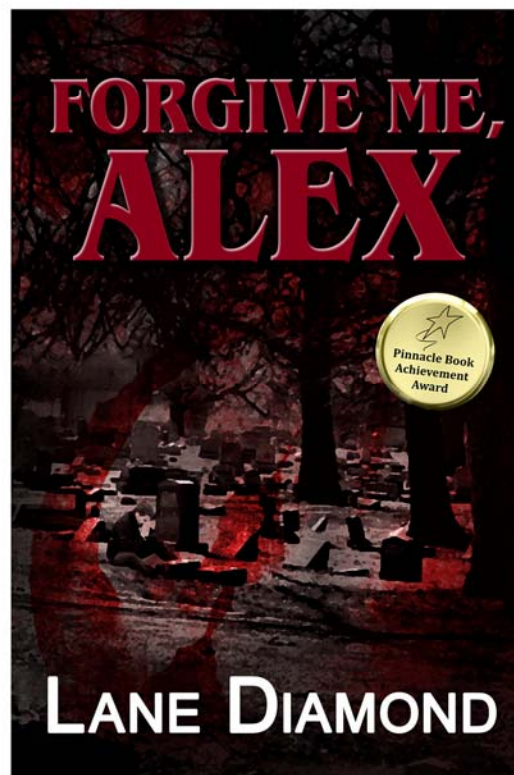


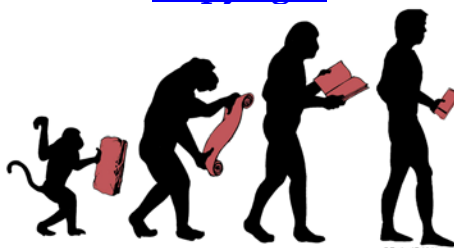
Forgive Me, Alex



Lane Diamond



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*Edited by D.T. Conklin*

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Parental Warning:

Please note that this is not a kids' book. It is intended for mature audiences.

[What Others Are Saying about *Forgive Me, Alex*](#)

Don't miss the [SPECIAL 3-CHAPTER SNEAK PREVIEW](#) of *The Devil's Bane*, the second book in this series, which you'll find after this story in the back matter. Thank you!

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"This story affords us a look into the mind of a serial killer and the tremendous strength of writing in this book makes that a terrifying experience. The writing is exceptional in that it propelled me into the story and into the minds of the main characters as well as keeping me totally fixated on the story. The suspense and tension in this story is very palpable and I found myself thinking about this story long after I had finished. The main characters of Tony and Mitchell are painted with such fine precision and depth I could almost feel their presence while reading. The character of Frank Willow the adopted Grandfather of Tony and Alex is a richly defined character who contributes a great deal of emotion and compassion to the story. The other characters in this story are all unique and well defined and successfully contribute to the sentiment, understanding and underlying current of the story." ~ *The Kindle Book Review*

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"Diamond does in FORGIVE ME, ALEX what I wish more contemporary authors would do: He brings me right into the story, forcing me to identify with the characters. I didn't have a choice—I would feel Tony Hooper's wrath and need for revenge, I would wallow in Mitchell Norton's desperate inability to ward off his demons. I would cheer for Diana Gregorio's unbelievable ballsiness in the face of seemingly unbeatable odds. I would weep, shedding actual tears, for Alex Hooper's childhood." ~ *Anne B. Chaconas*

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"With his first novel, *Forgive Me, Alex*, Lane Diamond has initiated a crime/suspense thriller series that exhibits many of the qualities that put the likes of Lee Child and James Patterson on the bestseller lists." ~ *Lex Allen for Readers' Favorite Book Reviews*

~~~

"Suck a rubber duck if you are not blown away by this dark psychological thriller. In a world where characters are as vital as in *The Game of Thrones*, the suspense had me on the edge of my seat and holding my breath for everyone involved. Neighboring Huntley, the setting is home to me, making this all the more twisted and real for me. If you love serial killers, red herrings, the thrill of the chase, and unpredictable endings, you are in for a treat. Methodically thorough, this book came together like a well-crafted puzzle. The word choice, though coarse, is meaningful and eloquent. The switching points of view and timelines were plot-driven, not pointless. The narrator made this story come alive. I loved all of the character voices. Well, I loved all of them except one. The author created such a vile creature in the serial killer that by the end of the book, I heard his voice and wanted to throw up. Authors should look to this as a great example of the use of an epilogue and cliffhanger. In short: mind blown." ~ *Raven Reviewer*

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"Psychological thrillers are my kind of books! Not only do I write them, but truly enjoy reading one that makes my skin crawl, my nerves skitter with fear and my heart thump a tad louder. This incredible novel by Lane Diamond handed me ALL of that, in spades!" ~ *Ashley Fontaine, Author*

~~~

"This book is gruesome and emotional right out of the gate. The main character, Tony, goes through some monumental losses throughout the story. These aren't the kind of losses that you can just blow off as insignificant because Lane's writing makes you really care about these people and what's going on. Lane excels in this area of sympathetic characters." ~ *Tim C. Ward, Former Executive Producer for Adventures in Sci-Fi Publishing*

Dedication:

*For Darren & Rhonda Lane, and for Steven Zerkel:
They walk the walk, and they saved me.*

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PART 1 – Justice Served, Justice Denied

Chapter 1 – June 6, 1995: Tony Hooper

“...that is the soul, and whether you are a soldier, a scholar, a cook, or an apprentice in a factory, your life and your work will eventually teach you that it exists. The difference between your flesh and the animate power within, which can feel, understand, and love, in that very descending order, will be clear to you in ten thousand ways, ten thousand times over.” – Mark Helprin, ‘A Soldier of the Great War’



I never expected to be a killer.
Who does?

I don't *hate* myself. Not really. It's not as if I don't recognize the face in the mirror every morning; I just don't always recognize the man to whom it belongs.

Mitchell Norton, the man responsible for making me who I am, will skip out of his final court hearing today – a mere formality according to the news. They're set to release him from the psychiatric prison after seventeen years, the thought of which has spun my mind into a whirlwind of memories I've long struggled to bury.

I killed my first man in 1975, at the age of fifteen.

Norton's actions three years later would push me deeper into my transformation, and aim me toward this place. The life I now lead. The me who isn't me.

Some things I've lost forever. Other things... well, other things I'd like to lose, but can't.

The memory refuses to drift into the eternal ether. If only I could erase the sound and the image, press a button and – *poof* – it's gone. Yet it forever haunts me, the first of far too many ghosts....



August 16, 1975

Crash!

The distinctive crushing of metal assaulted our Saturday afternoon, as Alex and I watched television and waited for Mom to return from the store. I jumped from the chair and looked out the living room window, but couldn't see enough of the street. I darted into the kitchen for a better angle.

Dear God, no!

I yelled to Alex while bolting to the back door. “Stay put, Hoopster! You hear me? *Do not* come outside!”

Mom was back. Almost. Our Chevy Bel Air sat right in front of our house, crushed into an impossibly condensed version of itself. A half-ton pick-up truck, its front end curled forward in a crescent moon, loomed over the windshield of our car.

I ran through the glass and the debris to the twisted wreckage, tripping over a chunk of something unknown. I fell to my knees and banged my head against the side of the car.

Shit! Oh God. Mom!

I snapped up and peered through the envelope-sized gap where the driver-side window had once been. The back of Mom's head sagged at a bizarre angle, barely visible above the

crushed compartment.

“Mom, are you okay? Mom!”

I pulled my head back, reached through the gap with my left hand, and walked my fingers along the wreckage to reach her. I found her wet, sticky hair, and stretched out... farther... farther. Unable to turn her face toward me, I moved my fingers from her chin and up the far side of her face, and—

I snatched my hand back and bolted upright.

I stared at my left hand even as I used my right one to wipe away the blood and the gray matter. Everything began to spin and close in. My chest hammered with every breath, as though God had reached down and clutched the air from the world. I leaned against the car, and my hands painted two red streaks down the metal as my legs folded beneath me.

I collapsed against the jagged wreck in a dark heap—blank—and vanished for untold moments.

Life resumed when a man fell from the pick-up truck, coughed and spat on the street. He looked at me, inched forward on his hands and knees, and vomited. It took him a moment to recover, but he...

What in hell is he doing?

The rotten sonuvabitch laughed and whooped it up, as though he'd perpetrated some ingenious practical joke. His bloodshot eyes looked as if they would burst at any moment. He spewed a garbled, incoherent mush that I struggled to translate.

“Shit! I think I fucked up my truck, buddy. Can you give a fella a hand?”

He faded in and out as my last image of Mom—what was left of her—overpowered me. Everything grayed again, but as the spinning stopped and my breath returned, the full tragedy came into focus. The wicked bastard who'd crushed my mom... was drunk.

My legs had deserted me, turned to dust. I could only look around in a daze at our neighbors, who'd emerged from their houses to investigate. *What should I—*

The asshole's staccato bursts of drunken laughter again pulled me back. The very air I breathed stifled me—gas, oil, burnt rubber and a vague metallic tinge, all mingled with the sour contents of the killer's stomach poured onto the street. I raised my hands, bathed in crimson and wafting copper, before my face.

A disembodied voice spoke from the void—*my* voice. “Where did the blood come from? Did I cut myself?”

“What's that, buddy?” The murderous drunk laughed again. “Shit! You think *you* got it bad? Look at my fucking truck!”

I floated still, adrift in an endless gray ocean of broken thought, struggling to make sense of the fluid that drenched my hands.

It's... it's.... Oh, God, it's Mom's blood and brains.

The maddening, driveling voice, like a spear in my gut, stabbed me again. “For Christ's sake, kid, stop fucking around and give me a hand, will you!”

Rage burned a red sheath over my eyes.

I stood and marched to the killer, who looked up with drunken eyes that meant nothing to me. They were evil. I focused instead on his neck, called up all that I'd learned in Master Komura's martial arts classes over the previous ten years, and struck.

Though strong for a fifteen-year-old, my success rested on the fragile physiology of that small patch of neck. To crush his trachea required more precision than strength.

The slobbering murderer collapsed, clutched his ruined throat, and gasped for air that would not come. His eyes blazed in one final, sobering realization. They pleaded for mercy and

begged an answer to the simplest question: *Why?*

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

Yet I had to make sure he understood. "You rotten fuck! Did you think you could murder my mom and get away with it?"

I shook under a roiling tremor, an earthquake of anger. I should have been crying for Mom. Why wasn't I crying? Never had such fury engulfed me. I wanted to pummel him, again and again and again and again, as he lay helpless on the street.

"What do you think now, you murdering sonuvabitch? Still feel like laughing it up? How about another drink, you miserable –"

His empty eyes, free of remorse or guilt, unburdened in death, stared back at me.

I'd meted out justice – simple, swift, final.

Now I needed to... to.... I shook off the cobwebs as my neighbors gaped in stunned silence, turned to the right, and –

Oh God. Oh God.

My little brother, Alex, knelt at the edge of our driveway with a face painted in tears, confusion and terror. Just seven years old, he wept alone on the worst of all possible days. My feet were as tree stumps sprouting from the bottoms of my legs, as I shuffled over and crouched before him. All the while, his gaze shifted between Mom's car and me, and he blinked through the tears no dam could contain.

He choked and sputtered, "I... want my... mommy. Where's Mommy? I... I... I want my mommy!"

I could barely whisper, "Me too. I want her too."

I wrapped my arms around him, and he hugged my neck as though he would fall to his death if he let go. Together we unleashed a tsunami of sorrow.

Another thought arrived through the haze: *I killed a man.* I'd thought nothing of it; I'd merely reacted. After witnessing the devastation of that horrible wreckage, the destruction of flesh and bone and tender love, I didn't even care. Yet wrapped in my arms was someone for whom I cared deeply, someone who needed me more than ever.

I stared at my bloodstained hands and clenched my fists to still the shaking.

Oh shit! I killed a man.

It occurred to me that jail would likely be my next stop. Where would my little brother be then? What would be left of his family, his life? He'd witnessed –

Oh God. Hoopster watched me kill a man.

I clutched him to my chest. "Forgive me, Alex. I'm sorry."



Return to June 6, 1995

Frozen forever in time at the age of thirty-six, Mom had given us light and wisdom, warmth and love, a path to guide our way. Who would be our rock now?

My childhood ended with her. What choice did I have? Was I ready?

It hardly mattered.

Law enforcement took rather a cursory glance at me, given both my young age and the circumstances of the event. A state-appointed psychiatrist determined that, in that moment of anguish, and in accordance with strict legal definitions, I was simply insane. Temporary insanity? Sure. Why not?

The psychiatrist thought so, and that was good enough for the judge. They declared me

healthy and normal, and sent me home.

Ah yes, home.

Dad floundered and withdrew from Alex and me over the next few months. Our first holiday season without Mom, regrettably, left an indelible scar. The elephant, as they say, was not in the room; only its ghost remained. Mom's absence nearly suffocated us.

Alex's vacant brown eyes and perpetual frown, his continuous soft sigh and the musty smell of sweat and tears on his Scooby-Doo pajamas, the way his chin rested continually on his chest – these left me utterly heartbroken.

I could only pray that the dark Christmas of 1975 would slip into history as the worst I would ever experience. Surely, Dad, Alex and I would recover our happiness, our optimism, as our futures unfolded according to a new plan, albeit a motherless one.

That little executioner's waltz I'd performed on the street in front of our house in August would no doubt be my last dance.

Little did I know: more monsters roamed the world than I'd ever imagined.

They weren't finished with me.

Chapter 2 – June 6, 1995: Tony Hooper

Mitchell Norton, the man I've long considered *the devil*, smiles atop the courthouse steps and waves to the simmering crowd. He tilts his head back to soak in the sunshine and cool breeze of the late spring day, the tranquility of which stands in stark contrast to the circumstances of this event.

The mere sight of him pushes me to the dark edge of my mind, where sanity hangs like... like... like a balloon in a tornado!

I stand in shadow across the street, one amongst many in the crowd of curiosity-hounds gathered to watch a monster's release. As my face blazes, fists clench and teeth grind, I can easily imagine the onset of a stroke, an aneurism, a pulmonary embolism, a raging scream –

Control yourself, Tony!

I long to charge across the street to destroy him – no remorse – as if stepping on a cockroach. Only sheer force of will prevents my doing so.

For seventeen years, I assumed this day would never come. How could they even *consider* releasing this vile creature, this very personification of evil?

In 1978, Norton murdered innocent kids who'd barely tasted of life. He tortured two of them beyond the limits of rational imagination, for to imagine such deeds was to summon a devilry that we dared not face. Yet the jury held him not responsible, a victim himself to the ravages of an illness that drove him to insanity beyond our reckoning.

He thus resides forever in the darkest pit of my psyche, chained to me in perpetuity. Now only two choices remain: I must cast off those chains, or yank them tight around his neck. Yes, I *must* obtain satisfaction. The idiotic jury seventeen years ago, and today's flawed court system, has left little recourse. No one else seems willing to deliver him to justice.

I am willing. After all, this is what I do. It's who I am. Indeed, *the devil* himself made me into this hunter of monsters. What a sweet twist of fate this is, that I may still, finally, administer justice.

He descends the stairs toward his waiting car with an arrogant swagger, watching the small group of protestors, the news reporters, and the police officers here to ensure a peaceful transition, as if to challenge them. His wicked grin never waivers.

Oh, that grin. For seventeen years it has taunted me, punished me for my indecision, my incompetence. I missed my chance to kill him in 1978, to remove his damned head – simple, as if cutting a sheet of paper. It would have been a fitting end for a monster.

Why did I let him live?

Like whispers in a storm, those memories only tease at me now, here at this obscene and maddening event. I'm trying not to relive every moment of 1978. Every time I do, I feel as if swimming in quicksand, anchored by my constant companions – sorrow and guilt. I'm too damned tired; can't shake the confusion, the dread. I fear surrendering to fear.

My life teems with just such wretched ironies.

As Norton vanishes inside a black sedan – looks like standard-issue law enforcement – I dash through the crowds to my van. Despite this call to action, my mind again zeroes-in on memories of 1978. I recall the court proceedings, particularly *the devil's* own twisted testimony, as though it were yesterday. I've only relived it ten thousand times.

Then twenty-six, Norton was a man-child who'd never quite grasped the nuance of adulthood. He continued to wash dishes at a restaurant, ten years into the only job he'd ever held. He found it comfortable and unchallenging – perfect. He harbored no great yearnings, nor

imagined exciting possibilities, nor sought lucrative rewards.

Then everything changed. He said that was when his new life emerged, when he became more aware, even more intelligent. He better understood the world around him. He discovered what he called "The Purpose" in the spring of 1978, and it guided his every deed. He claimed he became *a man* that year.

I remember it quite clearly as the year he became *the devil*.

The words I wrote in my diary at the time return to me, a personal anthem more relevant than ever: *Rage flows like lava through my veins. My soul slowly roasts upon the flames. How did I ever let it come to this?*

Now mortality, as it did seventeen years ago, lingers above me like the hangman's noose. Yet it looms more ominous than ever, as if it will drop down around my neck at any moment. After all, I know the true Mitchell Norton. And whom shall I fear if not *the devil*, the grim torturer who conquered my aspirations and left me without a recognizable world of my own?

Or is it me that I fear? The man I've become? The man Norton made me?

Some fancy maneuvering is required to escape the crowds and the police at the courthouse. I manage to keep Norton in sight, zigzagging between lanes and keeping several vehicles between us, hanging back far enough to avoid detection without losing him. Uncertain emotions bubble up, some indecipherable combination of dread and anticipation, fear and excitement, vengeance and sorrow. I must know where he'll make his home, information that has been difficult to obtain, as the authorities are concerned with Norton's security.

Give me a break! They should express their security concerns not for *the devil* himself, but for his next victims.

Oh yes, I know Norton too well. He *will* torture, murder and dismember again. The temptation will be too great to resist.

I saw him up close in 1978, looked into the soul of *the devil*, as we waded through the blood and gore he'd spilled. I couldn't fathom his unrepentant pleasure, the sick thrill, his gleeful anticipation.

Now he's out of prison, again free to call up his demons, to torture the innocent, to waltz to what he once called his "symphony of screams."

The devil walks the world again.

What shall I do about it? Aye, what indeed.

PART 2 - Rebirth

Chapter 3 – April 20, 1978: Mitchell Norton

Where is this strange place? Am I flyin' over it? What's he gonna do to that woman? Who is he? Maybe the better question is; what is he? I ain't no kid anymore, don't believe in monsters under the bed or demons in the closet, but.... The way he's lookin' at me gives me the fuckin' shivers. I think he... I ain't sure, but... does he want me to watch?

The woman is lyin' on a table – naked. I like that, sure enough, but I don't think I like the rest of it. Her wide eyes never blink, and her body bounces up and down like she's havin' some kinda convulsions. Sweat pours down her face and her ratty hair looks like she ain't washed it in a month. Somethin' horrible is goin' on, but fuck if I know what it is.

The demon, if that's what he is, wheels a cart over next to the table. The cart holds a bunch of weapons and tools – knives, saws, drills, scalpels, hammers and clamps.

Is he gonna perform surgery on her? He ain't no fuckin' doctor. His leathery face, his black grin, his eyes like coals from a furnace, all point to.... Fuck! I don't know, but whatever he's gonna do, I'm pretty sure he ain't plannin' to use anesthesia. He's droolin' and lickin' his chops.

He grabs a knife the size of my foot, looks up at me, and laughs. The woman screams in a high-pitched wail that pierces my ears like someone stuck a goddamn ice pick in my fuckin' brain. He moves alongside her and raises the knife like he's –

"Wait! What are you doin'?" I yell as loud as I can, but he ignores me.

He grabs her wrist and lashes down with the knife, and she screams again as blood spurts onto the floor. He turns to me, holdin' something up in his hands. It's hard to see, but I think it could be a –

"My God, why did you do that?"

He roars with laughter and tosses her finger off to the side like so much trash, and walks around to the other side of the table. His eyes blaze and he smiles, exposin' long teeth that end in a point like icicles.

My head feels like someone is crushin' it in a vice. I can't believe this is happenin'. What is this place? Why can't I get out? I gotta get help. I don't wanna watch this, but I can't seem to turn away.

Holy shit, he's feelin' up her tits! How can he do that after he –

Wait, what in hell is he doin'? He's squeezin' and pullin' up with his right hand, and raisin' the knife with his left hand, like –

"Hey, what are you doin'? Stop! Stop, damn it! You can't –"

This fuckin' house of horror ruptures in an endless, stabbing scream. Blood flies everywhere like a crimson swarm from hell. The demon's gaze bores through me again, and drool drips from his dagger-like teeth as he raises his new trophy above his head.

He points his twisted finger at me. "Soon, you'll do this, Mitchell."

My blood freezes in my veins. I can't move. I can't speak.

"If you refuse, I'll put you on this table next."

God help me.

He reaches back with his right arm, like he's on a baseball mound and windin' up for his next pitch, but that ain't no fuckin' baseball in his hand. It's his new trophy, the bloody remains of what was once so appealing and –

"Here, Mitchell, catch!"



I bolted up and looked around the dark room – my room, my bed – and could almost

breathe again. The cold, soaked sheets turned my body into a shivering, chattering heap.

Why did the nightmares continue to assault me? Who was that demon, and why wouldn't he leave me alone? I didn't know but—

Fuck a rubber duck! What did he mean when he said I'd be doin' that soon?

Chapter 4 - April 22, 1978: Tony Hooper

“Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps, for he is the only animal that is struck by the difference between what things are and what they might have been.” - *William Hazlitt*



Sunlight glistened off the surface of the lake, still as a mirror, as the cloudless sky stood sentry. The spring morning harkened me back to childhood, when the blustery weather broke and we couldn't wait to get outside to play tag, catch-one/catch-all, or Batman and Robin. I thought differently now, but those memories were no less vivid, no less uplifting.

A sheer, seventy-foot wall occupied the south end of the quarry, which had officially closed three decades ago. A narrow ledge wound down to a level spot less than two feet above the waterline, where Diana and I sat. The remarkably clear, spring-fed lake wafted a faint metallic aroma that reminded me of... I couldn't place it – something that made my stomach clench.

The water swirled in ever-broadening circles around my feet, which were submerged in the reflection of my cheeks. I leaned farther over the ledge, came almost face-to-face with myself, as if the reflected me would provide some of the answers I so desperately sought.

Diana pulled me back to the moment. “Be careful,” she said. “You're liable to fall into the lake.” The cool temperatures and bright sun had joined forces to paint her cheeks a rosy shade of unbearably cute.

I leaned back and let the sun work its springtime magic. The season was supposed to inspire rebirth, renewal, grand dreams and revived hopes – at least according to much of the poetry I read. I aspired to such promises, yet couldn't escape the relentless melancholy. Nothing new there.

It had built throughout the winter, as if I'd been buried in an avalanche. Each time I'd dug away three inches of snow, four new inches sealed my frozen tomb.

Shit! Don't be so melodramatic all the time, Tony. Focus on Diana.

The extraordinary Miss Gregario, perhaps the future Mrs. Hooper, dominated my thoughts. We'd met at our dads' company picnic the previous Fourth of July; they were accountants with the same firm. I'd seen her around school before then, but we hadn't actually met prior to the picnic. I'd surprised myself when I mustered the courage to ask her out, as I tended to be shy about such matters. I'd bumbled my way through it with a tongue twisted into nervous paralysis, made a complete fool of myself, and she accepted!

Whenever I contemplated the prospect of life without her, I wanted to vomit. *We fit* together. I told her I was the night and she was the stars, and that she brought an unimaginable light to my life. That made me a walking, talking cliché straight out of the classical novels I read but, what the hell, a little *corny* never killed anybody.

She was my first and only love, and when I departed for college in a few months, I'd leave her behind. Every time I pondered my future, platoons of emotions waged war within me. Even at that moment, the battle thundered in my chest and a wrenching lump bounced like a cannonball in my throat.

How will I –

“Happy birthday, Baby,” she said. “I still can't believe you wanted to spend it *here*, although it *is* pretty.”

I smiled, unsure how to broach the subject weighing me down.

"The big *eighteen*. Wow. So how does it feel to be a man? Well, in the eyes of the law, at any rate."

I snorted. "Oh sure, and where have they been for the last three years?"

I didn't mean to take out my frustration on her. She knew that, and took it in stride. Hell, she knew me better than I knew myself.

In one of my customary fits of introspection, I'd wanted to go there to take measure of the moment, to examine my new manhood. I thought I might enjoy some time alone on my birthday. Perhaps *enjoy* was not the right word. No matter, for Diana would hear none of it. She'd insisted that I spend the day with, as she put it, "the most magnificent girlfriend the world has ever known."

I couldn't argue with the "magnificent" part, and it was apparently some kind of unwritten law that she must share the "big day" with me. I didn't know which was funnier: her words, her goofy smile and Groucho Marx eyebrow shuffle, or the ridiculous way she'd curtsied.

She squeezed my hand until I looked at her again. "You're having another one of your moments, aren't you? Pondering the changes coming up, contemplating the meaning of life, the expanse of the universe, the —"

"I love this place, especially in summer. We weren't dating long enough last summer to come out here, but I think you'll like it. This is *the* hotspot."

"What does everybody do here? Besides swim, of course."

"You name it, somebody does it here. We bring food and pop, maybe a few beers — make a day of it."

"That sounds like fun."

"Some of the kids smoke like chimneys out here, or do drugs."

"Yuck!"

"Don't worry. We'll stay away from that stuff." I loved that we shared those values. "Then, of course, there's the skinny-dipping and the sex."

"Oh my! I'll have you know that I'm a lady, sir. I'm no exhibitionist." She leaned in and kissed me. "Except with you."

She skipped her usual seductive playfulness and leaned back. She knew I wasn't in that place, that frame of mind.

She laid her head on my shoulder. "Don't you guys ever worry about your parents catching you?"

"Nah, they don't come here."

I didn't know if this place was such a big secret, or if the older folks just didn't want to deal with the half-mile hike through the brush and trees to get there from the nearest street. At any rate, they didn't bother us, which made it a popular escape spot for teenagers.

This figured to be my last summer here, and I could hardly look at Diana for fear my emotions would get away from me. She wisely refrained from dangling her feet in the lake, but I couldn't resist. The early spring water chilled my toes into dead stumps, even as the noon sun baked my face. I loved the contrast: perfect metaphors for the forces pushing and pulling at me those days.

She sighed and placed her hand on my chest. "Summer will be here before we know it."

It's time.

I maintained a light tone. "Yeah, feels like I've been waiting forever to graduate. Then I get to have one last carefree summer before...."

She squeezed my hand again. She was a year behind me, a junior.

Her voice thickened. "You're supposed to be happy, you know. It's a big event, a fun time."

"I know."

"But...."

"I know I'm supposed to feel excited about college, about my freedom, about a whole new world full of potential and adventure. Part of me... hell, I can't wait to see it. I've earned it!"

"But...."

"I hardly know where to begin." I pulled my hand from hers and laid my arm around her shoulders. "For one thing, I've been taking care of Alex for three years. He's my Shadow, and he doesn't have anyone else."

"What about your dad?"

I huffed and almost laughed.

Alex was a bright kid, enthusiastic and determined – my little man. I often told him he was a grown-up trapped in a kid's body. He loved that. I liked it too, although I knew better. He may have acted older, but he *was* just ten years old. The way he followed me around, I often worried that people would think I had him on a leash. It irritated the hell out of me.

Well, it did. Until Mom died.

Somewhere along the way, I'd become more than his big brother; I was his best buddy, hero and idol. I'd never meant for such a thing to happen, but no sense in denying it.

I stared down at the water. "I don't know what to do about Alex. Dad wants to be a good father, but since Mom died, he's been way out of his element. He escapes in his work. He's more comfortable there than at home, dealing with two kids by himself. Not exactly father of the year."

She admonished me with a stunned expression.

"I know, I know. I hate to say such a thing about my own father, but I can't help it. You haven't seen the real Hank Hooper over the last three years. Trust me, if I walk away from Alex, I'll be leaving him largely to his own devices."

I longed for the simpler, carefree days unencumbered by the baggage of adulthood: the expectations, the worries, the pressures. I wanted to ride my bike on sunny days, play baseball all day long at the park, or teach Alex the finer points of basketball. I yearned for the simple distraction of my baseball card collection, or to crank up the stereo and sing along, pretending to the throne of stardom. I rarely did those things anymore – too old for that stuff, anyway.

"Shit! It's not fair." I hated whining, *especially* when it was my own voice.

My mother, in dying; my father, in retreating; my brother, in needing: each had conspired to take from me a sizable chunk of that which I could never regain: my childhood.

Bluch! I gazed once more into the water, and my own reflection mocked me. What right did I have to wax in self-pity and selfish examination of events over which I had so little control, yet over which I was willing to assign so much blame?

The look on Diana's face drove a stake in my heart.

I squeezed her tighter, and almost lost my words in the depths of her scent. "And what shall I do about you? How in the world am I supposed to live without you?"

"It's only for a year, and you'll be able to come home for the holidays." Her unsteady voice belied her optimistic reassurances.

"A year is a long time."

She kissed me on the ear. "We'll make it."

The frigid water numbed my feet. The endless questions without answers numbed my mind.

I'd always viewed the world through what my mom had called my "looking glass." Why must it be so cloudy, so fragile? Why must I wallow in that melancholy introspection all the

time? Perhaps Mom had been right: I read too much; I thought too much; I too often lost myself in deep contemplation. She'd once claimed that when Rodin created his famous sculpture, *Le Penseur*, he must have had *me* in mind.

I'd have loved to talk to her about it. God, I missed her.

I should have just goofed off like the other kids, and had fun. I should have stopped playing Atlas, carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders.

Shit! More melodrama? Knock it off and relax, already.

--END OF 5-CHAPTER SNEAK PREVIEW--