

OCEAN SNOW

(Sample Excerpt)

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Based on a screenplay by
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ISBN-10: 0988822016
ISBN-13: 978-0-9888220-1-6

Published by
[Chaos Publishing](#)
PO Box 1571
Annandale, VA 22003
USA

CHAPTER 18

Kevin tasted the coppery bite of blood. It was dripping from his nose and running over his lips. When he'd fallen, the branch had struck him across the bridge of the nose. It wasn't broken, but his eyes watered and his face was numb. He could feel the branch beside him with his fingertips but his blurred vision was set on Dozer now.

His heart hammered in his chest. *Fight or flight*. Kevin summoned the courage to stand his ground.

“Dozer, no!” he shouted.

The dog skidded to a halt barely a yard away. He hesitated. A glimmer of recognition washed over him. Kevin wrapped his fingers around the branch.

Dozer tilted his head. There was something familiar in the boy's voice. But it carried with it a shadow sound that buzzed in his head like a saw. Something jagged and unclear. A rumbling growl grew deep in Dozer's chest and rose to his throat.

“Stop it. Don't you recognize me? *It's me, Kevin!*”

Kevin got to one knee. He wiped the blood from his face on a shirtsleeve and held out his hand with fingers splayed as if a simple hand gesture might keep the crazed dog at bay. Behind his back, the other hand gripped the heavy oak stick.

Dozer looked at the smear of blood on Kevin's forearm. Yes, that's what would make him feel better. That's what would cure him of whatever had made him sick. That's what would quench the hideous thirst that plagued him.

Blood.

The growl churned and roiled, morphing into an ear-shattering roar of insane wrath. Dozer attacked, his powerful haunches launching him up at Kevin as he swung the stick and bashed the dog squarely across the skull.

Dozer yelped and spun his body away from the blow. Kevin had stunned him, if only momentarily.

"I'm sorry, Dozer. I'm so sorry!" His voice trembled with heartfelt remorse. Tossing the stick, he leaped back into the truck bed, and with a burst of agility, vaulted onto the roof and dove for another branch. A half-inch lower and Kevin's fingers wouldn't have found a hold on the slick bark, but they did, and a second later he pulled himself up and hung on for dear life.

Dozer lurched uneasily below, ready to rip Kevin apart if he fell. He followed as Kevin inched his way along the branch toward the tree house, where Hazel watched in utter disbelief.

Buckethead emerged from the shed carrying a puppy in her mouth by the scruff on the back of its neck. If Dozer's sense of smell was obliterated, his hearing certainly was not. If anything,

his ears had become hyper-acute. He heard the clack of Buckethead's claws and turned to face her.

Dozer stared. Hazel and Kevin stared.

Keep going, Kevin told himself. Don't just hang here, goddamit, move!

Careful hand over careful hand, he made his way toward the tree house. Fifteen feet up felt like thirty. His muscles ached. He was battered and tired. He saw the open well below. The crumpled plywood wedged to one side and empty chemical containers floating in the shimmery, pitch-black pool at the bottom.

Dozer padded over to Buckethead suspiciously. He sniffed the puppy then skittered away as if spooked. Buckethead curled her lip and snarled at the bigger Mastiff. Dozer stepped closer and snapped his teeth. Buckethead growled deeper, hackles up and head low. Dozer skittered back again.

Hazel watched the whole bizarre interaction with a kind of fascination. She hoped the female wasn't sick too. Maybe she would even kill the bat-shit crazy male to protect her puppy.

Buckethead whined, gingerly placing the puppy on the ground for a moment. She licked her hind end then picked the puppy back up by the scruff. She glared at Dozer one more time as if issuing a warning to back off, then padded over to the back

porch and into the house. Then just as quickly, she emerged without the puppy and went back to the shed.

Dozer had slunk off into the woods again.

Kevin hoisted himself up onto the tree house deck and collapsed with exhaustion.

Safe. I'm safe.

Hazel smacked him and it hurt all over.

“You’re an idiot! You could have gotten everyone killed. What did you think you were going to do down there?”

“I don’t get it.”

“Get what?” Hazel asked, irritated.

“Why doesn’t he smell them?”

Hazel looked back at the tent. Kevin was right. Dozer had no interest in it at all. Like it was being protected by some invisible shield.

“The bug spray,” Kevin said.

“Huh?”

“The little heathens marinated themselves in it before they went to sleep.”

“That’s what smugglers do to mask the scent from drug dogs. It throws their sense of smell off.”

Kevin turned and gave her his complete attention now.

“They do it in the movies all the time,” she said defensively. “They should be fine just as long as they stay quiet.”

“The twins?” Kevin asked with rhetorical skepticism. “Are you kidding me? If they wake up... They don’t know *how* to be quiet. We have to find a way to get them out of there.”

“Like how?” Hazel asked. “ In case you haven’t noticed, we’re trapped in a fucking *tree house!*”

She was right. Kevin looked around, eyes darting, his mind grasping for ideas. He nudged open the tree house door with his foot but it was too dark to see. Then he remembered the batteries. He pulled them out of his pocket and showed Hazel. A glimmer of hope passed between as she handed him the flashlight. Their hands grazed each other and Kevin blushed awkwardly. He fumbled the batteries into the flashlight and led the way inside the tree house with Hazel right behind.

Kevin fanned the flashlight beam over the piles of junk inside. Rags. Chemicals. Building supplies. Duct tape and rope. Dozens of empty plant food jars labeled “Mephedrone/4-MMC.”

“Christ, what is all this stuff?” Hazel asked.

She picked up one of the stained rags and sniffed it, then quickly threw it down.

“I have no idea. It was here when we bought the house.”

“You’d think they would have cleaned it up first.”

“I remember my dad saying something about buying it ‘as is.’ Maybe this is what he meant.”

He opened a container and ran his finger around the inside, drawing it back out covered with white, powdery residue. He brought it to his nose and was about to sniff it when Hazel caught movement in her peripheral vision.

“Oh my god, Kevin.”

Jacob poked his head out of the tent, yawned and rubbed his eyes with the ball of his thumb.

Buckethead ran past with puppy number two dangling from her mouth and disappeared inside the house again. Jacob smiled and slipped back into the tent.

He checked on Christopher, who was still sound asleep. He tucked an extra blanket around his brother then popped open his hearing aid case and put them in.

“Hey!!” Hazel yelled at the tent.

Kevin clamped his hand over her mouth.

“Ssssh!”

Hazel arched an eyebrow at him but remained quiet. Kevin pulled his hand away.

“Are you nuts?” she whispered. “We have to warn them.”

“If he answers back, Dozer will hear him too.”

“That’s right,” she said. “Maybe he’ll just—”

The two watched in stunned silence as Jacob slipped back out through the tent door again and ran into the house.

“Oh, Jesus,” Kevin said. “Buckethead’s in there.”

He pushed past Hazel and without a second thought, climbed over the edge of the deck and dropped to the ground. It was higher than he realized. Kevin tumbled to the ground, terrified for a moment that he’d sprained something. He was okay.

“Get up!” Hazel called down.

Kevin did. He ran toward the house as fast as his legs would carry him. He got within twenty feet of the open back door when Dozer charged out of the woods.

Hazel screamed but Kevin didn’t look back. There was no need. He kicked into overdrive, but Dozer was easily twice as fast. Hazel hurled a square metal can at him but missed. It bounced on the ground and landed next to one of the twins’ Nerf guns. The lid popped off and a clear liquid splashed out.

Acetone. Caution. Highly flammable.

She yelled and waved her arms, trying to distract the Dozer long enough for Kevin to reach the house.

“Hey! Hey, over here! Look over here, you stupid animal!”

Kevin leaped across the threshold and slammed the door shut just as Dozer leaped. His head smashed into the steel fire door with a deafening crash and the dog fell to the porch in an unconscious heap. Kevin didn't know it, but he had a couple of drug cooks named Cecil and Bobby to thank for that little bit of home improvement.

He backed slowly away from the door, waiting for another crash, waiting for Dozer to come hurtling through. No crash came. No sound came. Kevin realized his fists were clenched so tight he was cutting off the circulation. He opened his hands and saw that his fingernails had cut four crescents deep into each palm. As the blood flow returned, the crescents turned from white to red, mocking little smiles to remind Kevin how numbing his own fear could be.

Hazel rifled through the junk pile in the tree house, but could see little in the darkness. Kevin had taken the flashlight. She dug into her pockets and pulled out her lighter. She sparked it and held the flame up to cast a dim light.

Pyrovalerone. Paint thinner. Acetone. Combustible. Caution. Flammable.

Hazel's eyes popped wide open and racked over to the dancing flame of her lighter.

“Whoa.”

Her thumb recoiled and the flame winked out. Hazel backed out of the room, spooked but quite pleased she hadn't blown herself up. She looked down and realized she'd almost stepped right off the far side of the deck.

Get a grip.

Hazel noticed a cigarette butt perched on the edge and promptly booted it off with a sweep of her foot.

Kevin crept over and placed his ear against the door. It hummed gently, picking up the vibrations of some mechanical activity deep in the bowels of the home. But there was no sound outside.

He cracked open the door.

Dozer lay on the porch outside, looking almost as if he'd found a shady spot to lazily sleep away a hot, Georgia summer afternoon. Kevin looked over his beloved dog. Gore matted his once shiny coat. Tufts of orange fur pasted over his muzzle. His front right leg bore a festering gash ripped open by the splintered plywood. His chest was slathered in drool and slime, painted with a ghastly pink froth of blood and saliva.

How could this beast be the same animal that snuggled with the twins as infants? How could this be the same family pet that wore silly Christmas hats and sleigh bells in the Taylors' holiday cards each year?

How could this be Dozer?

Kevin swung the door all the way open and stepped outside holding a heavy, cast-iron skillet in his hands. He solemnly knelt down beside Dozer and raised the pan over his head to smash the dog's skull.

Dozer squeaked softly. His leg twitched. A wiggle like that tiny puppy at the shelter five years ago, dreaming of harmless rabbit chases, dreaming of innocence.

There are no bad dogs.

Kevin couldn't remember where he'd heard it, but suddenly it resonated with him on a deep and profound level. He hesitated. He held the skillet over his head, wrestling with a dilemma of unfathomable weight for a boy of fifteen. He felt sick to his stomach. Some part of him prayed for Dozer to wake up.

"Don't think about it!" Hazel called from the tree house.
"Just do it!"

Kevin didn't turn. He didn't want her to see the tears that streamed down his cheeks. His heart physically ached. He wiped the back of his hand across his face.

He lowered the pan and stood back up.

"Kevin! What are you doing?"

Kevin left Dozer unconscious but alive on the back porch, and went back into the house to find Jacob, praying he was right that Christopher would be safe inside the tent for now.

CHAPTER 19

Kevin made his way through the house with guarded caution. There was no telling whether or not Buckethead was sick like Dozer, but with puppies now in the equation, he didn't want to get on her bad side no matter what.

He walked through the main hallway on the first floor. The laundry room to the right was empty. Straight ahead he could see the stairway and the front door. He passed the dining room on his left, boxes upon boxes stacked up just waiting to be unpacked.

Kevin heard a scratching noise. He froze, trying to pinpoint the source.

“Jacob?” he whispered.

There was no answer. He heard the scratching again. It came from his left, but not the dining room. He walked further down the hall and peered into the living room. There, surrounded by more boxes, Buckethead lay curled up on a pile of quilted moving blankets and nursed her two puppies. She tilted her head down and nuzzled them. Kevin smiled. Maybe she was okay, after all.

Then a toilet flushed upstairs.

Buckethead turned and locked eyes with Kevin.

“Shit.”

A door creaked open. Neither of them moved. A child's feet pattered across the floorboards above and Buckethead sprang from the blankets, bellowing a shrill cry of protective fury. Kevin turned and bolted for the stairs. Buckehead's claws skittered across the hardwood as she rounded the corner and she slid across the hallway, crashing into the adjacent wall and losing precious seconds.

Kevin took the stairs three at a time. With one leap to go he tripped, his body slamming against the oak stair treads with a bruising thud. He looked up and saw Jacob, standing in the upstairs hallway frozen in terror. He could hear the Mastiff's nails on the floor behind him and closing fast.

“Run, Jacob! Ruuuun!”

Buckethead reached the bottom of the staircase and leaped, hear claws carving deep grooves in the floorboards. Kevin shoved himself back to his feet and rounded the banister.

“Go!” he shouted at Jacob. “Goddamit move your ass!”

Jacob's face puckered as the tears came, but he turned and did as his brother told him. He ran for the bedroom at the end of the hall with Kevin and Buckethead hot on his heels. Jacob's little legs couldn't move fast enough. Kevin dove, tackling his baby brother from behind and together they flew headfirst through the open bedroom doorway.

Jacob grunted at the crunching impact, trying to scream but he had no wind. Kevin twisted his head back toward the hallway and saw the crazed Mastiff coming straight at them. He might as well have been staring down the barrel of a loaded twelve gauge. Without a second to spare, he kicked the flimsy door shut behind them and Buckethead slammed on the brakes, barely stopping herself before crashing into it.

Melvin Hicks had replaced the interior doors, all right. With the cheapest, hollow-core pieces of shit he could pull off the shelves at the local big box store. Kevin knew they wouldn't hold up to a stiff kick from one of the twins, let alone a pissed-off, hundred and eighty pound Mastiff. But she didn't know that.

It was one of several things about the new house that left Kevin more than a little homesick for Westhill right about now. The old apartment was hot in the summer and cold in winter. The paint peeled and the plumbing leaked. But it also had big-old solid walnut doors throughout. Dark, gloomy, medieval-looking slabs that could have stopped a cannonball without popping a splinter. God save you if you ever slammed your fingers in one of them, as all of the Taylor boys had at one time or another.

Jacob finally caught his wind and let out the scream that was percolating in his lungs. The tears flowed and Kevin hugged his brother to his chest, doing his best to comfort him. Jacob clung on like a koala, and after a minute or so, he calmed. Kevin heard the faint peep of hungry puppies. So did Buckethead. She stopped

paced outside the door and thumped back down the stairs to check on them.

“Why is she mad at us? I’m scared.”

“I don’t know, Jacob. Maybe she’s sick.”

“Where’s Christopher? Is she going to eat him?”

“Shhh. Try to be quiet, buddy. I’m gonna go out and get him.”

Jacob sobbed so deeply that his entire body hitched and bounced against his big brother.

“I wanna go home,” he wept.

“We *are* home,” Kevin said, his eyes still glued to the cheap door.

“No we’re not. I hate this place.”

Kevin hugged Jacob tight. He turned back and caught the scent of Jacob’s hair. He breathed it in. Through a blur of his own tears, Kevin saw something on the wall behind Jacob.

An empty phone jack.

“Stay here. I’m going downstairs to call for help.”

Jacob tried to follow.

“No, Jacob. You have to stay up here.”

Jacob clung to Kevin’s injured leg, sending up a fresh jolt of pain.

“Don’t leave me here. Please, Kevin. I *promise* I’ll be good.”

“Come on, it’s not that. It’s too dangerous. You’ll be safer here.”

Kevin looked around the room, searching for some way to protect Jacob if Buckethead actually did come back.

The closet.

He peeled Jacob off his leg and knelt down so they could talk eye to eye. He spoke calmly and made sure to enunciate each word carefully.

“I’ll be right back.”

Jacob nodded in resignation, not sure if he actually believed it. But right now, Kevin was all he had. Kevin was *everything*.

The closet was shallow. Tiny. The Achilles’ heel of every charming old house. A single, bowed rod spanned across its width for hanging clothes and above that, a single shelf. Kevin lifted Jacob by the thighs and the boy crawled up. He curled himself into a frightened little ball on top of the high shelf and looked down at Kevin with eyes as desperate and dependent as any he had ever seen.

“Pinkie promise?” Jacob asked and stuck out a tiny finger.

Kevin handed Jacob a pillow and smiled. He offered his pinkie and they shook on it.

“Pinky promise,” Kevin said with a confidence in his voice that surprised even *him* a little bit. He crept away from the closet toward the door, but stopped and looked back.

“No. I didn’t have my fingers crossed,” he said knowingly.

Jacob smiled, relieved. It was, in fact, *exactly* what he was wondering. He screened himself behind the psychological comfort of the pillow, and that’s just where Kevin left him. A five year old boy on the first night in his new home, hiding in a closet from two murderous beasts downstairs who most certainly would have torn him limb from limb were it not for one very important thing standing in their way.

His big brother, Kevin.

CHAPTER 20

Kevin eased the bedroom door open and peered out.

All was clear. Or at least it *seemed* to be. He picked up a floor lamp with a large, cast metal base and hefted it in his hands. It was heavy. It would definitely do some damage if it came to that, and Kevin was pretty sure that it would.

He tiptoed out into the hallway and looked back at the closet one last time. Jacob peeked out past the edge of his pillowcase and was about to say something when Kevin quickly raised a finger to his lips. Jacob popped a thumb into his mouth instead and ducked back behind the pillow.

Kevin silently shut the door behind him and listened. He didn't hear the Taylor family van rumbling and squeaking down the driveway. He didn't hear Dozer barking, or Buckethead, or any living thing at all, for that matter. He heard nothing and it creeped the hell out of him.

He made his way quietly down the hall past the spindled railing, walking along the edge of the wall where there would be fewer squeaks in the old floorboards. He'd figured out that neat little trick in Westhill. At the top of the stairs he stopped again to listen. And again, he heard nothing. He descended the staircase in what almost looked like a sumo wrestler's stance, taking care not

to put any weight on the middle of the steps where they'd be most likely to creak as well.

At the bottom of the stairs he peeked around the corner at the front door.

Headlights. Please let there be headlights.

He'd forgotten to even flip on the outside light, and mentally chided himself for being so irresponsible. The country dark outside the windows was the pure black of oblivion.

No one's coming. No one's coming, Kevin. You have to deal with this yourself.

He took a deep breath and headed down the hall, a twisted knot in the pit of his stomach that pulled tighter with the knowledge that he'd have to walk past the living room to get to the phone in the kitchen.

In the parking lot at Joey D's, Rhonda has resisted the urge to call Kevin again. Driving home now, the phone sat on the passenger seat mocking her. *When had she become such a worrier?*

She shook her head and slowed for a red light. Across the intersection she saw a food market and suddenly realized she'd forgotten to bring anything back for Kevin to eat. There was no chance Ned was going to remember, that was certain.

No other cars waited with her for the light to change. No other cars passed through in the other direction. The town felt deserted. Not even a police car on patrol. It left Rhonda with an uneasy feeling, but she couldn't quite say why.

The light turned green and she pulled into the supermarket parking lot. She'd bring Kevin back a frozen pizza. He'd love that. He was probably just playing that stupid game on his phone again, the one where everyone dies and Kevin and his friends would laugh when they killed each other. The gorier the demise, the better.

Kevin looked down the hallway into the kitchen. He could see the old Bell telephone on the wall. It's coiled cord hung lazily over the counter. *I bet that cord could reach all the way here*, he thought. And he was right, not that it was doing him any good now.

He crept up the hallway so slowly it took him nearly two full minutes to reach the living room. The contented squeaks and whimpers of the puppies told him what he needed to know. She was in there, all right. He leaned into the doorway, careful to expose as narrow a sliver of himself as possible. Buckethead lay with her pups on the pile of blankets nursing. Luck was in Kevin's favor this time. She was facing the other way.

Kevin didn't wait for that to change. He held his breath, slipped past the open doorway and made his way into the kitchen.

He crossed to the far side and listened at the back door. Was Dozer still there? Was Christopher okay? Was Hazel? There was no way he was opening the door to find out.

Let sleeping dogs lie.

Kevin almost laughed at the thought. *You got that right.* He rounded the counter peninsula and reached the phone, letting out a preliminary sigh of relief. This would all be over soon. He picked up the receiver and heard a dial tone, so far so good. He would call dad. Dad would know what to do.

But when he went to dial the number, Kevin's heart sank. He'd always had Ned's number on speed dial. He didn't *know* the real number. He didn't know Rhonda's either for that matter. Kevin placed the handset back in the cradle and looked around for a phone book. He could call the restaurant. The ridiculous image of a fancy telephone being brought out on a silver tray to Ned and Rhonda's table by the maître d' at Joey D's suddenly popped into Kevin's head.

“Telephone call, Sir. It's your son. The dogs have gone batshit crazy and he would like you to skip dessert, if possible.”

Kevin shook his head. What was he thinking?

Just dial 9-1-1, you fucking idiot.

He reached out to pick up the phone again. And just as his fingers made contact... it *rang*.

In the living room, Buckethead popped up like a cork. She clawed at her ears. She snarled and snapped at the air. Spittle sprayed from her mouth with each spring trap of her powerful jaws. The phone rang again like hot steel on raw nerve.

The puppies wriggled helplessly as she catapulted across them out of the bed, skittering around the corner on a hell-bend to slaughter whatever abominable creature was making that wretched noise.

Rhonda crossed the parking lot back to the van with a grocery bag in one hand and her cell phone in the other. Two frozen pizzas, five home decorating magazines and a bag of wasabi peas had set her back forty dollars, but she was excited to get back and show Kevin that all was not hopeless out here in the boonies. They'd had his all-time favorite, Major Domo Deep Dish Sausage, so she had picked up two. The wasabi peas were for her.

She hesitated before calling the house phone again. She didn't want to seem overly concerned, but she thought she'd give Kevin a heads up so he could keep the dogs quiet when she came in. They tended to get a little excited when any of them came home.

Kevin flattened himself against the wall and clenched his eyes shut. He made a hasty sign of the cross over his chest and hefted the lamp over his head ready to swing for the fences. When he opened his eyes, what he saw turned his face cream pitcher white.

Buckethead's jaws opened wide, a gaping cavity lined with heavy, salivating teeth that could spike through the thickest part of a man's skull like a nail through balsa. Her rear shanks compressed as she prepared to leap. Kevin's legs threatened to give out. The room spun around him.

Her claws sliced into the vinyl flooring as she launched her muscle-packed frame, not at Kevin but at the telephone. Her crunching jaws shattered the case and sheared the phone clean off the wall with a great, ripping explosion of plastic and steel. Kevin felt the tethered receiver breeze past his face as she sailed onto the kitchen floor and set to mauling the ancient rotary relic that had faithfully hung in the farmhouse kitchen for nearly five decades.

Kevin lay pasted to the wall in shock. Buckethead's vicious growls and snarls were drenched in the echo of his mind, like they were drifting in over some ghostly radio. It took him a moment to realize he was still alive. This was not the afterlife. This was the kitchen. And when you dodge a bullet, you don't stand around waiting for the next one. Kevin dropped the phone

and ran like hell up the hallway toward the stairs, and a moment later Buckethead was after him.

Rhonda stared at the cell phone in her hand. She couldn't quite process what she was hearing. In the digital age, the once iconic and familiar analog tones of telephonic communication had lost their place in the world. She could only think of one thing to say, and felt immediately silly for doing so.

“Operator?”

Of course, there was no operator on the other end. There was *nobody* on the other end. It had been ringing. Three times if she remembered correctly. Then it had cut off. All she heard now was a peculiar, oscillating, two-tone beep. Not a busy signal. The line had gone dead.

Rhonda threw her bag of groceries into the passenger seat, twisted the van's ignition key and peeled out of the supermarket parking lot straight through the red light she'd waited patiently for barely fifteen minutes ago.

Kevin stumbled through the bedroom door and slammed it shut behind him. He rolled over on his back and talked to Jacob upside down through winded gasps.

“You okay, buddy?”

Jacob lowered the pillow and peeked out with a flurry of sniffles. His whole body hitched and trembled as he nodded “yes.”

Buckethead slammed into the door. Kevin and Jacob both gasped at the sickening sound of soft pine cracking as the jamb split. Buckethead backed up, found some traction on a carpet runner and rammed again headfirst. The flimsy door flexed at the bottom. The cheap, tin knob rattled. It wouldn't hold out long, and all three of them knew it.

Kevin ran to the closet and reached up for Jacob. He tried to pull him out of his cubby, but the boy planted his feet against the doorframe and pushed back with all his five-year-old might.

“No! I don't wanna. I'm scared. Where's Christopher?”

Buckethead bashed herself against the door again, sending splintered shards of colonial trim casing bouncing across the bedroom floor.

“Dammit, Jacob! Come on!” Kevin roared as he yanked him out of the closet. They tumbled together in a heap at the foot of the bed when the battered door burst into the room right off its hinges, spiraling briefly on one corner like a chipboard tornado before toppling over and fanning the boys with a ghostly wind across their faces.

Kevin leaped to his feet, scooping Jacob up and bolting for the window. Buckethead spun her wheels to give chase, claws

scrabbling across the fallen door as the boys crawled out onto a steep, narrow roof ledge. Kevin shuffled sideways on the precarious catwalk with Jacob's hand in a vise grip.

Two massive paws appeared on the windowsill and Kevin intuitively clamped his hand over Jacob's mouth to keep him quiet. Buckethead's slimy, wrinkled muzzle followed. Her usually cold, wet nose was now crusted and dry. She sniffed the air, but collected no sensory data. Like Dozer, her snout had been stripped of its olfactory prowess and now merely smoldered with the dull, bitter sting of chemical anesthesia.

The boys held their breath. Kevin struggled to keep his shoulders pinned to the clapboard siding as if some invisible hand was trying to prod him right off the ledge. A macabre thought needled at Kevin's psyche, the image of Jacob and him lying on the ground below, broken necks and twisted bodies numb with paralysis as the dogs closed in to finish them off like vultures. He banished the thought from his mind and gave Jacob two quick squeezes of the hand to remind the terrified boy that he was not alone.

Buckethead withdrew into the bedroom, and the brothers breathed a collective sigh of relief as they listened to the faint clacking of claws in the stairwell as she returned to her puppies downstairs.

CHAPTER 21

Melvin Hicks didn't give two shits whether his tenants were cooking drugs, dealing drugs, shooting drugs or shooting each other as long as they paid the goddam rent on time. And the shit-birds in this particular apartment had not respected Melvin Hicks' code of propriety.

He pounded on the weather-beaten front door. Truth be told, it wasn't even an exterior door at all, just another hollow interior door Hicks had hastily slapped up after the last one was kicked in.

A baby cried inside. Dogs barked in disapproval. Mean fuckers, Hicks suspected. Whittled down to mindless droids of aggression through antagonism and deprivation. He waited, shuffling impatiently and glaring up at the security cam the junkies had installed.

Real discreet, he thought. Fucking amateurs.

The door flung open and Hicks smiled condescendingly at the skinny, strung-out woman who stood there in a once-fuzzy robe speckled with cigarette burns and stained with god-knew-what.

“Babe!” she yelled back into the house. “Landlord!”

She stood there mouth-breathing while the baby wailed in the background. The sound grated on Hicks like sand on a wet ass.

“Still nursing?” he asked with a shit-eating grin. She scowled and slunk off, leaving Hicks to stand there waiting alone. Without her blocking the view, he was able to peer inside the apartment. He didn’t see the dogs, thank Christ, but the baby loitered in a sagging diaper a foot or two from a huge flat-screen television that belched out obscenities that could have made a sailor blush. Behind the cherub, a coffee table sported a buffet of glass pipes, ashtrays, beer cans, rolled up dollar bills, a gun, a baby bottle and a few little white packets of Ocean Snow.

Darryl McKinnick slipped into the doorway like a vapor. Tall, equally strung-out and nearly as rail-thin as his girlfriend, Darryl did little to dispel the white trash stereotype. It almost looked like he wore Skoal Bandits on his teeth for caps.

“Dude. You’re a week early.”

“*Dude*. It’s the twenty-first,” Hicks swatted back. “You’re three weeks *late*.”

Darryl groaned and rolled his eyes, then slammed the door in Melvin’s face. He waited patiently, well versed in the song and dance. There would be yelling inside, then screaming back, that scream would be repeated for emphasis, then maybe something would break...

All of the above transpired before Darryl returned to the door.

“Got change? This is all I got.” Darryl held out a spray of hundred dollar bills.

Hicks patted his pockets for his money clip. *What the fuck?* He hid his mild panic well, retracing mental steps but coming up without a map. He snatched all the bills from Darryl’s jittery hand.

“I’ll bring you back your damn change.” He turned and stomped halfway down the cracked and stilted sidewalk, then turned back.

“Minus a fifty dollar *asshole* tax!”

Darryl sneered, his thin lips twisting like two worms on a hot sidewalk.

“I’ll be waitin’!” he barked as he slammed the door. Actually, he had to slam it twice because the flimsy thing just bounced back open first time.

Hazel had barely taken her eyes off Dozer the whole time Kevin was in the house. He had twitched and whimpered a few times in his sleep since he’d knocked himself out, but that was about it.

She paced anxiously on the tree house deck, wondering if she should go down and try to get Christopher out of the tent. She had heard Kevin yelling inside the house. She had heard several violent crashes. And she had heard the other dog barking with the

same frightening ferocity as the one that lay cataleptic on the porch. He would wake up soon, wouldn't he? Why the hell hadn't Kevin smashed its stupid head in? *What was going on in the inside that house?*

Hazel stopped pacing. As if an emotional switch had flipped inside her head, her face scrunched up tightly and she wept. She cried less than a minute, but it seemed to be all she had needed. She fanned her fingers and shook her hands as if the tears would run out the tips and she'd be done with them. As quickly as the tears had come, they disappeared. Hazel wiped her face and got to work on her idea.

Emerging from the tree house carrying a roll of duct tape, a ten-inch scrap of yellow-sheathed Romex wiring and a few loops of spun polyester rope, Hazel knelt down at the edge of the deck. She dropped one end of the rope over and saw that it fell a few inches short of the ground below.

Perfect, she thought as she grabbed the wiring and chewed a perforation in the plastic insulation. She peeled back the sheathing and twisted the bare white wire into a long J-shaped hook. The black wire and the ground she twisted back out of the way, then she bent the other end into a closed loop like the eye of a needle. She threaded the rope through the eye, knotted it tight and bit off a piece of duct tape to solidify the joint.

Somebody was going fishing.

Kevin and Jacob shuffled along their narrow band of roof until they reached the relative safety of a wider, shallow-pitched overhang covering the small bump-out in the kitchen that overlooked the yard. Jacob sat down on the asphalt shingles and craned his neck trying to see the tent.

“Stay away from the edge,” Kevin said as he walked toward it himself. He found that if he stepped out far enough, he could see the spot by the back door where Dozer still lay unconscious.

“Jesus, he’s still out.”

“Huh?” Jacob asked sleepily.

Kevin turned and caught something out of the corner of his eye. *Something was moving in the trees.* He squinted, then rubbed his eyes and squinted again.

“What the hell is she doing?”

Jacob strained to see whatever it was that had captured his older brother’s interest. Then he saw it too. *A girl.* There was a girl perched precariously far out on one of the oak tree’s long, girder-like branches.

“Kevin, who *is* that?”

“That’s Hazel Ryan,” he said. “She lives next door.”

“What’s she doing up there?”

“I have absolutely... no... idea, Jacob.”

Hazel lay face down on a stout branch with the tail of the rope in her hand, dangling and jostling it like a puppeteer would the strings of a marionette. On the ground below, the hook dragged along through the grass as she tried to catch her fish. One of the twins' Nerf blasters.

“Do you think she wants to play tag?” Jacob asked.

“I don't think so buddy. I have no —”

Kevin's words cut off mid-sentence. He had caught something else out of the corner of his eye. The hair on the back of his neck bristled.

Dozer was moving.

Kevin looked back at Hazel. She worked with dogged determination to feed the hook through the toy gun's trigger guard. She reached out, hanging further off the branch. The hook caught momentarily but slipped off.

“Hey!” Kevin whispered loudly at her, not wanting to draw Dozer's attention to either of them.

Dozer shook his head. The fog was thick. He struggled to stand in his clumsy stupor.

Hazel didn't hear. Every ounce of her concentration poured into snagging that plastic toy. The hook danced over the trigger guard, tantalizingly close. *Just a little further.* Hazel stretched, hanging onto the branch with wrapped legs and an arm extended much too far.

Dozer sensed a blur of movement in the tree. He shook his head again, flinging out a pinwheel of drool and lather. His vision began to clear. Kevin watched the Mastiff's demeanor change from a befuddled daze to the single-minded focus of an executioner. A squall of blood-thirst churned behind his crazed, red-rimmed eyes. It sent a chill through Kevin from the back of his skull that exited through the tips of his fingers.

"Hazel," he said louder this time. She heard him, but the hook was so close to her target she could taste it. Dozer took a step forward. "Hazel!" Kevin shouted, and as she finally fished the wire through the toy gun's trigger guard, she looked up.

"Got it!" she announced proudly, but the pride was short-lived. The first thing she saw wasn't Kevin. It was Dozer, and he was halfway across the lawn. It was a measured, methodical pace. Unhurried, as if the dog itself understood the inevitability of the situation.

Hazel's eyes darted. She spotted Kevin and Jacob on the roof. Suddenly she felt like bait on a fishhook. *I'd like to get back in the boat now, please.* Yes, that was a very good idea. Hazel shifted her weight to turn back on the branch, but lost her balance. She spun around, completely upside down and flailing for something to grab onto. Her fingertips brushed across the slick silver bark and Hazel realized with horror that she was going to fall.

Kevin reached out instinctively. All he could do was hold his breath and watch. Jacob slapped his hands over his face and peeked through his fingers.

Hazel felt the wind on the back of her neck as she plummeted. Her hair fluttered up over her face like streamers as the branch shrunk away in her field of vision. She found herself thinking about the fact that she still held the end of the rope in her hand.

What an odd thing to be—

She slammed into the ground with bone-bruising force. Her lungs emptied on impact. An anvil on her chest. Hazel had never broken a bone before. She wondered if she would know what it felt like.

“Don’t... move!”

For a second, Hazel didn’t know if Kevin was talking to her or the dog. Dozer stood frozen, not in response to Kevin’s shout, but to the odd event he had just witnessed. It was like a bird he’d been chasing had suddenly lost the use of its wings and simply fell out of the sky.

Dozer turned his heavy head and saw the boys on the roof. Kevin waved his arms as a distraction and kept talking to Hazel.

“Stay where you are. Don’t make any sudden movements.”

He wants me to play dead? Is he kidding?

Hazel grabbed the Nerf gun and hopped to her feet, half expecting to topple right back over on two broken legs. Dozer's attention snapped back. He narrowed his eyes on her. Hazel could feel them boring into her chest and squeezing her heart. The moment stretched out impossibly long under the weight of its own gravity as they all waited for something to give.

Buckethead threw herself against the back door with such a violent crash that every window in the kitchen rattled in its frame. Dozer skittered and looked back. Jacob screamed.

Hazel took a step toward the tree.

“Hazel stop!” Kevin pleaded.

Dozer curled his lip in a snarl and dropped his head. Hazel took another step. Dozer's head sunk lower, the red pits of his eyes contracting to pin-points.

“Don't run! He'll just—”

Hazel didn't run... she *bolted*. Dozer sprung after her. A dragster shooting flames from its straight pipes.

“Shit, run! *Ruuuuuun!*”

Hazel glanced back as Dozer launched himself through the air, a glistening mass of blurred fangs and fury. Then he was on her. He struck her between the shoulder blades and they tumbled to the ground, rolling over each other in a chaotic spin cycle that came to rest barely a foot away from the exposed well.

Dozer pinned Hazel on her back and lunged for her throat. She let out a chilling cry of terror, curling into a tight ball and crossing her forearms over her neck and face to protect herself.

Kevin twisted Jacob's head away and pulled the boy's sobs into his own chest.

"Don't look, Jacob." He covered his brother's ears to block out Hazel's screams. "Protect your neck!" he shouted. "Don't let him get your neck!"

Crimson florets bloomed all over Hazel's sleeves. He was *biting* her. Over and over again as he tried to dig his muzzle in at her neck. Hazel fought with everything she had, grappling and kicking to fend off the attack. But he was too big, too strong. His teeth were huge in her face, the red spikes of a devil's horns. Pain seared through her arms. Her head began to swim.

Buckethead slammed into the metal door again from inside. A hollow crash like a sledgehammer on an oil drum. It bulged and warped under the force, but the lock and hinges held fast. Dozer spun his head back, the clatter echoing in his brain like a trapped wasp that stung him again and again. His back leg slipped and his haunches tumbled over the edge of the well.

Hazel saw her window of opportunity and wriggled out from under his tremendous weight. She scrambled to get out of the way of the Mastiff's scouring front claws as he thrashed to pull himself back to solid ground. One back paw found its footing.

Hazel grabbed the Nerf gun and ran for the tree, limping and shivering in shock.

“Don’t look back, Hazel!” Kevin yelled. “*Go, go, go!*”

Dozer pulled himself out of the well opening and went after her, but Hazel was already climbing, frightened and bloodied, but *alive*.

“Are you alright?” Kevin called over to the tree house.

“*What do you think?*” her voice shot back from the dark.

He shook his head. “Yeah, stupid question, huh?”

Jacob nodded in agreement.

Christopher rolled over in his sleeping bag and flopped his arm over where Jacob should have been. He sat up sleepily, looking around the tent with half-open eyes.

“Jacob?”

He picked up his flashlight and shined it on Jacob’s sleeping bag. It was, of course, empty. The cold flutter of fear danced beneath Christopher’s sternum.

“Jacob, where are you?”

He fumbled for his hearing aid case and found it, tipped over and empty. Growing more frightened by the second, he searched for his hearing aid, feeling around with his hands in the dark.

“Christopher! Don’t make any noise!” Kevin’s voice bellowed from outside, but the words fell unheard. “Stay in the tent! I’m coming down to get you!”

Christopher flipped over the corner of a blanket and smiled with relief. He picked up one of the hearing aids and popped it back into the case, then continued the search for its mate.

Dozer slunk over to the house, his full attention now shifted to Kevin. Lips peeled back from his teeth in a macabre grin, muzzle steaming in a gummy wash of drool and Hazel Ryan’s warm blood, Dozer calmly sat on the ground below the evil boy and made it crystal fucking clear that if he was coming down... things were not going to end well.

***Ocean Snow* is available as a complete novelette in all popular digital and traditional print formats from Amazon, iBookstore, Barnes & Noble and Lulu.**

Script requests and rights inquiries regarding J.D. Simone’s original screenplay, *Ocean Snow*, should be directed to Chaos Publishing.

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DOUG JOHNSON is a multi-talented media creator and editor with a passion for telling stories through moving visuals, dynamic sound and the power of the written word. As a freelance audio-visual designer in New York City, his skill and creativity have been showcased in works for television, documentary and film.

Doug was honored in 2010 with a First Place win at the industry-powerhouse “Fade In Awards” for his short screenplay, *The Bassinet*. He has also written three feature-length screenplays, *Debt to Society* with co-writer Brian Murphy, and *The Holstein Epiphany* and *From Hell I Came* with co-writer Dennis Smithers, Jr

Doug writes primarily in the crime and suspense genres, with liberal doses of horror, black comedy and the inherent drama of the human condition. He cites as major influences the strange, violent and darkly humorous southern gothic traditions of authors Flannery O’Connor, Edgar Allan Poe and Harry Crews.

Ocean Snow is his first writing project for Chaos Publishing.

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J.D. SIMONE is a serial creator whose personality merges a bottomless well of ideas with the drive to implement them. As founder of Chaos Publishing, her goal is both simple and bold. By launching an entirely new business model that merges parallel fields to harness the massive power of an existing promotional pipeline, screenwriters will reach a far larger and more diverse readership for their stories than ever thought possible.

J.D. brings cross-disciplinary experience as a successful entrepreneur, published author and award-winning screenwriter to this mission. She has written several scripts, including the award-winning short film, *Blinded*. Her fictional works favor genre thrill rides steeped in suspense, laced with black humor and bound by heart, celebrating the strength of damaged heroes and the perseverance of the underdog.