

Excerpted from

## HONEY, DO YOU WANT A GUN?

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— Honorable Mention: Book-Length Nonfiction —

There are six cops in my apartment. Four of them are crowded into my tiny living room with me. It's claustrophobic. I'm sitting on the red sofa my mom bought me at Levitz when I moved out. Their guns are at eye level as they move around fingerprinting, testing doors and windows, looking through my things.

I'm sticky, wet with orange juice and blood. It's mostly my own blood, probably some of the strangler's too. I got in some good punches.

The police took pictures of me earlier. I never look good in pictures, but I bet these are the worst. My knees and my back are burned from the rug. My knuckles are cut. My neck is bruised. They took shots of all of it. I want to take a shower, but I have to answer more stupid questions.

I watch the guys work and try not to think about what happened. I can't think about it; it's like a bad acid trip when your mind shows you horrible things and the scary hallucinations seem real.

Shultz pops his head around my divider and waves me into the bedroom. I've given the cops fake names to keep track of them. The boss is Jaws because he's big and his skin and hair and eyes and suit are all a sallow gray and he's trying to eat me alive with questions.

Jaws's partner, Shultz, is Shultz because he's a bumbling fool with a round face and a stupid mustache like the sergeant on *Hogan's Heroes*. Then there's Curly, Moe, Larry, and Joe, the stooges doing the dirty work.

I'm careful to step around the orange juice puddle in the doorway when I join Jaws and Shultz in my bedroom.

Jaws is looking at a large photo on my dresser. It's the photo John took of me and Ralph, the artistic one with me semi-nude. John blew it up to 8x10, framed it, and gave it to me for my sixteenth birthday: it's the only picture of me I like.

Jaws squints at me like he's trying to read me. "Who's the guy?"

"Ralph. Ex-boyfriend."

"The one you say was here earlier?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure it wasn't Ralph who attacked you? Did you have an argument that escalated?"

"You already asked that. No. We were fine. It was nice. We had dinner."

"He looks a lot older than you."

"He's twenty-nine."

"And you're seventeen?"

I nod, feeling his judgment. He raises his eyebrows, then stares at me, sure that he knows all about Ralph and me.

"So give me the attacker's description again."

"Tall, good looking with shoulder-length brown hair, wearing jeans, no shirt, and a hunting knife strapped on his leg. I told you, I

thought it was my brother at first.”

“You thought it was someone you knew?”

“Just for a second, then I knew it wasn’t.”

“Wasn’t someone you knew?”

“Wasn’t my fucking brother!”

“Hold off with the profanity, we’re trying to help here.”

“I know, but it just sounds like. . .”

“Like what?”

“Whatever.”

Jaws tries to stare me down. I stare back. He shoves the photo in my face. “Your description sure sounds like this guy.” He fans me with it, and each time I feel the whoosh of wind, I want to scream. I close my eyes and take a deep breath and begin to see myself suddenly knocking the photo from Jaws’s ugly grasp.

Shultz asks, “Are you on something?”

“No, I’m not on anything!”

Jaws joins in, “Were you taking drugs earlier?”

“I told you, no drugs, just a bottle of wine with dinner.”

Jaws stares at me again, eyebrows raised. I glare back, hating him for his injustice, hating him for his white-male power, hating him.

Shultz picks up my nightlight. The cord is cut.

“It’s the cord he used to strangle me,” I say.

“Yeah, we have the other piece. It was in your hand when we found you down the road. Looked like you’d had some strong drugs. You were convulsive.”

“I don’t know why I was convulsing. I just fought him, then chased him a block, and I was scared. I was pissed off. My body just did that. It’s not now. See.” I hold out my hands. Steady as a rock. I’m angry and it makes me steady.

Joe comes in, steps right in the puddle. He whispers loudly to Jaws. “Our little victim here has been a guest in Juvenile Hall on occasion.”

They all look at me.

“I’ll tell you what I think,” says Shultz. “I think you and your boyfriend did drugs, got in a fight, he hurt you, and now you’re trying to protect him.”

“Shultz,” is all I say.

“Who’s Shultz?” Jaws asks.

I laugh, then look into his gray eyes. “Can we just be done with this now? I don’t want your help anymore.”

“We’re here because calls came in from miles around about your scream! We’re investigating!”

“No, you’re not; you’re accusing.”

He glares at me for another long beat. He’s not studying me, he’s trying to break me. I’ve seen it before: in cops, teachers, parents. I speak up and fight back when someone’s an asshole, and it’s gotten me into situations where I’ve seen this crap before.

I wait it out, staring back, but I can’t stand him anymore. “Go fuck yourselves,” I mumble.

Jaws laughs. “Wait here,” he says. He takes my photo and splits. Joe and Shultz follow and they all step in the puddle.

I sniff the ends of my long, blonde, sticky hair. I'll never forget that orange juice on the floor, in my hair, on him.

I sit down on my bed to wait. I run my fingers over the flowers on my headboard to feel the raised bumps. It's my childhood bed, a single white headboard and footboard, with hand-painted pink flowers and tiny green leaves. I used to do this when I was little, pass my fingers over the raised bumps.

My mom let me take my old bed last month when I moved out. My queen-sized waterbed got a leak, so this was all there was to take. I'll get a big bed later when I save money.

Jaws and Shultz return. Jaws steps over the orange juice, Shultz steps in it. They don't have my picture with them.

"Are we going to find drugs in the house?" Jaws asks.

"No."

"My men are turning it upside-down for evidence. It's better to tell us now."

"No, no drugs," I say again, "Where's my picture?"

"We're using it," he answers.

"For what?"

"Just sit tight."

They stomp out with their big, dirty shoes, and I wait some more.

Finally, Larry lumbers in with my photo. Larry because he's bald on top, but has hair around the sides. He steps in the puddle and stops to look at it. He taps his shoe in it, looks at me, and then at the picture. He leers at me and then at the photo a couple of times, comparing, seeing me naked in his dirty, bald mind.

Jaws and Shultz return. Larry sets the photo upright on my dresser. It tips. He fixes it. It falls.

Stooge.

Jaws comments like I'm not in the room. "Where the hell were her parents when she was taking that picture? Just don't give a damn."

Larry dips a brush in black powder and spreads it over my photo and dresser, "Irresponsible, let their kids do what they want."

That doesn't describe my parents or I wouldn't be here. I watch the brush turn my things black. My dresser matches my bed, white with raised pink flowers.

Jaws starts his interrogation again. "So, you're saying another rapist got in after the Ralph guy left?"

"He didn't try to rape me. He just tried to kill me."

Moe and Joe squeeze in and we barely all fit. Joe whispers something to Jaws, but I can't hear it.

Jaws stands. "Come with us to the station."

"No way, I haven't done anything!"

"We're not arresting you. We want you to do a sketch with our artist and look at some photos."

Moe adds, "Your neighbors saw a man hanging around the last few days. He's been asking questions about you, when you get home, what days you work. That stuff. We showed them the photo. It's not Ralph."

I give Jaws an "I told you so" stare, but he walks away, Shultz trailing him. I follow them out and step right in the puddle. Moe, Joe, and Larry bring up the rear.

We go out the front door in the same order, Curly at the back. The night smells fresh and new. Curly turns off the lights. “Do you have your keys?” he asks before he shuts the door.

I don’t even have my purse. I pull out of line and Curly stands aside so I can go back in.

My apartment is dark. It seems big now that it’s empty but still filled with my fear. It’s a different kind of claustrophobic.

I look into the blackness. It reeks of terror. I hear my screams echoing still, maybe they always will.

I step over the threshold into darkness.



*Pudding Creek*  
James Maxwell  
Photograph