin: Not in the hotel itself, but my great-grandmother's home and mine—they were next door to each other on the property—had more closets than I can count, all good for hide-and-seek. The best one was my parents' bathroom walk-in, where I'd duck behind my mother's long dresses. Fortunately for me, all the hiding I ever did was for purely playful reasons.

Colleen: Do you have a favorite scene from the book?

Erin: I like varying parts of my books depending on what kind of a mood I'm in. But I've always liked this one, about Fox, a gang leader who's crazy about his 12-year-old son:

Someday they'd have a bigger place in a better part of the city, a house, and he'd have a better-paying job so she wouldn't have to work so hard. The Fox said this at least once a week, usually when she was on her way out the door, her eyes puffy from not getting enough sleep between her housekeeping and bartending jobs.

“Keep Coz outta trouble,” she'd say on her way out the door.

“We ain't never found trouble we couldn't get out of, baby.”

Then he'd give her a kiss to carry with her on the bus and she'd leave, smiling.

This particular Saturday, after she was gone, the Fox roused their son from his blankets on the sofa. He yanked out the boy's earbuds and let them dangle. A distant heavy beat tapped the floor.

“Up now, son.” He gave the boy a firm shoulder shake, then went to the window and lifted one slat in the brittle plastic blinds. In the parking lot two floors down, a few of his Heavies were wasting the day in a line of parked cars, tinkering and smoking, dealing and plotting. Three of them were gathered around an open trunk, ogling whatever it contained. Hot products, Fox guessed, that they'd sell to the highest bidder. There was his closest brother, Hector. The wild man Jones, and the linebacker Brick. Jones clapped Brick on the arm and threw his head back, laughing at the sky.

On the sofa, Coz groaned and pulled a blanket up over his head.

“We got work today,” the Fox said.

“You work.”

“I do. And your mama works harder 'n botha us. Work's your way outta these projects someday, so get a move on.”

“Mama says school's my way out.”

“She’s right.”

“So which is it?”

“There ain’t no school today is there? C’mon now, up. S’already afternoon.”

Coz swung his adolescent legs off the couch but didn’t lift his head. He was a marionette at this age, all skinny limbs and floppy head, waiting for some no-gooder to pull his strings.

“You got some moral dilemma goin’ on inside that melon o’ yours? Go pull your pants on. And put on some respect while you’re at it.”

The Fox had already poured himself a bowl of cereal and eaten it by the time Coz shuffled into the bathroom, where he’d dropped his jeans before crawling under the blankets last night. Sometime in just the past few months—the Fox wasn’t sure exactly when it had happened—Coz went to sleep a child and woke up a man. His mother had tried to point it out. The Fox remembered that now. She saw it in the way his eyes registered the neighbor girls as they scuttled down the gray halls in whispering groups. Heard it in the smack she had, until then, successfully scolded off his lips. Smelled it in the laundry she carried down to the basement washers every Monday night. But the Fox didn’t give her any credence until the day Hector called Coz *brother* rather than *boy*, changing everything with just a few letters of the alphabet.

The Fox had been with the Mile High Heavies near twenty years, since he himself made the shift from boy to brother. He was an old man now by the gang’s standards, a respected leader who’d paid his share of bills over the years with drugs and fenced goods as often as with hard-earned paychecks. Every so often one of the brothers would father a child and be reformed. More often they became lesser men than they were before, throwing off their women and the kids they made together. A few were like the Fox: decent brothers, loyal and responsible to their family circles, offended by claims that anything in their lives needed to be done differently.

So nothing changed in the Fox’s life until that day when Hector called his son *brother* and

took him without Fox's permission to be inked with the MHH insignia. When Coz came home with inflamed art on a neck skinny as a baseball bat, the Fox saw red. Coz was nobody's brother and only one man's son, and he would never be a Heavy just because some underling assumed it was his destiny. The boy deserved options, however limited they may be.

Since then the Fox had made subtle moves toward the margins of the Heavies' activities, surprised by the energy it took to keep one twelve-year-old child, not to mention himself, profitably occupied. He'd found unexpected help in the form of a detective from the Denver PD. In exchange for information about certain city gang activities—never the Heavies'; the Fox was no traitor or coward—the detective put in a good word for the Fox on odd jobs. Legal jobs.

Coz emerged from the bathroom still bleary eyed.

“What is it today? Hauling? Framing?”

The Fox put his bowl in the sink. Coz poured himself a cup of red fruit punch and collapsed onto a counter stool.

“Security.”

“Like for a club?”

“Weed dispensary.”

“Security like where you get a uniform? A piece?”

“None o' that.”

“Rent-a-cop without a gun. What kind of—”

“I got a gun. You don't.” The Fox began depositing items in front of Coz: a bowl, a box of Cocoa Puffs, a jug of milk, a spoon.

“You done security before?” his son asked.

“All week long.”

Coz snorted and poured. “How'd a guy like you pass the background checks?”

“It’s under the table.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means it’s win-win. Now shut up and eat. We leave in five.”

“Security is boring.”

“Boring’s a jail cell for thirty years. Boring’s life in these projects.”

“Might be interesting if they paid in product.”

“Wouldn’t you like that.”

“What’s my cut?” Coz grinned at his father and shoveled a spoonful of the little chocolaty Cocoa Puffs into his mouth.

“Every time you speak, it gets smaller.”

The boy tried not to laugh. Proof of that came in the shining eyes and the concave chest and the line of milk that spurted out his nose. Which is how the Fox knew it was going to be an okay day.

* * *

Hiding Places

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KATE

Kate sat on a stool behind the hotel's tall reception desk, quiet as a mouse, thinking invisible thoughts. If she waited long enough, quietly enough, Gran might send her on an errand. But when Alyssa pounded down the stairs and headed across the foyer, head down, fast as a cross-country skier, Kate knew what was coming. She should have made her escape much sooner.

Gran, helping a line of guests check in, caught sight of her.

"Alyssa. Keep your sister occupied," she ordered.

Alyssa's sigh drew the attention of the guest at the rear of the line. "It's my day *off*," she whined.

"Just for two hours. Go. Both of you. Figure it out." Gran waved a hand at Kate without looking at her. "Shoo now."

Kate slid off the stool, already plotting her getaway. She hated the instructions as much as Alyssa did. Sometimes she was able to slip away to her favorite cubby hole, knowing Alyssa wouldn't bother to look for her. At other times Grandy would secretly press a fiver into her palm, anticipating that Alyssa would take Kate into town and leave her at the park while she shopped. "Get a smoothie," he'd whisper.

Grandy noticed Kate in a way that no one else seemed to. Still, he was as busy as the rest of them, and eating a smoothie alone wasn't any more fun than playing on the jungle gym alone. And sometimes Alyssa would steal the five dollar bill and say Kate lost it. *You really should be more careful.*

On this particular day, Grandy was nowhere in sight. And as if to convince their grandmother she shouldn't order them to do such things, Alyssa grabbed Kate's arm and marched her outdoors before Kate could race ahead.

“Let’s go for a hike,” she said with all the anticipation of going for shots at the doctor’s.

“Chef wants pine cones.”

“What for?”

“Does it matter? A centerpiece or something.”

A hike for pinecones wasn’t a terrible way to spend an hour. “We’ll need a bucket,” Kate said.

“Then get one.”

“You mean two?”

“One. I’m just keeping you occupied.”

In the foothills behind the property there were no trails to speak of, just towering pines and skeletal aspens and dry needles that rolled around under Kate’s shoes. She collected the elongated, papery cones that fell from the spruce trees, sap making her fingers tacky, while Alyssa kept up a pace that was much too fast. At twenty-two Alyssa was twice Kate’s age and tall, mostly legs, and Kate had to take two steps for her sister’s every one while stooping for the required cones. She had to leave several perfectly good ones on the ground just to keep Alyssa in sight.

Kate knew these woods moderately well, though stern warnings from Gran prevented her from ever exploring too far alone. *Remember Mitzzy*, Gran would say, resurrecting the family’s dead dog and a deadly cougar with two clipped words.

In mere minutes Alyssa walked beyond Kate’s self-imposed boundaries.

“Wait up!” she kept calling.

“Keep up!” Alyssa would reply without slowing down. “You’re the Kat.”

Kate hissed and made a claw of her hands. Then she dutifully followed. Kate hated the feline nickname more than anything the boys at school ever called her. *Princess Kate, Duchess of Cambridge*, for example.

The sisters went on like this long enough for Kate to feel thirsty. Her bucket was almost full, and she'd lost sight of Alyssa. She paused to listen for a clue, heard nothing but the flutter of a bird taking wing somewhere high above.

“Lyssa?”

“KAT!”

Her sister lunged from behind a tree. Kate shrieked and dropped the bucket, spilling her cones. A few rolled down the gentle slope. Alyssa laughed.

“Stop *doing* that!” Kate stomped her foot and felt near tears.

“Doing what?”

“I am *not* a cat.”

“Kat the Killer.”

“I never killed anyone in my life!”

“No, you kill dreams.”

Kate rubbed her nose with the heel of her hand and then knelt to collect the spilled pine cones, needles pricking through her jeans.

“I want you to call me *Kate*.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I asked. Ms. Davis says respect is when—”

“We all want stuff we can't have.”

The remark confused Kate. Alyssa wasn't just a grownup, she was the oldest sister, which meant she pretty much got anything she ever wanted.

“Stuff like what?” Kate asked. The cones rustled as she scooped them together, weighing almost nothing.

“Like a life away from here.”

Alyssa was looking down the valley, wearing her usual cross frown.

“If you want to leave, I won’t stop you,” Kate said.

“No, you did that years ago.”

There was no point in trying to figure out what Alyssa meant when everything she had to say was completely crazy. It was like trying to talk to the Cheshire cat.

She imagined her sister with purple stripes.

A brittle ponderosa felled by pine beetles had caught most of Kate’s stash. The beetles worked invisibly, destroying trees until they turned gray and sometimes fell over, but although there was evidence of their work all around, she’d never seen one of the beetles anywhere except in a clear plastic box at school. There might be thousands of the tiny insects in the towering trees that surrounded them even now.

Her heel fell against the log, drumming.

“I’m not going home until you promise to call me Kate.”

“Then I guess you won’t go home.”

Alyssa left her on the log without looking back.

The sun was directly overhead when Alyssa stalked off, and the late-October day was warm, and Kate had eaten a large lunch, so until the light began to shift and the shadows began to lengthen she had no motive to take back her vow. She hoped Gran might send Grandy after her when Alyssa’s abandonment was discovered, or that Chef would need the pine cones bad enough to go searching, and somehow or other, someone would find her and punish Alyssa. It might have happened if she’d waited until dark, but long before then she had to pee and couldn’t do it where beetles might get into her pants. More than that, the breeze in the trees and the birds pecking for grubs and small animals skittering around too quick to be seen all together formed a terrible warning in Kate’s mind: *Remember Mitzy*.

And wouldn't Alyssa just love it if a cougar ate Kate the Kat?

She left then, unsure of the way home except that it was down. So long as she aimed downhill she was bound to come to the lodge sooner or later, and even if she missed it, she couldn't possibly miss the creek, which wound through the foothills all the way into town and beyond. If she followed the creek she'd find a familiar place soon enough. She might even walk *in* the creek, to cover her scent and throw off any mountain lion stalking her.

Kate hurried.

* * *

CHARLIE

Charlie.

His name was a dream, a distant call.

Charlie! A command to wake up.

“Charlie!” This time a knife in his ear.

Charlie jolted and smacked his head on the low steel ceiling above his sleeping bag, setting off a ringing alarm in his head.

Someone was aiming a flashlight into his eyes. He grimaced and touched the spot on his forehead.

“You awake yet? Merridew—I mean Dad—well he called a meeting, and you're late.”

The speaker was his street brother Drogo, a seventeen-year-old who'd named himself after some story warrior who never cut his hair. Choosing a name like that for yourself was asking for it, Charlie thought. Too much of a temptation for the rest of the family. Step on the wrong side of the

rules and what would they do? Tax your hair. Charlie never said anything of it, though. Drogo wasn't his responsibility.

In the six months since Drogo joined the family, he'd been fortunate, but as of yesterday Drogo's chances of having his hair cut off spiked exponentially. Because yesterday Merridew had challenged the old Yakuza for leadership of the family, and won. Merridew was fond of taxes.

"What's the meeting?" Charlie asked.

"New parents, new code. You know. Merridew—I mean *Dad* has a job for you."

Yes, Charlie did know. Drogo might lose his hair, but Charlie would probably lose his chair at the family table, so to speak. Merridew didn't like Charlie much.

Charlie rolled off the ledge where he slept and dropped onto a jerry-rigged plywood floor braced between two steel girders, where he had more head room. Drogo lingered while Charlie dressed.

"Is it true what they're saying?" Drogo asked as Charlie fished around for a T-shirt.

"Depends what they're saying."

"That you wouldn't challenge Yakuza because he let you do whatever you wanted."

"I didn't challenge Yakuza because I never wanted his job."

The shirt stank, so Charlie shrugged into a wrinkled blue button-down instead. He'd have to pay one of the girls to take his clothes to the youth shelter. Probably Star. Since aging out of eligibility for the city's homeless-youth services, he'd found it less expensive to pay his sisters to wash his shirts than to do it himself at the Laundromat. Star did the best job.

"Yakuza liked you," Drogo said.

So maybe he did, Charlie thought. He'd liked Yakuza too, but a family wasn't supposed to *like* their dad, they were supposed to respect him. Yakuza wasn't always respectable, but he was sober, and he did let Charlie do just about whatever he wanted. All that was about to change.

Drogo said, “Ender says Merridew’s gonna make a mess of this.”

“Then Ender can challenge Merridew.”

“You’re older ’n any of us. Older ’n Merridew even. You should’ve done it.”

Charlie said nothing to that. Under the surface appearance of things, age had nothing to do with anything in the politics of street families, but Drogo was too new to the streets to realize it yet.

“He says bring your notebook,” Drogo said before turning away.

So Merridew could tax it like he’d eventually tax Drogo’s ponytail? Not a chance. Charlie shoved the spiral-bound book deep into the foot of his sleeping bag, slowly worked on the buttons of his shirt, then shoved his feet into an old pair of canvas sneakers and tugged the narrow bill of his knit cap down onto his brow. Dots of sunlight poked in through tiny gaps in the steel structure at Charlie’s eye level. He lifted his wristwatch to a slim ray of light. It wasn’t even eight o’clock.

He made his way down the length of the bridge, vaulting over the girders that gave each of the family members a modicum of privacy, balancing on plywood floors they’d hauled up themselves to have something solid to walk on, until he reached the center, the high point of the arch where the group had built something of a living room out of scrap boards and foam and sheet metal. They congregated here before splitting up each day.

Charlie was the last one to arrive, the rest of the family looking like they’d been up awhile. There were twelve of them today including Charlie. Yesterday they had numbered fourteen.

Charlie felt his twenty-four years with a new pain as he scanned the ragtag group that wouldn’t meet his eyes. Merridew was the only other one in the room who’d seen his twenty-first birthday. The rest hadn’t even hit nineteen. Other than their youth this dirty dozen had only two things in common: this cramped bridge and their agreement to abide by whatever rules their fictive parents established. Charlie had been here before any of them—a fact, he supposed, that wasn’t far from Merridew’s mind.

In the few hours since Charlie had last passed through here, the small space had been transformed. Sometime while Charlie slept Merridew had hauled up a chair and a cheap table for himself, and Xena, the fiercely tiny woman he'd appointed "mom" after running off the previous parents, had hung blankets around the private space designated for her own use.

Drogo reclined on a pile of yellow foam bricks collected for insulation, his long hair collected over his shoulder. Leaning against a girder, Ender took a cigarette from Eve, who held out a slim cellophane-wrapped box with her name on it. Eve was the prettiest girl with a deceptively delicate look—but she could outrun, outmaneuver, and sometimes outwit them all.

Giggles sat on a box, wincing as Star viciously brushed and braided her hair. Nervous Bugsy, fat Scratch, and slow Wadd played cards on an old mattress. Xena sorted clothes from a plastic shopping bag, and threw a little girl's T-shirt at Scratch.

"That one might be big enough for you," she said to the obese boy. He threw it back at her and she laughed.

Daylight rose through the gap in the floor, where they'd scramble out to descend the steel arches to the ground. Over their heads on the freeway deck, a truck bounced hard over a rut.

Merridew was perched on the new chair, sipping from a warm beer bottle. He eyed Charlie over the brown glass and fingered his smiley, which he'd laid out on the lopsided table. The heavy chain held together at the ends by a padlock was the family's weapon of choice. This one was still brown with Yakuza's blood.

"Sleeping Beauty arrives," Merridew said, fingering the smiley's thick links.

Charlie folded his arms and leaned into a corner. He rubbed the small bump that had formed on his brow and noticed that Wadd had a paper cup half full of coffee at his feet. It wasn't often that anyone went out to the shelter, or any other haunt, for breakfast before eight.

"I think I'll call you Beauty," Merridew said, setting down his bottle. "It's no good to be

going by your real name after all this time. You'll get us all in trouble with the law one of these days."

"Maybe Charlie's not my real name."

"No? You got some hard-to-pronounce Japanese name to go with that face of yours?"

Charlie scowled. "I like Charlie."

"Doesn't matter what you like anymore. Where's your notebook?"

"What notebook?"

"Ender, go fetch his notebook."

Eve pouted when Ender left her. The tall slim blond adjusted his cigarette to the corner of his mouth and crossed the floor. He didn't speak to Charlie as he passed, but his eyes apologized. Rule number one of the street-family code: honor thy father and mother.

"It's in the bag," Charlie said just loud enough for him to hear. The kid raised his chin in thanks and hauled himself up over a girder, heading for Charlie's end of the bridge.

"Got some housekeeping to do this morning," Merridew said. "Some old grime Yakuza was too weak to clean up. Some old grievances."

Charlie held Merridew's glare.

"Seems everyone around here thinks you don't pull your weight, Beauty."

"Everyone, huh?"

"You don't contribute enough."

"I bring in the spange."

"Ever notice how little panhandling anyone around here is doing anymore? No matter how much spange you collect in that woolly cap of yours, you can't get half of what Giggles can get on her back or what Wadd can sell in a little plastic bag."

Giggles snickered. Star yanked on her braid and the girl shut up.

“No one else here works every day,” Charlie said. “And I always meet the quotas.”

“I’m thinking the quota’s not high enough, considering how much more everyone else can haul in while you record deep thoughts in that notebook of yours.”

Charlie shrugged. “Then raise it.”

“Seventy-five bucks a day.”

All eyes flitted to Merridew. Apparently he hadn’t announced this outrageous number before now.

“It’s a bluff,” Eve said, exhaling smoke.

But Merridew and Charlie were alone in this conversation.

“Seventy-five,” Charlie said. “Got it. Anything else we need to cover?”

“This family doesn’t spange anymore.”

“What?” Star yelped.

“If you want me to keep the family straight with the law, let me do it,” Charlie said.

“Spanging is legal. I’m all about staying legal.”

“Pot is legal too,” Wadd said. “In Colorado. It is. That’s what you told me, Buggy. Legal for everyone.”

“To inhale,” Buggy said under his breath. He adjusted his glasses. “Not just anyone can sell it.”

“But you said I can sell it.”

“You can sell it. You just keep selling it. Okay?”

“Will I get arrested?”

“No. Alright? Just don’t worry about it.”

Wadd looked as worried as a fish on a hook. Merridew took another sip of his beer.

“What’s it to you how I get the money so long as I get it?” Charlie asked.

Scratch said, “That’s what I was wonder—”

Bugsy socked him.

“What’s it to you to stay legal when you’ve already got a record?” Merridew asked Charlie.

The room stilled at this news, a secret of Charlie’s that Yakuza had kept. He wondered how Merridew had found out. As far as everyone here was concerned, there was no shame in having a criminal background. If anything, it raised a man’s status in the family. But Charlie had never wanted status. He didn’t want attention, or fame, or notoriety, or responsibility. All he wanted was to get by. Do the minimum required to stay. Eat and sleep and write and maybe someday sell a story. Nobody bothered him and he didn’t bother anybody.

Drogo shot him a look that said what Charlie presumed everyone was thinking: *A record too? Then you were a coward not to stay a step ahead of Merridew. You’re the reason we’ve gotta live with Merridew now.*

Ender dropped back into the room with a dog-eared blue book rolled like a tube in his fist. The whole thing looked much slimmer than Charlie remembered it being.

“Ender, let’s see that notebook.”

Charlie consciously relaxed his fist as his brother handed over the book. Merridew licked his thumb and started paging through it. A few tiny scraps fluttered to the plywood floor. Ender met Charlie’s eyes, and he knew: Ender had tried to save some precious pages. He’d torn as much as he dared from between the covers before doing what Merridew ordered. Charlie thanked his brother with his eyes.

“You were working on a story,” Merridew said, searching.

“I work on a lot of stories.”

“I’m interested in the one about security at pot shops.”

Charlie immediately knew which one, but he didn’t offer any help.

“Something about how now that weed is legal in this state, the guys who sell it can expect to

be robbed.”

Giggles giggled.

Merridew laughed too. “It’s even funnier when you know Charlie’s record is for breaking and entering.”

“No scam?” Scratch said. “What did you—”

“Here.” Merridew had found what he was looking for. He had a finger on the passage.

“‘Cash-based stores,’ ‘inadequate security,’ ‘50 percent burglary rate.’ Explain.”

Charlie tried to see where Merridew was going with this, couldn’t. So he told the truth.

“Recreational marijuana’s legal here now, but on the national level it’s still not. So a lot of banks and security firms won’t service the stores.”

“Why?”

“Servicers worry about breaking the feds’ laws even if they’re clean with the state. The DEA isn’t on their side.”

“So pot shops are cash-based and don’t have anyone to secure their money for them.”

“Yeah. A lot of them anyway.”

Merridew flipped to another page. “They use freelance security,” he read.

“Guys with guns who are happy to do the work for the right price. Not everyone can afford them.”

“Do the freelancers need credentials?”

Charlie shook his head. “Just credibility. A lot of them have military in their blood. Or backgrounds as cops.”

Merridew closed the book. “You sell this story?”

“No.”

We have staff writers, he was told when he tried to pitch it to an underground online rag. *And*

no, you can't be a staff writer. Come back when you know how to write a sensible sentence. An article on the topic had appeared on the home page two weeks later, quoting some of Charlie's sources.

"Your chicken scratch won't feed us," Merridew said.

Charlie itched to hold his notebook again.

Merridew stood up slowly, as if his thick Nordic muscles were just thawing out. "I know a guy with credibility. He's hungry. We're gonna help him get some work."

"How?"

"You're going to break and enter."

Charlie saw it all in a blink: Pot shops with no security were most likely to sign up for some right after they'd been robbed. Charlie would rob them. Merridew's friend would sweep in and offer his services.

"Why? Is your friend is going to give us a cut of his contract?"

"On top of whatever weed we can cram into our pockets. Two hundred grand or more, if it's a good day."

"We could buy a house," Wadd said.

Charlie bristled. "No one's going to see that kind of money. Dispensaries aren't stupid. And they keep the cash in vaults, you know."

"Just take their inventory," Merridew said. "We don't need cash to get this job done."

Charlie tried to reach for his notebook. Merridew snatched it away.

"So what was this show for?" Charlie demanded. "Obviously you didn't need me to explain anything."

"It's all for your benefit, Beauty. I want us to be clear." Merridew beckoned to Eve. She obeyed, and when he pointed to her cigarette lighter, she placed it in his palm. "Drogo and Ender are going to help you," he said, running his thumb over the igniter. The flame snapped to life.

Drogo swore under his breath. Charlie watched the flickering tongue lick the corner of his notebook.

“I won’t do it. The gangs are over places like that. You get family entangled with the gangs and—”

“It’s my call.”

“Someone’s gonna get killed, Merridew.”

“Then it’s up to you to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Merridew ran the lighter along the edge of the notebook until two sides were afire.

“A small tax. Just peanuts. For arguing with me.”

The padlocked-chain weapon lying on the table caught Charlie’s imagination. It whispered into his ear that challenging Merridew would be the easiest thing he had ever done. Pick up the smiley, sling it around the Viking’s throat, jump on his back, and pull until he yielded. Put an end to the dictatorship before it started. Take care of the family by keeping it safe.

The moment passed.

Merridew handed the burning notebook to Ender, who looked for a second like he didn’t know what to do with it. Then with a flick of his wrist he tossed it through the exit hole. It went down flapping, a burning bird that would land right in the South Platte River, if Charlie was lucky. He might save the book yet.

Ender’s risk to save Charlie’s pages shamed him. He’d done nothing to deserve that kind of respect, nothing but be a few years older than everyone else, and a little less greedy than Merridew. What good would that do them? He’d never play the role they wanted him to play.

“Okay,” Charlie finally said. “I’ll do it.” It would be his final contribution to the family. It would be his departing apology. A hit and run. Even now he felt guilty for planning to abandon his brothers and sisters to the brute will of their new father. But not too guilty.