



CHAPTER 1

Skyys the Limit

“There’s no one there. There’s no one to see. There’s no one to judge, no one to spread rumors. Nobody will know. Yeah, that’s the place. Time to stop.” He talks aloud over the music blaring from the car’s slick speakers as he drives along a secondary back road through the autumn countryside of Northeastern Connecticut.

He pulls into the stone-gravel parking lot after a quick right-hand turn, thoughts racing through his head. Lucky for him, this extended branch of Route 44 is mostly traffic-free this time of day. Not much chance of being spotted. It was only 3:45, after all. Not quite quitting time for the real world. Yet he’d already been away from his job as a Catholic elementary school principal for fifteen minutes after leaving the office at 3:30.

After the sharp braking turn, luckily with no oncoming accident waiting to happen, his car slides to a stop right in front of the porch-like, welcoming open doors of the Whitehouse Package Store. The bright white building resembles a cottage in the woods, perhaps one of the more extravagant ones. The red rectangular sign with bold white letters proclaims the place’s name and announces that you’ve reached this alcoholic’s oasis between Providence and Hartford on Connecticut’s main connecting route between the cities.

He can hardly wait as he slams the door of his midnight blue Audi A5 sedan behind him and heads through the entrance. Immediately, he notices the smell change. From gravel-dusted air to that distinctive liquor store essence. Not exactly booze, but something like muted booze. It resembles the faint odor of vodka, which has a faint odor to begin with, mixed with the scent of cardboard boxes, probably from the cases the bottles lining the walls had arrived in.

“Mickey Rybak, you are home!” The words he mutters quietly to himself express the longing he has felt for the last two hours.

Yeah, he’ll have to drive away from this place when he’s ready to go. But not until after swallowing a few. Don’t want to drive impaired. Never mind that. “We’ve done this before,” he mutters to himself. Driving home won’t be a problem. The buzz won’t set in for at least ten minutes. His mind rages on.

Inside the store, as Mickey makes his way toward the register to his right, he spots what he’s looking for. There it is: the big white box filled with an assortment of nips. The display sign is positioned

FURTIVE ACTIVITY

to lure onlookers with the tempting “\$1.79 EACH” in black print on white, so everyone gets the message: “Get messed up for cheap!” He doesn’t need any such enticement. He has been rehearsing the six-versus-eight debate in his head for the last ten miles. He decides to split the difference. It will be seven.

As he thumbs through the pile of nip bottles, he searches out the navy-blue ones. A better brand of vodka, he has learned. Once Mickey has the gaggle of seven Skyy Vodka minis in his paws, he proceeds to the register and unloads them onto the counter. The rather nice-looking blonde clerk, with braided hair and dressed in a plaid flannel shirt and jean overalls, proceeds to place the mini bottles into a small paper bag while ringing up the total. Mickey can’t help himself.

“They’re for the guys at the VA,” he proclaims, lying in the blink of an eye. As if it were necessary.

“Oh. How thoughtful,” she responds.

“Not exactly regulation and all. But the boys need a break from the monotony of that place,” Mickey explains.

“I think it’s sweet. Need anything for yourself?”

“No, I’m all set. Driving and all,” Mickey lies.

She hands him the bag full of Skyys. He smiles at her and turns to walk out.

It is the start of another drinking day for Mickey. Just like the last how-many days. Not worth counting. Too many anyway. Same time, every day. He has identified at least five liquor stores along his route home so he can mix it up. Nobody will suspect him of anything since he only shows up once a week at each store.

After getting back inside his car, Mickey reaches into the bag on the passenger seat and grabs one of the Skyys. Twisting off the cap, he grips the bottle in his fist and pours it down his throat. He drops the empty bottle back into the bag and reaches into his coat pockets for the gum and his keys. While turning the ignition, he slips a piece of gum into his mouth, stashes the pack away, and puts the car in reverse.

The next thing he realizes is that he is twenty miles down the road, heading west toward his home in Bolton. After an abrupt dip in the road and a sharp incline upward, he recognizes he is on Route 44 at Mansfield Depot. The green town border sign he passes a few seconds later confirms it.

How did he get here?

Still driving, he reaches into the bag on the passenger seat and realizes there are several empties. A quick count, fumbling his fingers over the bottles, reveals five empty plastic nips and two full ones. That means he has already drunk five, and he is only halfway home. For the life of him, he cannot recall how he got to where he is now or how the bottles had been emptied. Must have blacked out.

Better stop! his brain warns him. Open the window! another cerebral command follows. He complies.

After pulling into the first nearby parking lot, a Dollar General, he stops the car, puts it in park, and kills the engine. Turning the key back to activate the electrical system, he presses the armrest console button with his left finger to lower the passenger-side window. Immediately, he feels the cool breeze flow through the car. But the music is still blaring, and he suddenly realizes everyone outside can hear the racket.

FURTIVE ACTIVITY

He quickly presses the power button on the sound system. Silence. For a moment.

He glances in the rearview mirror and sees a pair of bright lights approaching from the entrance to the lot. High beams. Heading right for him, looming larger and larger. That's when it happens.

Suddenly, a blaring flash of red followed by blue and white. Repeating and blindingly bright against the dusky sky, flickering off every surface. Then the sound. Like an extended electronic burp.

In that instant, he knows he is screwed.