

CHAPTER ONE

“JAYSON’S GONE MISSIN,” said my mom. Her Appalachian slough rebounded off the satellite and reached me through my cell phone. Despite the care I had taken to keep sand off my things, an abrasive layer of grit irritated my ear as I pressed the plastic phone against it. I sat facing Chicago’s lakefront. Thousands of North Beach sunbathers and volleyball players glistened around me. Immediately I saw my mom. She stood concerned on the screen porch, in the spot where she always stood when she talked on the phone. Down the porch steps and all about the front yard she looked at the audience of my father’s derelict car collection. Those cars faced the porch on rotted tires and masonry props. I used to address them in the loneliest hours of the night when they stood as my constituents, and I stood before them as Abraham Lincoln, passionately defending my position on the absolute necessity of state unification. My mom never understood the eccentrics that blazed about like comets within my brain, mostly because I didn’t know how to explain to her what went on inside of me. My dad just thought I suffered from ‘dropped baby’ syndrome.

“Kenneth—boy—you there?”

“Ya ma. Right here. I’m on the beach. I’m spacing out I guess.”

“Dicha here me say? Bout Jayson?”

“Ya I heard you say. About how long’s Jayson been gone?”

“Gone missun days now.”

“You sure he’s not just going through another drunk episode?”

“Kenneth you know he ain’t that way no more since he found the Lord and the Lord told him to quit shine.”

A white volleyball escaped its court and bobbed into a sand pothole by my toes.

“Ma there’s this thing called a relapse,” I said. “It’s what people who have problems sometimes do. They quit their problems for a while then something happens and they go back to having their problems.”

“T’ain’t like that. Jayson’s a changed boy. Somethin terrible happened to um. I know’d somethin—.”

A plane passed along the lakefront dragging behind it an advertisement for some drink.

“You say he hasn’t been home in days?”

“Jayson’s in trouble. Man come round few days ago. Asked for Jayson. And you know’d what?”

“What?”

“Man had himself horns on his head.”

“Horns?”

“I’m ascares Kenneth. First I loosed your daddy,” and this was the point at which she started crying, “and then I loosed you,” and she really began to bawl, “and now the devil come and taked Jayson,” and her sad hound dog cries came out. “I’m lone. You men done left me lone.” No doubt about it my mom was a sensitive woman. When she got herself worked up she could flood the valley with howls and tears.

“Ma—ma—. Relax—. Ma. It’s gonna be ok.”

“I’m ascares Kenneth. Devil got his hand in this.”

The assemblage of my tall frame began to unfold. I got the entire six foot four structure upright. I brushed sand from my shorts. I experienced interplay of images: I saw my mom crying on the porch in Kentucky. I saw a woman ankle deep in Lake Michigan picking a white bikini from her butt. I saw the dirt lane roll down through the long front yard, how it

winded into the green valley where at the bottom the Turnabout River flowed. I turned around and saw a traffic jam of walkers, joggers, bikers, people on roller blades and stroller pushers. They were clogged together on the beachfront path.

All while my mom cried.

“Ma I know you’re upset. But I predict Jayson’ll show up looking and smelling like hell, yet he’ll be all right.”

“No Kenneth—yer havin a misthought. Devil got Jayson. I seen the devil hisself. Man with horns! I’m lone Kenneth! I aint got no one to get him back but you—.” She cried at a pitch that prohibited her from further speaking. Suddenly the call to adventure pulsed through me: I would locate Jordan and tell her what was up, I would call work and let it be know I needed a temporary leave, I would go back to my apartment, pack a few things and I would be on my way out of the Chicago before the sun went down.

“Kenneth—” she said.

“Ok ma. I’m coming home. I need to first take care of a few things. But I’ll leave soon. I’ll be there by breakfast tomorrow morning.”

I picked my backpack from the sand and slung one strap over my shoulder.

“I donno no other way Kenneth.”

“I know ma. Hey—is Ladle’s Creek dry?”

“It ain’t rained in three weeks.”

“Fine. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

I removed the phone from my ear and folded it shut, effectively severing the umbilical cord of data that connected me with Kentucky. I turned and faced Chicago’s downtown skyline. I wanted to soften my focus and descend into space out mode. I loved to stare. But I stepped away from the comfortable spot I had claimed on the beach and I began my trip back home.

CHAPTER TWO

GOD BLESS MY toothless mom and all her onion-sized bunions and her genetically unsound skeletal structure. God Bless her second grade education and her story about having never traveled more than a chicken's flight from home. God Bless her ability to cook roots and mushrooms a hundred ways, her unconsidered artistry in quilt making and her honest devotion to animal husbandry. Even though I later learned that I had grown up during the advent of cable television and the personal computer, God Bless how during my early years she got me to believe that if I camped long enough at the end of our lane, I would eventually see Civil War troops marching down through the Cumberland Gap heading back to their homelands (a fiction that fueled great fantasies of travel and adventure within my pre-pubescent imagination). And especially God Bless her yearning for me to learn to read. When an old hippy neighbor relocated himself from our niche of the Appalachian Mountains out to the Rocky Mountains my mom traded him beef jerky and canned vegetables for his entire book collection. With her mule cart she hauled those books to our house. The collection was offered to me and in it I discovered a million pages of stuff, managed to read it all and understand maybe five percent. But that five percent included instructions on

how to build a set of wings, which I later used to fly from the valley and enter the wider world outside of Kentucky.

“JORDAN,” I SAID, gripping with my free hand the overhead bar and swaying to the oceanic motion of the crowded CTA bus. “I have to go home. As a matter of fact I’m on my way back to the apartment right now to get some things and then I’m traveling straight out of the city to Kentucky. My mom called me. She said a man with horns abducted my brother. It’s a long story. I wish I could talk with you before I leave. When you get this please call me right back.”

I held the phone and stared at its blue screen for the rest of the ride, anticipating Jordan’s immediate callback. I exited the Chicago Avenue bus at the southeast edge of Ukrainian Village. I walked towards our apartment still studying the phone screen. Finally I spoke into it, telling it what new number I wanted dialed.

“*T and L Corporation*,” murmured Julia the receptionist, more interested in the words of whatever Gothic novel lay opened on her desk surface.

“Julia this is Kenneth. Is Tom or Linda around by chance?”

“Nope.”

“Do you know if they’re going to be in the city today?”

“Nope.”

“Do you know what day it is?”

“Tuesday.”

“Could you leave Tom and Linda a message from me?”

“Nope.”

“Please.”

“What.”

“Tell them I had a family emergency. I had to go home to Kentucky. Tell them I’ll return in a few days. If it’s longer I’ll call. Write that down ok?”

“Nope.”

“Please.”

“Whatever.”

I disconnected the call. I had walked to within a block of my apartment. I continued to monitor the phone screen, still anticipating Jordan's immediate call back.

CHAPTER THREE

WE WILL BE traveling back to Kentucky, but I need to stop for the next few pages to begin admitting something.

Before Chicago I lived for three months in Phoenix, Arizona. During my first morning in town I rented the first place I found, a studio apartment in a village of asphyxiated, debilitated, castaway old folk who played cards and rode off into the sunset on golf carts. I stayed mostly hidden inside my apartment while I ulcerated about the situation I had left in Seattle. I watched the old go about their business through the seam in my patio curtains. I tracked their movements through the small diamond-shaped window in my front door. Then when I got a tiny bit comfortable I went out the patio doors into the scorched-earth courtyard. I stretched my body while they sat in a slanted gazebo sucking air from mobile oxygen tanks. I appeared to them as an anomaly, a young transient who somehow got let into their confines. At first they left me alone but after they learned I didn't talk much and that I was polite they used me. I was asked to move countless boxes from their garages into their apartments and vice versa. The movement of boxes seemed to be the biggest and most important thing the old couldn't do for themselves.

After three months of despair I blew out of Phoenix on a course set for Chicago. If Chicago didn't work out, I planned

to go to New Orleans. And if New Orleans didn't work out, I planned to go somewhere else. I planned to keep going until something worked out. But Chicago worked out. I was able to stop in Chicago.

I got an apartment in Ukrainian Village. The building had a laundry room in its basement, which I saw as a bonus. While I was down there washing a load of my worn out travel clothes I met my neighbor Danny. He asked me some questions, and he immediately observed my depression. He took it upon himself to help me. In a way, I also helped Danny. He wanted for a long time to enroll in a computer programming class, but he lacked the motivation to do so on his own. Since I had no plans, Danny decided he and I would learn computer programming together.

After our sixth night of class, we went to a bar to erase the world around us. There it was by fluke that we met our future employers, Tom and Linda.

Tom noticed our programming books on the bar and he asked if we were into computers.

Danny answered that we were studying to be Webmasters.

"No shit? We're getting ready to start a business and we need Webmasters. You want to work for us as Webmasters? We'll pay you huge salaries."

"He and I are just novices. In fact we just started taking classes."

Tom put a hand on each of our shoulders and he said: "Fuck those classes. Learn from experience. Experience is a better teacher."

"We seriously don't know what we're doing. Thanks though."

"No—you don't have to say '*thanks though.*' It's a good fucking deal you don't know what you're doing. Linda and I barely know what we're doing, but we have a big fucking idea. *Huge* idea. We're going to use the Internet to make millions peddling porn. But we can't do it without Webmasters. You two guys are raw. You shouldn't have any inhibitions trying new things. You would be a perfect match for us."

TOM AND LINDA named their company *T and L Corporation*. They domiciled it on the third floor of a nondescript building in the River West art gallery district. The cool thing about the building was its loading dock. It was always vacant. It faced an alley plastered with rat warning signs. I spent my breaks on the unused dock and made up scenarios about Depression-era gangsters rolling barrels of beer and whiskey over the creaky wooden floor slates.

Tom and Linda explained the scheme of *T and L Corporation*, and it made perfect sense to me. After I got my computer hooked up I checked out the graphics applications and I designed the company's logo—essentially the logo was a bicycle tire. The central hub represented *T and L*. The spokes represented the ten thousand porn sites that would feed money into the hub. The outside tire represented the consumers. It did not take long for an obscene amount of money to begin flowing from the tire through the spokes into the hub.

Danny and I were Tom and Linda's first employees. Since they had no children they treated Danny and me like sons. They fed us and took us out for beers and smoked pot with us. We helped them unload and set up computers and string miles of wires along baseboards. By the second week of the corporation's operation there were five Webmasters and we were running hundreds of *amateur* and *actual housewives* and *bathroom voyeur* porn sites purposefully made to look homemade and sloppy alongside hundreds of elite and glamorous looking porn sites. Me and Danny and the others were free to dream through every cosmic stretch of our imaginations as we utilized and improved upon our budding Webmaster skills. *T and L's* single goal was to flood the online sex market. Tom and Linda said that if a person could make good money running one Internet porn site (which they could), that same person could make tons of money running ten thousand such sites (which was the truth). So all day long, Danny and I and the others sat locked in our individual offices with powerful desktop computers, scanners, hardcopy stacks of photos, digital files of solicited images, and our imaginations. Our sole function was to

create and maintain porn sites that catered to everyone in the humongous online porn market. Our different sites featured solo, couple, swinger, cock slinger, same sex, multiracial, hermaphroditic, midget, shemale, smearing, biting, pierced, punk, pregnant, group, reality, water sports, fire games, fisting, gun play, alligator jaws, bestiality, brutality, exhibitionists, fetishes both normal and paranormal, whatever except for children—otherwise if an act could arouse a human’s sexual interest, we captured a portion of that arousal market with photos, digital clips and written descriptions somewhere on one of our sites. Within a short time I became desensitized both mentally and physically. But then Jordan’s file appeared in an email. Her photographer asked that she be put into the genre of *genuine teen porn star*. Jordan was twenty-two, but her petite body and delicate face let her pass for the eighteen-year-old teen starlet that her massive Internet audience quickly accepted her as. I became infatuated with Jordan while studying that first series. It involved soft-core lesbian play. Jordan frolicked in panties inside a supposed ‘college dorm room’ with a few other girls, smiling directly at the camera in every photo. There was something extremely different about Jordan. I immediately intuited in her an odd, otherworldly aura—like she was a devilish Greek Goddess vacationing in the forever-confused world of humans.

CHAPTER FOUR

I OPENED THE lobby door. I monitored the phone's screen as I climbed the stairs. My free hand wandered blindly below vision as the key sought the lock on the apartment door. Why hadn't she called? Inside the apartment I looked around, the same as I left it. I went into the kitchen. Sure enough Jordan's cell phone rested on the counter by the coffee maker.

I loud I burst: "Dammit Jordan! Why didn't you take your phone?! I have to talk to you!"

I dug through the refrigerator and prepared a light meal as I continued to argue out loud and douse with guilt an imaginary Jordan.

AFTER OPENING MY laptop on the coffee table, I signed onto the Internet, zipped around and pre-purchased a ticket on a Kentucky-bound Amtrak. The train was scheduled to leave Chicago in less than seventy minutes. It would deposit me in Carthill, Kentucky. Next I went to a different site and bought a ticket on a Greyhound that would come into Carthill, pick me up, take me two hundred miles east and drop me outside the small town of Bryceville. That drop would take place at three o'clock in the morning. My mom's house would still be a few hours away. I would have to walk

a half-mile down the road until I found in a shallow canyon the dry bed of Ladle's Creek. The trek south through the dry creek would take place under the moon's observation. Memories would return as I reencountered the native stones, grasses and plants and flowers of my youth. From over in the east would stretch to me all the shadows of Appalachians. The sky would gradually lighten and birds would begin to sing the day's agenda. I would climb Dunhill's Spine, come down its other side at sunrise and walk the two-mile grass meadow to the small stand of woods. Immediately after circumnavigating the woods the mailbox would appear, along with the long lane leading up to my childhood home in the hills.

I stuffed durable camping clothes into my backpack. In the hall closet I dug out hiking shoes. The last renter left a set of red velvet curtains over the living room windows. That fabric blocked out sunlight like no other covering I had ever known. I jerked open the velvet curtains. Suddenly the apartment had light. Hunching over the coffee table, I wrote a quick note that repeated what I already said to Jordan's voice mail. I told her I would call her *so keep your phone with you!* The note drifted across the counter that divided the kitchen space from the living room. It wasn't wise to leave in a storm, yet I had to. I filled a plastic container with fresh water and grabbed an apple. I strapped on my backpack and scrambled out the apartment.

OUTSIDE THE APARTMENT building I stopped at the first big tree along the sidewalk. I traced its branch pattern until I found a dead limb that could become a walking stick. With my backpack still attached, I scaled the tree's trunk, grabbed onto the dead limb and swung away from the trunk, effectively breaking the limb.

On the sidewalk I hurried and broke the small sticks away from the limb. By the time I got to Chicago Avenue my walking stick was prepared and I considered myself fully outfitted for the journey home.

MY TRAIN LEFT Chicago's Central Station at the precise moment my cell phone clock displayed 4:18 pm. My

backpack and walking stick rode in the empty seat next to me. I put a rolled newspaper against the window, rested my head there, and watched as the train emerged into daylight. I watched the rise and fall of power lines, and when we got onto a higher elevation, I watched the jagged climbs and falls of the Chicago skyline. I closed my eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE

JORDAN'S DESIRE TO role-play before the photographer's lens was insatiable, and she knew no taboo. By my fourth week of employment Jordan's photos began streaming into *T and L* everyday. I asked that all work involving her be forwarded to me (it wasn't uncommon for us to have monopolies on some material). The sites I placed every one of Jordan's photo series into received uncommonly large responses from subscribers wanting more and more of her. I realized Jordan deserved her own site. I didn't know her real name so actually it was me who gave her the name "Jordan." I called her site *Jordan's Playhouse* and almost overnight *Jordan's Playhouse* had nine thousand World Wide Web subscribers. She enthralled her audience. For me she excited ideas of freedom. I fitted her with carefree and independent character traits. I felt confident she was someone who would make the perfect life companion. Finally I called one of the photographers who sent me her work. I got a contact number. I went home after work and after a few sedating beers, I called her number.

"Hey Jordan?" I said.

"Hello?" she responded.

"This is strange. This is out of the blue. I'm the guy who made and maintains *Jordan's Playhouse*."

“Who is this?”

“My name’s Kenneth.”

I pictured her sitting on a low couch. I pictured one lamp nearby, a big dark loft space everywhere else. I associated her pauses with cigarette breaks.

“What kind of a name is *Kenneth*?”

“I’m from Kentucky.”

“Who are you looking for Kenneth?”

“Jordan, *you*, I think. I don’t know your real name. I’m the guy who gave you the name *Jordan*. I just—you can hang up if you want.”

I held my breath and wiped condensation off the torso of my beer bottle. I kept imagining the sound of the click. She didn’t hang up.

“Hey Jordan—or *not* Jordan—I just wanted to hear what your voice sounded like. I’ve been making up your voice in my head. I mean I’ve been making up what I think your voice sounds. It sounds just like I imagined. So like I said I’m the guy who runs *Jordan’s Playhouse*. You get a thousand emails everyday. You wouldn’t believe what people ask you.”

“Kenneth what are talking about?”

“This is weird. I’m talking about you. What’s your name? Well you don’t have to tell me. I renamed you Jordan. I get your photos—you know the ones? I gave you your own web site called *Jordan’s Playhouse*. That’s where all your photos go now. People are obsessed with you. You wouldn’t believe how many people want to talk to you.”

There was a long pause. I imagined her to be finishing her smoke. I saw her snub it into a clean clear glass ashtray.

“People want to talk to me?”

“Are you smoking a cigarette right now?”

“*What?*”

I almost lost her—I almost went off on a tangent because I wanted to describe to her what I was seeing in my mind—but I knew from past experiences that people didn’t always appreciate my sudden switching tangents—in fact, I caused the end of many conversations before they even developed because of how my mind wandered. I strangled the beer bottle. I needed to get back on course.

“Nothing—I said people want to talk to you. Through email. Hundreds of the emails pile up all the time. Anyone who pays to be a member of *Jordan’s Playhouse* can send you an email. Sometimes I respond to them acting like I’m you. It’s just a business tactic.”

“You act like me?”

“Totally.”

“How is my writing style?”

“Your writing style’s good.”

“What do I say to people?”

“You’re very imaginative. You’re polite and you always say flattering things.”

“Kenneth do you enjoy acting like me?”

“Like I said, it’s a business tactic. It keeps customers.”

“Do you like to impersonate me?”

“Probably not anymore than I like to impersonate myself.”

“Do you do a lot of drugs Kenneth?”

“Not really.”

“You’ve renamed me Jordan. You’ve built me a shrine called *Jordan’s Playhouse*. You impersonate me in order to respond to my fans. Why did you even contact me? Aren’t we already the same person?”

“What do you mean?”

“Kenneth maybe you’re having a schizophrenic breakdown. Maybe right now this phone call is happening inside your own head. Maybe in your darker self you want to be a twenty-two year old girl. Maybe you are having a breakdown?”

“Don’t say that. That’s tripped out.”

“Do you owe someone a personal favor? Did you call me because you need me to do something personal for one of *my* subscribers?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to do something personal for *you* Kenneth? Is that why you called?”

“No. Not specifically. Maybe.”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe I was wondering about your living arrangements. I rent this apartment and I’m looking for a roommate. I know a lot about you. I think you’d be a good roommate.”

“You know *a lot about me*? You want me to be your *roommate*?” She laughed openly into the phone. I pictured her lifting her bare feet from the hardwood floor as she leaned back into the couch laughing.

I looked around my apartment. It wasn’t that big. It only had one bedroom. I didn’t know where the idea for a roommate came from.

I continued: “Do you need a place to stay or anything? I’m hoping to cut my living costs in half.”

“How practical of you, and you know what Kenneth? It’s ironic you called. It just so happens that someone in our loft did something yesterday. Something bad. And because of their bad action, we got an eviction notice. We have to leave immediately. In fact, we have to be gone by tomorrow morning. And I haven’t made plans yet.”

“Great. Do you want to move in with me?”

“How do I know you’re not a weirdo or a pervert?”

“Because I manage sites that satisfy audiences of weirdoes and perverts and I know enough about them to understand I don’t personally identify with them.”

She laughed openly again. “That’s good to know.”

“I live in the Ukrainian Village neighborhood. It’s quiet. The building is clean. I guess you would need the address.”

“I guess I would,” she said.

The next morning before going to work I followed our plan. I left my spare keys under the apartment building’s doormat. When I came home that night, Jordan was not in the apartment, but a few bags of her things were there. Originally I entertained very involved fantasies about Jordan becoming my girlfriend. But Jordan was *everybody’s* girlfriend. I didn’t know how I would succumb to the fact that she would never be *my* girlfriend. What evolved between us was a relationship indefinable. Throughout our platonic togetherness, I came to believe I loved her.