

Dress shoes clicked on the concrete.

The man gassing up his black van looked up. Three massive men in matching Brooks Brothers suits stopped several feet from him.

Though it was night time, the men wore reflective sunglasses.

Though it was a warm summer night, the men wore overcoats.

"Can I help you fellows?"

"Are you Tom Joad?" The voice came from behind him.

Tom turned around. This fourth man was thick but not overweight. His head was shaved completely bald, and though he also had an overcoat on, he was not wearing sunglasses. His eyes were bloodshot and reddened around the edges as if he had been crying. His mostly clear face was bristled with several unshaven patches that clashed with his neat, expensive clothes.

"Yeah."

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Lies/Dexter Goad/2.

"My name is Steve Pitt. The men behind you are my associates, John, Paul, and George." Steve hesitated, as if waiting for the obligatory "Ringo couldn't make it?" remark.

Tom merely stared at him impassively.

Steve finally shrugged and pulled out an 8 by 10 color photo. It showed a beautiful blonde girl who looked to be between 16 and 20 years old. He and held it at waist level. "Have you seen this girl?"

"No." Tom said evenly, his eyes never leaving Steve's face.

"How 'bout you take a look at the fucking picture before make that pronouncement?" Steve replied in a tight voice.

More clicks on the concrete as the three non singing Beatles edged closer to Tom's exposed back.

Tom's eyes still didn't drop. "Don't have to take a look, I haven't seen nobody."

The skin on the other man's face was reddening. "Is that right?"

"As a matter of fact, I haven't seen nobody in so long, until I saw you I thought I was blind." Tom deadpanned.

Steve nodded imperceptibly and something smashed into Tom's right shoulder so hard there was a crack of a bone snapping.

The assaulted man fell to his knees with a sharp cry. There was another cry as his kneecaps, protected only by his filthy jeans, connected roughly with the concrete.

"You don't want to crack wise with me again, Tom Joad!" Steve screamed from above him, spittle spraying over the wounded man's face. "You would do extremely well to not even consider letting

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Lies/Dexter Goad/3.

another country witticism crawl out of your filthy mouth, do you hear me!?"

Tom pulled a red checkered handkerchief from his back pocket and carefully wiped his face of any trace of spittle. When he was done he put away his handkerchief and merely looked up at Steve.

Steve, face redder than ever, sucked noisily from his nose for a minute and then spit out a nasty glob into Tom's freshly cleaned cheek. "So you don't want to answer me, huh?"

Tom reached for his handkerchief again.

Steve tore into his overcoat and ripped out a .45 Automag. "If you wipe that off I'll blow your fucking brains out, do you hear me? Let it stay there!"

Tom dropped his hand, and continued to look up impassively.

"Um, boss, we're in a public place." Paul whined, looking around nervously.

A tanned and leggy woman in shorts and a halter top was looking at them with huge eyes.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" George barked. The woman squealed and hopped into her jeep without replacing the gas hose.

Steve, ignoring all this, was still locking eyes with Tom. "Now," he said, cocking back the hammer of his pistol, "I'm going to ask you to look at this picture one more time. And if your eyes don't drop from my face within 2.3 fucking seconds to my picture, I'm going ventilate your fucking dome!" With his free hand, he held out the picture again.

This time, Tom's eyes dipped to the picture.

"The station attendant is calling someone, man." John said calmly. Unlike George and Paul, he didn't seem to care if the

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Lies/Dexter Goad/4.

police came. But there was something else in his voice.

Disapproval?

Steve continued to ignore everything except Tom. "Well?"

"I haven't seen her." Tom Joad informed them in a dark voice. Sweat had broken out on his face, no doubt a result of the pain of his broken collarbone.

Steve sighed and replaced the picture in his hand with another one. This one was a smaller school photo of a red haired, freckled boy of the same general age as the girl. "What about this punk?"

"Nope." Tom said even before Steve had finished extending the second picture.

"I see." Steve said in a clipped tone. He returned the second picture to his pocket. His hand now free, he scrubbed his lips and forehead so hard he left white trails in his crimson face. Then he ripped a third photo out of another pocket. "What about this motherfucker! Have you seen this one?!"

Tom had about a second to see an 8 X 10 of himself leaning out of the driver's side window of his black van before the pistol came swinging in and clipped his left temple. His head crashed into the side of his van and he slumped to the pavement.

Steve knelt beside Tom and rammed his massive pistol into the helpless man's right cheek. As he talked he grounded the weapon deeper and deeper in. "Now, I'm going to ask you again, Forest. And your answer had better start with a 'y' and end with an 's' because if I hear anything else start to come out of your mouth I'm going to vaporize that lying shithole you call your mouth so you'll never tell another goddamned lie! DO. YOU. RECOGNIZE. THIS. MOTHERFUCKER?"

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Lies/Dexter Goad/5.

With that last, Steve jammed the picture of Tom against his eyes.

"Yes."

"Good boy." Steve said, sighing and settling back on his haunches. "Now we're getting somewhere. This lying fuck remembers what he looks like." He produced yet another photo. This one showed Tom opening the side door of his van to let in the boy and girl from the first two photos he had been shown. "Now I know you look dumber than dead moose but let's try this again. Have you ever seen these two kids from this picture that shows you letting them in your fucking van?"

"Oh, THOSE two kids." Tom said in an attempt at sounding surprised.

Steve looked astonished. He finally seemed to remember his associates were there and looked up at them. "Can you believe this boy? I'm stomping him into the pavement and he's still trying to be a comedian! This isn't a Gomer act, you really are the dumbest bastard on the planet, aren't you?"

"Those first pictures don't look nothing like them." Tom complained.

Steve's eyes narrowed and he dug in even harder with his pistol. "Try me one more time. You're on your last rope, son."

"Sir," John warned.

At that moment headlights splashed over them and a siren wailed. "Drop the gun!"

Steve sighed and put his pistol on the concrete.

"Get down on the ground! Face down on the ground! That goes for you three too!"

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Lies/Dexter Goad/6.

"We can't do that!" Steve called back. "We're CIA and we have a prisoner in custody! We can't take our attention away from him!"

There was a pause as the officer apparently talked to his home base. Then a sound of a car door opening. "I have all four of you covered. If what you say is true, he's not going anywhere."

"I'm not worried about him going anywhere, you dumb shit, I'm worried about him taking a pill to off himself so he doesn't have to answer our questions! This man is a terrorist!"

That word seemed to make the difference. The officer took a step closer. "Slowly pull out your ID. None of you others move."

Steve brought out a small leather wallet and tossed it to the ground in front of the police officer.

Keeping his eyes on the five men, the officer slowly knelt and picked it up. He didn't look at it until he had returned to a standing position. And even then he brought it, opened, up to his eye level rather than taking his eyes from the men to look down at it.

After a long moment, the officer said, "I've actually seen one of these before. This is legit."

More headlights splashed them as another cruiser screamed to a stop and two more officers leapt from their car.

In the old days, the officers might have questioned the CIA's authority within United States borders, but now they simply checked the other three men's IDs and then asked if they could help.

Glancing at the growing crowd of civilians drawn by the commotion, Steve ordered Paul and George to put Tom in the back of his own van. "I'll go with them, John, you follow in our car."

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Lies/Dexter Goad/7.

Steve sat in the back with Paul and Tom while George drove the van. "The front of this van smells like ass," Paul whined.

Steve, staring at Tom in the dim light, ignored that. Instead, as Paul pulled out of the station, he said, "take us the way you saw him go with the kids three days ago."

"You see Tom," Steve went on, "Paul and George were following those kids the other day. Had been following them for almost a week, in fact. They are good. Very good. You didn't even know they were there, did you?"

Tom stared back imperturbably.

Steve realized that during the confusion with the police his prisoner had wiped his face clean. "What have they told you about me? You obviously feel like you have to protect them. What lies have they told you?"

Tom said nothing.

The gun was back out again, almost quicker than the eye could see. Steve was standing over Tom and pressing the gun against his throat. With his free hand Steve pulled a straight razor out of his pocket. He flipped it open, a passing street lamp's light gleamed on the shiny blade. "I'll bet they didn't tell you that I am Kerri's father. Did they? Did they tell you that she is only 15 years old? Oh, I see that surprises you. I know she looks 20 but she's only 15. Did they tell you that she ran away from home almost a week ago?"

Steve grinned a humorless grin. In the shadowed interior of the van his eyes were deep dark holes and he looked like a vengeful zombie. "How could she possibly believe that I wouldn't find her? I'm a district commander of the CI-Fucking-A!

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Lies/Dexter Goad/8.

We were on them like stink on shit within an hour after I knew she was missing! I had them followed instead of picked up right away because I wanted her to get a taste of how hard the road is. Find out how much the real world hurts when it bites you in the ass. Nothing serious could happen to them, my boys were there all the time."

He paused, seeming to remember who he was talking to. "My point, Tom Joad, is that Kerri is my fucking daughter. I'm very serious about my daughter. I play games sometimes when it comes to spying, but I play no games when it comes to my daughter. So if I get any more of this strong silent type bullshit from you I'm going to bust your nuts open with this without even pulling your pants down. Do you hear me, sweetheart?"

"I hear you." Tom replied evenly.

"Did they tell you anything about her father being a government spook?"

"No."

"What story did they give you? Why did you pick up two very possibly runaway teenagers?"

"They told me that his mother was sick and they were rushing back to California to see her before she passed away. They told me they were married."

Steve savagely pressed the barrel of the gun deeper into Tom's neck, forcing the man's head against the side of the van. "You're lying, you piece of shit! They didn't tell you they were married!"

Tom stared holes into Steve.

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Lies/Dexter Goad/9.

"Don't look at me like that!" Steve raged, waving the razor close to the other man's face. "Oh, you're getting mad now, eh? Well, guess what, I'm mad too! I'm real mad! And when I get mad, I STAY mad! Bonzo has been pissing me off for a year now. I knew that little motherfucker was trouble the first time I laid eyes on him! What kind of fucking name is 'Bonzo'? I kept expecting him to show up wearing clown shoes and a rotating tie with a stupid name like that! Did he tell you his name was Bonzo?"

"Yes."

"So you're getting mad at me? Good. I want you to step one inch out of line so I'll have an excuse to blow your fucking teeth into your brains. What the FUCK were you thinking picking up two kids at 2 in the morning? Two kids walk up to you while you fill up at the station we were in and you fall for their sob story and take them down the road? Why?"

"I believed their lies." Tom answered simply. "I thought they were a young married couple."

Steve smacked Tom with the barrel of his gun again. "Don't you call my daughter a liar! If anyone will, I will! But just because you've spent a couple days with her doesn't mean you have any right to call her names!"

Tom reached up to feel his face. The skin had broken on his right cheek where the barrel sight had torn flesh.

"You want some more or are you ready to tell me what they told you that convinced you to let them stay at your house?"

"They didn't have to convince me. They seemed nice and they were definitely tired of being on the road, so I offered."

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Lies/Dexter Goad/10.

Steve stared at Tom for a long moment of silence. Then he finally, mercifully, pulled back the Automag and dropped his hand to his side. "That sounds like the first time tonight you've been honest with me."

Tom rubbed his neck silently.

"You see, Tom, besides the command of facts that my position offers me, I also get a feel from people whether or not they are telling me the truth. I knew you had seen my daughter and her piece of shit boyfriend because my men took pictures of you picking them up. I just asked you with the first pictures to gauge how you act when you're lying. That way, each new time you lie when I DON'T know for sure, I'll have an idea of what you're like when you lie."

"What if I had admitted up front I'd seen them?"

Steve shrugged. "If you had volunteered knowing them without knowing I had proof you had, indeed, picked them up, then I could probably trust anything else you said."

"You expect me to help four obvious thugs find two nice, honest kids? It'd been different if you had shown your ID from the getgo. But each brutality you committed against me convinced me how much trouble those kids would be in if I said anything."

Steve, who seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of pockets and things in them, was now unwrapping a piece of hard candy. He had not released his hold on the pistol, so he did most of the work with his free left hand.

Paul, sitting next to Tom, took his cue from his boss and was opening his own piece of candy. He offered a second piece to Tom, who shook his head.

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Lies/Dexter Goad/11.

"So let's test how much you've come to trust me." Steve said easily, his former fury completely gone as if it had never been. "How far did you take them?"

Tom didn't hesitate. "I took them to Statesville, left them there, and went home."

Steve nodded his near imperceptible nod again, and Tom found himself lifted from his seat and slammed to the floor of the van. Paul had aimed him to land on his damaged right side. The split bones in his shoulder ground together and shattered even more audibly this time. Tom screamed in agony.

Steve knelt next to the writhing man and jammed his Automag into Tom's groin. "Tom, Tom, Tom. Why are you putting yourself through this? Why are you lying to protect them? What are they to you? You haven't felt anything yet compared to what I'm going to start doing to you if you don't start giving me some truthful answers soon."

The three men in the back of the van sat watching each other until Tom's groans of pain had begun to subside a little.

Steve pressed his pistol a little harder into Tom's groin. "How far did you take them?"

"My house!" Tom gasped.

Steve released the pressure. "Are they still there?"

"Yes!"

Steve nodded. "You see, I had figured that. Because Kerri and Bonzo were supposed to be somewhere yesterday. After my boys lost you when they were trying to follow you taking them somewhere, I decided to reacquire my daughter and her clown lover at this location in Statesville. They never showed up. Had they shown up,

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Lies/Dexter Goad/12.

they could have earned ten million dollars. Not bad for two kids under twenty years old, eh?"

Steve glared at Paul. "I told you she'd have a change of heart, Paul. I told you she wouldn't go through with betraying her old man."

"You were right, boss." Paul said in a properly abashed tone.

Steve leaned close to Tom, his face a mask of pure hatred. "If my daughter, my own flesh and blood, had shown up at that drop point with the intentions of selling that shit she stole from me to the Chinese, I would have blown her fucking head off! Who did she think she was fucking with? What would I look like, my own daughter betraying our country!"

"That's why you were following her." Tom said in a pain filled voice. "You wanted to see if she'd do it."

"YES!" Steve screamed, spraying spittle into Tom's eyes and mouth. "When they didn't show up, we took their contact into the desert and buried him head first in sand. So now I'll just chalk up what Kerri did to her boyfriend taking her into that shit. His motive was the money, but I guess she was stupid and in love or something."

"So you're not going to kill them?" Tom wanted to know. Tears of pain were streaking down his face.

Steve held up his pistol, admiring it for a second. "Oh, I'm gonna stick this up Clown Boy's ass before I pull the trigger! But she didn't go through with betraying me so I can let it slide after I punish her."

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Lies/Dexter Goad/13.

The van was pulling over to the side of the road. Through the windshield they could see a road snaking off to the left. A sign revealed it was "State Road 66."

"This is where I lost him, sir!" George called out.

"Now Tom, my boys were following you the other night after you picked those two crazy kids up. And then the weird thing happened. For the first time in their collective 65 years in this business, they lost their quarry on a lonely country road which held little other traffic."

Paul spoke up, sounding irritated. "He turned into this road and we ... just lost him. There were half a dozen driveways up that road he could have turned off into and we didn't want to go down there because we would expose ourselves."

"I want the materials that my daughter stole from me." Steve added. "If they know I'm coming they'll destroy them. So you will drive us the rest of the way." He hammered the barrel of his pistol into Tom's broken collarbone. "And if you take us to the wrong house I'll rip you to pieces!"

When Tom had recovered from this fresh bout of pain, Paul and George hauled him up and put him in the driver's seat. George sat in the passenger seat, revolver in his lap. Steve sat on his knees right behind Tom's seat, barrel of the AutoMag pressed firmly into his prisoner's neck.

As Tom pulled back onto the road and made a left turn onto State Road 66, Steve said, "did you talk them into not making their Statesville meeting, Tom Joad?"

"I never knew they had a meeting." Tom answered honestly.

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Lies/Dexter Goad/14.

Steve smelled the honesty. "Okay. What reason did they give for wanting to stay with you so long?"

"They were tired of traveling. I've been lonely and they are delightful kids so I didn't have a problem with it."

"When were they leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

The barrel of the gun came again, smashing again into Tom's temple. The van swerved dangerously, almost running off the road and into a tree. Tom recovered it at the last second and brought them, tires squealing, back onto the road.

"You think because you're driving that you're safe, you lying shitbag?!? I'll beat you to a fucking bloody pulp and you'd better not fucking crash us or I'll FUCK you with this gun, you got that?"

"Okay, okay!" Tom cried. "They've decided to live with me for a while! We're really getting on well!"

Steve crawled around the seat enough to shove the pistol's barrel down into the shattered collarbone. "Are you having sex with my daughter?!?"

The van swerved again, but this time didn't leave the road. "Of course not!"

Steve, confused, released the pressure of his pistol. "You're telling the truth. Huh." He sounded strangely disappointed.

Tom spoke into the following silence. "It's interesting."

When he didn't elaborate, Steve tapped the pistol's barrel into the top of Tom's head twice, making a dull thud sound each time. Tom crunched down in his seat while trying to keep his attention on the road. "Quit it!"

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Lies/Dexter Goad/15.

Paul and George broke into mean laughter. One of them mimicked him in a girlish voice. "Quit it!"

"What's interesting, shit for brains?" Steve said in a dangerous tone.

"That you use the word 'fuck' every other sentence and yet the one time tonight that the word is actually appropriate, you use the word 'sex' instead."

Steve stared at Tom's profile. When it became obvious that Tom was willing to wait him out, he finally said, "what the fuck does that mean?"

"That's my point, actually, Steve. What does it mean that you, who uses the word more often than Dennis Miller, avoids using it in connection with your daughter having sex?"

Tom was saved from another savage beating when Steve's cell phone rang at that moment.

Steve grunted and flipped open his phone. "Moby." He answered, obviously using a code word.

John's voice sounded like it was coming from the moon. "... fuck are you guys?"

Steve turned and looked out the back windows. The comforting glow of the SUV's headlights was no longer behind them. "Where the fuck are you? We turned at State Road 66, you incompetent buffoon!"

"So did I! ... don't see ... farm hous-..."

"Just a second, John!" Steve returned his attention to Tom. "How much further to your rathole?"

"Another mile, we'll be there in two minutes."

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Lies/Dexter Goad/16.

"Pull over here." When Tom didn't immediately comply, Steve rapped him in the side of the head again with his pistol. "Today, shithead!"

Tom pulled the van over to the side of the road and put it in neutral but did not turn off the engine.

"We've pulled over John, catch up with us. We're still on State 66, you can't miss us!"

John's voice suddenly came in loud and clear. "Look Steve, this was cool when it was about getting your daughter back from her boyfriend who talked her into running away. But I'm not going to stand there and watch you blow people away. All those cops SAW us with this asshole!"

"What the fuck are you talking about!" Steve raged, hitting Tom's seat with his pistol in frustration that John was not standing here.

"This thing with your daughter has sent you off the deep end, man. You've lost your mind. This whole thing is creeping me out. I'm leaving." John revealed.

"WHAT? YOU GET YOUR HOT ASS UP HERE WITH US RIGHT NOW OR THEY'RE GOING TO FIND YOU FACE DOWN IN A FUCKING DITCH! DO YOU HEAR ME, JOHN?! GET OUR FUCKING VEHICLE HERE PRONTO!!" He paused for breath, and then said a little calmer, "if you want to bail on me, after 15 years of close service with him, fine. This is an operation outside of a the law, and I told you at the beginning that if any of you didn't want to do it that wouldn't be held against you. But we need that SUV and the shit in it."

"I looked in the back after you guys drove off, boss." John said. "I saw what you have planned for those kids."

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Lies/Dexter Goad/17.

George grabbed Steve's arm. "Have both of you lost your minds? You're talking on cell phones!"

Steve's eyes bulged as realization dawned. "Enough conversation over insecure lines, Captain. Get that vehicle up here NOW or start hunting for a cave in Antarctica in hide in!" He cut the connection without waiting for a response.

They waited for ten fuming minutes in silence. There wasn't even a sign of the SUV's headlights in all that time.

Steve finally sighed. "When I get done with him, there won't be enough to feed a gerbil."

No one else said anything. Paul and George glanced at each other from the corners of their eyes, making sure Steve didn't notice it.

"Let's move on." Steve nudged Tom with the pistol. "Take us home, Tom Joad."

Tom pulled back out onto the dirt road.

"Jesus, you don't even have a paved road to your house?" Steve snorted.

Tom slowed without comment and made a left turn into a narrow dirt side road leading into thick woods.

Steve swiped Tom's head again. "You'd better not fucking have my daughter living in a wood shack with no running water, you asshole."

"When we ran his plates his address was listed as a rural route." George said helpfully.

Steve gave his minion a glare that said 'who gives a fuck?' but didn't reply because they emerged into a clearing.

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Lies/Dexter Goad/18.

Tom's house was a two story stone and cement structure. Paul didn't know what made him think so, but he didn't think the stone was a façade. The walls actually were made from various sized stones cemented together, just as had been done for centuries before modern house construction.

Even more odd was the fact that not a single window graced the front or side walls that were in sight. "Who's ever heard of a house with no windows?" Paul wondered aloud, puzzled.

"No fucking windows? What kind of squalor do you have my daughter living in?" Steve snapped while he rapped Tom's shredded collarbone with his pistol barrel.

Tom parked in front of the only break in the stone wall, the wooden front door. He turned off the engine. "Now what?"

Steve put his Automag back into its holster. "Now you let us in so I can see my goddamned daughter!"

Tom nodded and opened his door. When Steve was sure the man couldn't see him, he got his silenced .38 out, checked the safety, and stuck it and his left hand in his deep overcoat pocket.

"Come on." Steve said.

George and Paul got out nervously. "Um, listen, Steve, we're not so sure..." Paul whined.

Steve wheeled, bringing his silenced revolver out so quickly the other two had no chance to react. Pressing the silencer barrel against Paul's chest, Steve gave George a vicious glare. "Does this piece of shit speak for you?"

"No boss!" George said quickly.

"I don't speak for me either, boss." Paul said almost as quickly.

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Lies/Dexter Goad/19.

Steve snorted, then actually chuckled. "Okay, okay. Fuck it, it's been a long night." He eyed Tom, who was fumbling with his keys. "Come on, Jetro! Today!"

Tom unlocked the door and pulled it open onehanded. The wooden door looked at least a foot thick. He gave Steve an insolent grin. "After you."

A magic marker sized hole appeared between Tom's eyes. He flew backward against the stone wall and sagged down to the earth.

Steve lowered his silenced revolver and pocketed it. Then he got his Automag out again. "No Tom Joad," he said grimly, "after you, I insist."

He stepped to the doorway. "George, guard the front door. Paul, circle the house. If there is another, guard it. If not, when you get back around, come in and back me up. I'll be back directly."

After their muted consent, Steve stepped into the house. The first room was a combination living room/library. Every wall but one was filled from floor to ceiling with shelves upon shelves of books. They seemed to be evenly divided between hard bound and paperback. The final wall was taken up with the most elaborate entertainment setup Steve had ever seen. Four TVs, side by side, ranging from a 40 inch digital TV to a 9 inch DVD/TV combo. A Playstation 2 was connected to the 30 inch TV. A state of the art sound system, two VCRs, a DVCR, and a DVD player were arranged around the TVs. The rest of the wall was filled with floor to ceiling storage cabinets that no doubt held videos on every format there was a player for.

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Lies/Dexter Goad/20.

Steve headed for the hallway. At that moment Kerri and Bonzo appeared in the hallway entrance.

"Daddy!" Kerri said happily. She looked stoned out of her mind. Bonzo had an infuriatingly dazed smile on his face.

Further evidence that the two were drugged to the gills was the fact that both of them were stark naked.

"Kerri!" Steve said, returning her bright tone of voice. Even as he said this, he lifted his pistol and fired. The top of Bonzo's head exploded.

Kerri's boyfriend flew backwards and fell with a meaty thud three feet behind her.

Steve advanced on his daughter, eyes hungrily examining her naked glory. It was the first time he'd ever seen her naked, and she was as stunning as he'd imagined it.

The final truth was, she'd stolen no secrets when she sneaked out.

The final truth was there had been no planned meeting in Statesville. Statesville was where she'd planned to marry Bonzo because that is where Kerri's favorite teacher had eloped to get married a couple decades ago. He'd done it in a little courthouse in the middle of town. Kerri had written all this in an email to her best friend. Written her plans to emulate this "romantic event" down to the last detail. Kerri had thought deleting an email off her computer was good enough to preserve her secret. It hadn't been. Steve had planned to show up just as they had started the ceremony and drag her away from Bonzo the Clown. If her boyfriend tried to interfere, Paul and George would thrash him for his trouble.

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Lies/Dexter Goad/21.

The final truth was that the Chinese man who had happened to show up at the courthouse the second day of their 24 hour stakeout after Paul and George lost track of this van was not a spy trying to meet the kids to purchase secrets. Steve had seized the opportunity because he had already said that he knew Kerri was meeting a Chinese operative at the courthouse. Steve, needing to preserve his story to keep his men in line, hadn't thought twice about ordering the Chinese man's execution. George and Paul never seemed to doubt the secret theft story, but now it seemed as if John had never really bought it.

The final truth was that Steve wouldn't let any man have his daughter. Ever.

Kerri, slack faced with shock, opened her mouth to speak or scream.

There was a loud crack just outside the door. At first Steve thought it was a gunshot. He twisted around and brought his gun to bear on the open doorway. Then George filled the doorway, his gun down by his side. If there had been trouble he wouldn't be walking so casually.

George walked in two steps and then stumbled to his knees. With a soft sigh he fell flat on his face. Half of the back of his head was missing. The shape of the hole was funny. If Steve didn't know better, if he for instance was insane, he'd say it looked like something had bitten a huge chunk out of George's head.

Then another shape filled the doorway.

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Lies/Dexter Goad/22.

Tom Joad walked into the living room, still chewing. Blood streaked from both corners of his mouth and was collecting on his tee shirt.

The hole between his eyes was gone.

Tom Joad swallowed nosily and grinned at Steve. Then he slammed the heavy wooden door shut and slide the bar lock closed with finality.

Steve was going to pull the trigger of his AutoMag, for what good it would do, when a razor sharp vise ripped into and pulled chunks out of his right shoulder. Steve screamed and fell to the side, looking back at what had attacked him.

Kerri was licking his blood off her lips. Then she opened her mouth in an impossibly toothy grin. Her jaw opened far wider than humanly possible, revealing even more teeth.

A shadow fell over Steve, causing him to look behind what his daughter had become. Bonzo was standing again, and his head was knitting back together before Steve's eyes. He pulled his teeth back to reveal his own set of surgical teeth.

"The truth is, I couldn't resist them, Steveo." Tom Joad said, standing over Steve now as well. "They were just too delicious to pass up." He cocked his head, looking down at Steve gravely. "I never bring my victims back anymore, but these two were such good sports. I'm sure I'll tire of them eventually and send them back."

Steve was gripping his mutilated shoulder and whimpering softly.

"Who knew her father would turn out to be a big shot government spook?"

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Lies/Dexter Goad/23.

Tom Joad asked, moving his right arm to make it obvious that he no longer had broken bones.

"What are you!?" Steve screamed.

"Speaking of you being a spook," Tom said impassively, ignoring the question. "I think I'll bring you back for a couple hundred years so I can enjoy punishing your sorry ass. Tell me, Steve, am I lying?" He laughed nastily, then gestured to the surrounding books and entertainment wall. "Even with all this stuff, Forever gets boring, you know. Forever gets REALLY boring. You'll liven things up nicely. For a long time."

Tom, who lived the daily lie that he was a human being, knelt beside a cowering Steve. Kerri and Bonzo followed suit. All of their jaws unlocked and every one of their teeth jutted expectantly from their lips.

"Eat him slow this first time," Tom whispered lovingly.

THE END