

Excerpt from -

**Cheeseland: A Novel
by Randy Richardson**

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Chapter I

December 28, 1979

Naked. That's how Marty's mother found him.
Hanging from a rope in his bedroom.
Feet dangling like fish on a line.

The thought of it turns my stomach, and I rush to the toilet and try to retch out the pain, the anguish, and the guilt, but all that I see in the water are chunks of last night's nachos.

I catch my reflection in the mirror as I lift myself back to my feet. My eyes are puffy and red, the manifestation of crying all night long, so I splash cold water on my face. After drying off with a hand towel, I look again, shake my head, and hand-comb my hair before making my way to the closet, where I grab off a hanger the only suit coat I own. It is tattered and at least a size too small for me. My mom had given me money to get a new suit, but I pocketed it instead, thinking that it could be better spent and knI make my way outside into the crisp winter air that's about as clear as it ever gets here in Dolton, a blue-collar town sandwiched between factories to the north in Chicago and to the east in Indiana. *Dolts*. That's the obvious and unflattering nickname given to residents here. You can see why I have a poor self-image. Look at me, I'm a Dolt. I sure felt like one when I got held back a year in the fourth grade because I wasn't, in the elementary school's view, *progressing*. The teachers, administrators, and counselors diagnosed me dyslexic, which probably isn't what you think. I don't read or write words backward; I'm just unusually slow and make mistakes because I can't see the words the same way others my age see them. I'm not cured, never will be, but I've learned how to live with it and correct for it.

Being left behind a year, being separated from the friends I'd had for four years or longer, didn't help my self-esteem. I became withdrawn and socially isolated from other kids, who saw me as this extraordinarily shy kid with long bangs. The crueler ones called me *mute*. I didn't start to come out of the shell I'd built for myself until freshman year, when I first met Lance.

The ground, the bushes, and the trees are freshly coated with a light dusting of snow that fell overnight, but the pavement is dry except for a few patches of ice. There in the driveway sits my pride and joy, a 1973 red Charger SE with white pinstripes. The Cherry Bomb stands out against the suburban landscape like a sore thumb. That's one of the reasons all the neighbors despise it, and why I like it so much.

I plop into the driver's seat, take a deep breath, and scan the eight-tracks before settling on *Led Zeppelin IV*. Skipping past the first three songs, I stop at track four, "Stairway to Heaven." The ache in Robert Plant's crackly voice soothes me and I turn the ignition. owing that Marty couldn't care less what I wore to his funeral.

A few blocks away, I stop at Lance's house. Lance is my best friend—my only friend now that Marty's gone. He's standing outside wearing an unzipped navy blue parka over his busboy uniform—white dress shirt and black cords. The best outfit he owns.

Lance hops in the passenger seat and grabs the eight-track case. After a quick scan, he pushes the eject button on *Led Zeppelin IV* and replaces it with *Rush 2112*. Lance never accepts my choice of music, which I not only understand but appreciate. He knows music—feels music—like no one else I know. Before I met Lance, music played only in the background. He made it run through my veins.

After he cranks the volume an extra couple of notches, Lance lights up a joint and takes an extended hit before passing it to me. In addition to being my rock 'n' roll mentor, Lance is my unlicensed doctor. Unlike any other of the physicians and mental health professionals who have treated me in the past, Lance has an uncanny ability to know what's ailing me and how to cure it. And at that very moment, as I drive past the street where Marty lived and died, that joint is the best possible medicine.

As a tribute to Marty, we make a detour to Curley's, a hot dog stand on 142nd Street next to a private lake where the three of us spent many a night partying. After I order two dogs (Chicago style, as always) Lance pulls out of his coat pockets two icy cold cans of Old Style. Leaning against the car and looking out over the frozen lake and barren trees, I say, "I feel guilty."

"Don't," Lance shoots back.

"But we—I—could have done something."

"It's not your fault, man. Marty did this, not you."

"I really hate him."

Lance looks at me. "Marty?"

"No." I chug the beer and belch. "His father."

Lance nods. "Me too."

"What do we do about it?"

"I don't know."

We arrive, stoned, at the funeral and take seats in the back pews of the cavernous Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Church. The church has a peculiar musty odor to it, like an old wet shoe. This is the first time I have ever set foot in a Catholic church, and I feel awkward, uncomfortable, out of place. It strikes me that Marty would have hated his own funeral. It's exactly the kind of thing that he always shunned because he couldn't tolerate hypocrisy. All these people who stayed at least an arm's distance away when he was alive coming out to see him when he's dead. I imagine him sitting next to me, shaking his head in disgust while begging for the pipe-organ music to end.

I see things that I don't think others see. Like the crack in the stained-glass window. There's a statue of Jesus and I swear it's staring at me. Did its lips just move?

I feel like I don't belong here. I don't know when to stand, or sit, or kneel. I don't know what to say. I can't even understand half of what's being said.

Lance gives up. Five minutes into the funeral, he's looking at his watch. After fifteen minutes, his head is bobbing. Twenty-five minutes in and his head is down for the count. An elderly man wearing a toupee turns around and glares because Lance is snoring. I act like I don't notice.

Forty-five minutes into the funeral, Marty's father stands from the first row. I nudge Lance from his slumber. He looks at me with an annoyed glare. I sense he doesn't know where he is, and I motion toward the lectern.

At a muscular six-foot-three and close to two hundred forty pounds, Marty's father commands attention. Just about everyone in town knows Don Torlikson. He's led the boys' high school basketball team downstate three times and brought home the crown once, in 1970. For that, the town worships him. The room falls silent as he clears his throat. After he appears to choke back tears, he begins his eulogy for his only son.

"Most of you know me only as *Coach*. I wish that there were more here who knew me for being a father. Yes, I take pride in my basketball teams. But I loved my son. He always came first. He always—"

After Lance glances my way and gives the signal nod, the two of us rise from our seats. Marty's father doesn't trip on his words or halt them. But as we walk out of the church, I feel his gaze burning on my back.

At that same moment, I see an image of Marty, standing on the steps outside the church, a Sox cap over his curly hair, smiling, braces gleaming in the sunlight. I pause and stare.

Lance brushes by me. "Come on," he says, "I'm thirsty."

I smile back and then jog to catch up with Lance.

Chapter 2

Graduation Day, 1980

I've got a plastic cup of keg beer in one hand and my dick in the other, looking at my face in the mirror through foggy eyes as the clear piss splashes in the toilet.

"Kiss Casimir Pulaski High good-bye." A crooked smile in the mirror. I raise my cup and take a swig, a toast to my release after four years in prison. The cold burn feels good down my throat.

There's a knock on the door, followed by a jiggle of the handle. "Occupado," I say, as the last few drops trickle into the water.

After a quick comb of my hair, I open the door. Lance is there wearing a shit-eating grin and a black Cheap Trick *Live at Budokan* T-shirt tucked into snug blue jeans with holes in the knees. A brass belt buckle engraved with a marijuana leaf stands out from his rail-thin waist.

Somehow, I've managed to avoid him all night. Until now.

"Too long." In fact, we'd done little but exchange hallway pleasantries since the funeral. I feel uncomfortable around Lance now. Lance and Marty and I were a threesome. Without Marty, it doesn't feel right. It's like The Who after Keith Moon died. The band isn't the same. The drummer dies and the whole band dies with him.

"Exactly." Lance nods in recognition. "Hey, after I take care of business here, let's down a couple cold ones together. You know, like old times."

I paint on a smile. "Yeah, like old times. That'd be good."

I'm at Heather Morrison's house. It's her party, but I don't know her. I'm one of probably two hundred, a quarter of my high school class, crammed into her graduation party. When I say I don't know her, I mean that I've never spoken with her. I've drooled over her while watching her cheer from the sidelines in that purple and yellow skirt. She probably doesn't even know my name, and yet here I am in her house, as drunk as I've ever been. It's hard to believe that I've spent eight hours a day, five days a week, of the last four years with these people. Hardly any of them know me, and I feel like I'm invisible as I stumble and bump into them in search of Lance.

Where the hell *is* Lance? I bump into Rob Bannerman, the varsity quarterback, spilling half my beer on his white leather Adidas sneakers. Rob casually retaliates with a strong elbow to my left side. I look up and then drop my head and move along, knowing that he'll kick my ass if I give him the opportunity.

I'm starting to feel a little light-headed as I make my way through the crowd. I should just go home. I'm not ready to deal with Lance. Not now, maybe never.

As I poke my head into the kitchen, I see him. No. It can't be. Please tell me I'm not seeing what I'm seeing. How could he do this to me?

I wish my eyes were playing tricks on me, that it was just an alcohol-induced hallucination. But I know that's not the case. It's Lance, all right, with his hands all over Carla DiLeonardo. And she's not pushing him away.

The rapping on my bedroom window starts the next morning just after seven. Bleary-eyed, I pull the curtain open to see Lance's stringy blond hair and mischievous grin. He sports the same outfit he was wearing last night.

Lance motions with his thumb for me to lift my bedroom window. Don't do it, I tell myself. Just close the curtain and go back to hiding underneath the covers.

Five minutes later, I'm standing in my backyard amid the rusted swing set and empty birdbath, a patch of pillow-styled hair protruding from the left side of my cranium.

"I like the union suit, man," Lance smirks.

I peer down only to confirm that I am indeed wearing a one-piece undergarment that makes me look like a poor-man's superhero. My face flushes to a reddish hue that matches the color of my long johns. "What are you doing here?" I ask in a feeble attempt to cloak my shame.

Lance's droopy eyes return to their proper place, away from my crotch. "What happened to you last night?"

The thought of my fist crushing into his jaw gives me a fleeting sense of pleasure. Why can't I confront him?

"Sorry, I got tired and left."

"Lame."

I nod.

"Well, you're getting a second chance," Lance says with a mischievous grin. "Get some clothes on, man. We're goin' on a road trip."

"Road trip? It's graduation day."

"Fuck graduation day."

"You can't be serious. You can't *not* go to graduation."

"I'm totally serious. Come on. You need to get out of this place. I need to get out of this place. We can make this a day we'll never forget. You can't blow that off for a bullshit ceremony."

"I can't, Lance. My family—they've got this, they've got a party planned for me." As I say this, I realize that I didn't invite Lance.

"Forget it . . . I shouldn't have asked." Lance turns and starts to walk away but then halts his steps and spins around. "No, wait. I'm sorry. This is our day, man. It's not your dad's day. It's not your mom's day. This is what we worked—suffered for—for four long years. We shouldn't have to go to some bogus ceremony just because that's what's expected of us. We should do what *we* want to do."

I shoot Lance a dubious glance.

"Besides, you can't wipe away four years of bullshit with the toss of a cap."

Lance has a point there. My better instincts tell me that this might just be the biggest mistake of my life. But my better instincts are not all that good, and Lance has a knack for killing them, sometimes without my realizing it.

There are many things that I should say, should ask, but instead I stand there, mouth agape and look on, like a witness to a tragic car crash.

As Lance backs away, knowing that he's got me reeled in, I call out, "Wait—"

Lance turns and shouts, "Make sure the Bomb has a full tank."

I pull into Lance's driveway a little before nine a.m. and honk the horn. His crotchety neighbor, Mr. Crandall—*The Crank*, as Lance calls him—glares. The Crank is outside in his robe and slippers, showing off his silvery, hairless bare legs. In acknowledgment, I yawn and stretch out my arms. Then I slowly turn my balled right fist upward and raise my middle digit.

Lance is a nicknamer. He nicknamed me *The Danimal*. Not just *Danimal*. It's always *The Danimal*. If someone makes the mistake of calling me *Danimal*, Lance corrects them. "*The Danimal*," he says.

Most knew Marty as *Toe-Licker*, an unfortunate nickname he got from a grade-school bully. *Toe-Licker Torlikson*, they used to call him. You could see how Marty would have had problems growing up with a nickname like that. But then Lance came along and dubbed him *Mad Dog*.

Marty's nickname didn't fit him any more than mine fits me. But to Lance they represent what he saw in Marty and what he sees in me. Something that no one else saw in Marty or sees in me. Not even Marty saw it, and I don't see it but find pleasure in the thought that Lance sees me this way and saw Marty that way.

Into the trunk, Lance tosses a tent, a large cooler, and a duffel bag. When he opens the passenger side door, he eyes me with raised brows. "Thanks for the help, man." On the floor of the car, next to the eight-track case, he sets down a small cooler.

"No prob," I say, smiling. As Lance settles in the seat and reaches down for the eight-track case, I ask, "What did you tell your mom?"

"I didn't."

"Didn't what—tell her?" I'm surprised because Lance has an unusual relationship with his mom, in that he actually communicates with her. It's something that I've always envied about him. As much as I've tried, I just can't talk to my parents. Neither of them could accept my learning disability. They fought a lot, and though they tried to hide it, I know they were fighting about what to do about me. Now my dad is barely around at all. He's always on the road, but even when he's home, it's like he's not there at all. On the rare occasion when we all are at the dinner table together, no one says anything other than "Pass the peas" or "Pass the potatoes."

"No. She's still sleeping. She was out later than I was."

"Really?"

Lance nods. "It's messed up. I know."

"Don't you think she's going to wonder where you are? I mean, graduation is in just a few hours. Isn't she planning to go?"

"Don't know, man. Don't care. Like I said, this is *our* day."

Lance pulls out Thin Lizzy's *Jailbreak* and sticks it in the eight-track player. As the title track's sirens blare, he asks, "What did you tell your folks?"

"I didn't."

Lance shoots a disbelieving eye. "Bullshit."

"No. Really. I didn't tell them. If I'd asked, they would have just said no. So what's the point?"

"Aren't you going to be screwed when you get back home?"

I nod. My parents have planned a graduation party for me without once asking me what I want. I hated high school, everything about it, just about everybody in it, but do my parents know that? Nope. Don't have a clue. All they see and care about are those grades on that damned bullshit piece of paper that arrives in the mail once a semester. Hell, if I got straight A's, I think they'd go and buy me my next supply of pot. The only one who understands all of this is Lance.

"Wow, man, and I thought my life was messed up. You're screwed. Royally." Reaching down between his legs, Lance pulls two cans of Old Style out of the cooler.

As I turn the ignition, he pulls the top on the first can and then reaches over. "Take this. You're going to need it."