

INSTINCTS

Chapter One

"Instincts"



Hheavy breaths. *Agh-huh Agh-huh* Billy trudges up gravel, bicycle at his side. He scales to the top, the starting line, of Roller's Hill. It is the hottest day in recent memory. People go to the pool or the beach on a day like this. Hill surmounted, Billy sets his bike against a fence. He hops it and charges into thick brush. He trots, kicking up decaying matter in the wood, sliding atop the smooth rocks, swinging around the trees, ducking and jumping. He snakes through brambles and emerges once more into the sun.

He stands on the crest of a beautiful pasture, surrounded on all sides by a natural foliage barrier. It is verdant; the grass is short, soft and cool. The hill rolls in this meadow and gives the eyes of the lucky soul a view of the land, the town of Haven Harbor, below: a small river running toward the endless ocean, a forest pockmarked with house-tips merges with the town trickling along the edges of waters. Church steeples stand on

BILLY'S ADVENTURES

high. The downtown and oceanfront buildings are big and blocky; they squish together, supporting each other. The town hardly makes a noise, just the occasional *beep* of a car, or *honk* of a barge. It is serene and comforting.

Keeeirt! Billy awakes to the scream of a hawk. Sweat covers him; clothes mat to his skin. His stomach rumbles. He checks his watch. *Lunchtime*. He stands, covered in grass, brushes himself off, and heads back through the wood. His progress is without the deftness of before. His sleepy head does not notice an exposed root upon his exit, and he falls flat on his face.

“Oiya,” he says, into the ground. He lifts his head and jerks it in surprise of an object not two inches from his nose. “Hello, what’s this?” An object of stone nestles amongst the leaves of grass alongside cans of Bud Light and discarded cigarette packs. The rock is almost oval, scoop-sharpened along edges, bright brown, and semi-transparent. “A genu-wine Indian arrowhead!” He pockets the treasure and scales the fence, onto his bike in one swift motion.

Whoosh Billy rockets at incredible speed. Nothing short of a concrete wall can stop him. He crouches closer to the handlebars, lowering his center of gravity. Eyes squint. Hair blows with the wind. Vision blurs. The bike rattles, and the back wheel bounces up, threatening to send him out of control. He twists the front tire and straightens out, immaculately controlled. The road levels off. He loses speed. His adrenaline lowers, and he coasts to a smooth stop. He looks at the hill, rising into the sky. “That’ll never get old.”

He pedals into town. The gravel turns to blacktop, and there are soon more people than cattle. He rides past *Ken’s Auto and Boato*, waving to the man.

“Hey, Billy,” he says.

“Hey, Mr. Pots.”

He cruises through a residential “S”, waving and exchanging pleasantries with the neighbors, like Grandma

INSTINCTS

Malone, Little Felicity, and Desperate Dean. Children play in sprinklers, grown men watch television outside, and literary ladies read in the shade of trees. Few cars drive the roads but kids ride their mini-motorbikes like little demons.

He rides past the city school, where he is to live from five to eighteen. It stands vacant and silent, given life only by a single groundskeeper on a mower. He rides past the public pool, jam-packed with kids screaming and throwing fits to make their time count. Splashing, laughing, cool water flowing and soothing their skin burned hot: the perfect retreat from a hot August day. Billy stops. *A pool full of crazy kids on a hot day, restrained by inadequate lifeguards, and the water, oh the water! Oh the frenzy!*

He puts the screws to his bike, lifts the front and spits sand from the back. He curves a path toward the frantic flailing of arms and inflatables. He sets his bike against a fence and strolls into the innocuous white square building.

“Hey Billy, come for a swim?” asks Jessica, the pretty teenaged lifeguard servicing the paper-work. She is in her swimsuit, dripping water from short brown hair.

“Hey, er, yeah,” he says, signing his name on the membership list.

Jessica looks left and right, leans forward and whispers, “You know you’re still technically kicked-out until tomorrow and if Chester sees you, you’ll be out for the the summer.”

“Good, that’s how I like it,” he says, “living on the edge and all.” He flashes a smile from ear to ear. “Summer’s about over anyway.”

“Suit yourself,” she says. “But you know Chester’s a good guy. You just kind of... wear on him.”

“Same as he’s wearin’ me,” Billy says. He turns to head to the locker room, but stops. “Umm, can I have a towel?”

Billy stands in front of the mirror. He wears the body of a twelve year-old kid well. He’s a solid five-foot tall with a

BILLY'S ADVENTURES

good frame, athletic but does not call attention to the fact. *My mom says I'm good-looking, too.* Plaid gym shorts cover his midsection, and his blue t-shirt reads "Smooth Jimmy's" in a funky font. He throws his excess wearables under a bench and exits. "Ha," he chuckles, noticing the sign: *All those using the pool must shower before and after entering.*

He silently creeps to the shallow end of the pool and slirks in, feeling the cool water wash over him. He keeps an eye out for Chester and mingles with endless screaming bodies. Even with four lifeguards, most of the kids stay in the shallow end, opting to follow their parents' orders. This broad social more makes for way too many kids crammed into the same small area. Still, the water feels good.

"Hey Billy," says a voice from the mass.

"Who is it?" he asks, searching all directions for the source.

"It's Matt!"

"Matt where are..." Billy says. He spins and sees a freckled face encroached on his personal space. "Ahh!"

"You wanna throw the ball around?" he says, brandishing a mini-football.

"Yeah," Billy says, backing away slightly from his over-enthusiastic friend. They play catch. Matt spring-boards off random shoulders, and Billy semi-purposefully plunks a few disinterested heads.

The mood is raucous when Chester emerges from the locker room. Squeals of glee drop to mutterings, smiles turn to forced expressions of contentment, and flailing arms become reserved appendages. Billy follows suit.

"That's what I like to see," says Chester, walking to his high-chair. Billy studies the man: late teens, short red shorts, bleached blonde stock-broker hair, sunglasses too big for his face, a righteous sneer, and a gait that makes a giraffe look graceful.

Matt slogs over to Billy. They watch Chester on his

INSTINCTS

high-horse. Matt says, "That guy is scary man, like, I heard he kicked a kid out for lookin' at him cuz he was pissed cuz he ate a bad corndog and had the runs." He points to his butt. "Did you know his dad's a cop?"

"Yeah, I heard that," Billy says, "makes sense. You know, he could only be more of a tool if he had a big glob of sunscreen on his nose." Billy and Matt look up and watch. Chester snuffles and reaches into a small box. He produces a tube of sunscreen, squirts a glob on his finger and, sure enough, deposits it smack on his nose. "You gotta be shittin' me," Billy says.

"Hey, no splashing!" Chester yells. He glares at another kid, pointing. "Drop the candy, punk! You want me to come down there?" The kid, no more than five, slowly shakes his gaping mouth, dropping a Laffy Taffy into the deep end of the pool. "Look what you did, you ingrate! Now go get it!" he says. The boy's eyes well up, and he bursts into a crying fit. "You little... I'm comin' down there!"

Chester climbs down his mini-ladder and whips off his glasses. "Little bastard, you're gonna get-" he stops, spying a new offender. "Hey, what do you think you're doin'?" he says to a little girl.

She looks up at him with terrified eyes. "I just wanna swim?" she says.

Chester's eyes bulge, and he says, "Swim? You think you get to swim? You didn't take a shower!" The girl is stunned to silence. "Jessica! Throw this pig-tailed perp in the showers!"

He puts his hands on his hips, and feels the eyes of all upon him. He abouts to face the crowd. He blinks hard, and his face twitches. "Anyone," he says, addressing the crowd, "that doesn't shower... is... is..." He bends forward, grabs his stomach, and lurches into the locker room.

The kids look at each other, shrug and mutter. Someone says, "Must've been a bad corndog." The pool erupts into laughter and raucousness once again. Billy and Matt throw the

BILLY'S ADVENTURES

football a bit more, and everyone enjoys.

Soon enough, Chester exits the locker room and the pool quiets so much that the *flush* is distinctly heard. Chester nervously grins, looking more pitiful than angry. He calmly walks to his chair and sits down in relief. He still points and gives mean stares, but the fury has waned.

Billy gives a confirming nod to himself. "Hey Matt," he says, "I gotta go." He hops out of the pool.

Matt swims up and asks, "Are you gonna do something like last week when you clothes-pinned his shorts to the seat and when he stood up he was naked?" The prospect of another Chester humiliation excites the boy thoroughly, perhaps a bit too thoroughly.

"Not this time," says Billy, "certainly not on an empty stomach."

Billy strolls out the pool building and mounts his bike. He stops to think, plod out a course for the rest of the day. He checks his watch: 1:30 in the afternoon. No responsibilities or obligations shackle him; his only limitation is a timely arrival for supper in the evening. "Growl," says his stomach. *Damn, that's right, I need food.*

Billy pats his belly. "Don't worry boy, I'm on it."

He peels a rooster tail out of the parking lot and points himself downtown. He rolls onto Oceanfront Strip, the boulevard with the unique businesses. Shoppers line the streets, walking, strolling, strutting. Billy meets eyes, but recognizes few. He rides past the bowling alley, the liquor store, the fish market, and multitudes of sundries shops carrying names like *Frederick's Flea*, *The Asian Import Importium*, and *The People's Gifts*.

The restaurants catch his eye, eateries of great variety: West-Mex, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, American seafood, Indian seafood, Mediterranean seafood, English fish and chips, and hot wings. The Haven Harbor kids' local favorite is a pizzeria called

INSTINCTS

Papa Papa's Pizza Parlor and Paninoteca – Plus Arcade. It serves up pizza by the pie or slice, Italian sandwiches, a full-featured arcade, and plenty of root beer on tap to keep the small people's juices flowing.

Billy parks his bike and strolls into the parlor with a grin on his face. Few folks eat, only a couple pairs in out-of-the-way booths.

“Buongiorno Billy! To what do I owe this pleasure?” Papa speaks with a thick Italian accent, even though he's lived in the States for thirty years. He is rotund in a white chef's outfit; greasy, black hair covers his body, and a wide mustache sits beneath his round nose. Papa knows him by name ever since Billy managed to boot some rats from his kitchen. He has yet to relinquish his secret to rat expulsion.

Billy slides up to the bar. “Well Papa, I was just down by the pool and I got this weird feeling.”

“Oh no, what could be the problem?” Papa says.

“I think it's from my stomach...” Billy continues, “It doesn't *hurt*, exactly, but I'm scared and I don't know what to do!”

“Hai fame! A terrible affliction, but I have just the remedy,” Papa says. “Two big slices of my best mushroom pizza, straight out of the oven, and,” he says, leaning toward him, “with extra cheese.” Papa slaps the table and chuckles to himself. “Not just for anybody, you know.”

“You're definitely the best pizza man in town,” Billy says. Papa drops a plate with the pie in front of him, steaming hot. The cheese melts over the mushrooms, and the topping fills straight to the crust. It is thin and piled high with the tastiest goodness anyone can imagine. “Papa, make that the world.” Billy takes to his meal, and the only word to describe his consumption is *gnarf*. He finishes the first slice in little to no time.

A man storms out of an office in the back of the restaurant. He huffs and puffs to move his weight around, wears suspenders, perpetually sweats, and desperately clings to the last of

BILLY'S ADVENTURES

his hair with the thinnest comb-over that can legally be called such. He stomps his way to Papa and gets right in his face.

“Look here *Papa*,” he says, ripping the pizza out of Billy’s mouth, “this is my establishment now, and when I say two ounces of cheese go on each pizza, I *mean* two ounces of cheese go on each pizza!” He glares, holding the half-eaten slice, as Papa formulates a response.

“Signore Brady! I... I do not know what, ahh...” Papa attempts to compose himself, difficult when confronted with a pudgy, red-nosed face two inches from his own. “Sometimes pizza needs more cheese-”

“It does not!” he screams. He flails the slice in the air, flinging sauce and cheese like little missiles. A mushroom smacks Billy in the forehead. Mr. Brady closes his eyes intently. “The recipe for a profitable restaurant begins with the establishment of a standard usage of minimum ingredients, along with proper accounting of the amount of said ingredients and final product.” He re-opens his eyes, and scowls once again. “What don’t you understand?”

“Nothing,” says Papa, dejected. “Scuza me, Signore Brady.” He turns away and begins wiping the bar with a rag.

Mr. Brady lets out a harrumph, plops the mangled slice on the plate, shoots Billy a glare that nearly knocks him off his stool, and stomps back to his office.

Billy wipes away the errant mushroom. “Papa, what’s going on?”

Papa turns around and leans close to Billy, his jovial spirit thoroughly crushed. “He is the new owner, installed by the bank.”

“He’s a real jerk,” says Billy.

“Haha,” Papa laughs, “that is a good way to say it.”

Billy looks at the rest of his pizza with disgust and pushes away the plate. “I’m finished,” Billy says. “It’s real good, but I don’t think I can stomach the rest of it, you know. I think I’ll just go down to the arcade.”

INSTINCTS

“Okay, ciao Billy,” Papa says. “Come back soon.”

Billy descends the steps. “I got tokens, I got tokens here!” a kid yells, from a mid-stairway landing. He has blonde hair, a fake nose-ring, and jeans made to fit around the trunks of Redwood trees.

“Hey, what do ya got?” Billy asks.

“I got tokens, what do ya think?” he says, with a flip of his long, bowl-cut hair. “I even got special ones for the bar across the street. Make all your dreams come true.”

“What do you mean special ones? For what?”

“Just trust me,” he says. “Each special token is worth five regular, but believe me, it’s worth it.” He stares. “Believe me.”

“Well, here, I got this,” Billy says, removing the arrowhead from his pocket. “I’ll give it to ya for twenty regular and two special.”

“What the hell is that?” he says. “What am I supposed to do with a rock?”

“A rock? Pssh,” Billy says. “This is a genuine Indian arrowhead, and worth a shit-ton of money. I’m givin’ you a deal, bro.”

“Arrowhead? I don’t think so,” says the kid.

“Bullshit! Look at how it’s shaped, it’s not natural, like, erosion doesn’t do that shit,” Billy says. “You can sell it to a museum or a collector for a bunch more than some tokens.”

“Real slick...” the kid says. “I’ll give you ten regular and one special.”

“Make it fifteen and one and you got a deal.”

He looks at Billy, the arrowhead, and back at him. “Deal,” he says. He reaches into his enormous pants and pulls out a stack of gold tokens and one silver.

Not bad for half a day’s work. He descends to the ground floor. Multicolored lights get brighter; synthesized noise gets

BILLY'S ADVENTURES

louder. The room opens to him; kids rush from red light to blue light to green, smashing buttons and twisting joysticks. An odd scream mixes with the beeping, buzzing, and gunshots. Speeding cars, pirates, ninjas, superheroes, kung fu fighters, and renegade cops compete for attention.

Two argue in front of *Haiku: The Fighting Poet*. “No way man! I would’a beat him if the joystick wasn’t all jacked up! I couldn’t move to the left!” one boy says. “Give me another token and I’ll use the second player. Quick!”

In front of a racing game called *Blistering*, “Dude you just wrecked on the last lap! I’m takin’ over this time. Show you how it’s done bitch.” He flips up a cover and pushes a button: a hover-car bursts onto screen, flying over a roller coaster road.

“Dammit!” A kid exclaims in front of a shooting game, *Chet Razor: Mercenary*. He drops another token, picks up a big blue gun chained to the console and pushes a pulsing button. “Alright you dirty, pinko, commie, cock-faced bastards...”

Billy perks up at the lewd language; he never knew the kids could cuss with the best of them: freedom of speech plus imagination. He makes his way past the racing games, the shoot-em-ups, and the fighters, to a pinball machine, *Blastimator 3*. Fifteen tokens and a good pinball game is a combination that is hard to beat.

The atmosphere stays raucous. The kids scream, they swear, and they have a hell of a lot of virtual fun. Before Billy’s third game, something breaks the atmosphere. It is the voice of a woman, not a girl, but a woman. Everyone quiets and searches for the source.

“George! Georgie!” the woman says. “Come here right this minute Georgie!” The kid from the flying-car game sees his mother near the steps. He takes the dead man’s walk; head hung low. The whole of the arcade watches the procession in silence. “Georgie, where have you been? You were supposed to be home two hours ago! A darn good thing your sister knew where you’d be! You had us worried sick!” She grabs his arm. “We’re going

INSTINCTS

home, right now.”

Georgie pulls away. “I still have four tokens left! And don't call me that!”

She eyes Georgie so angrily, and with so much authority, that his legs buckle, and he collapses like a house of cards. Georgie's mother towers over him and speaks quickly, “You know we were going to your grandmother's today. You *know* we were going for lunch. The whole family has been waiting on *you*, for two hours!” She lifts the shaking child to his feet and stares him down, unblinking. “Give me those coins.” He promptly hands over the tokens, and they start up the steps. They stop at the landing, next to the blonde kid. She rolls them around in her hand and, with a quick motion, flings them out over the arcade floor.

Billy giggles from a vantage point atop the pinball machine. Kids, from all sections of the arcade, immediately dive, risking life and limb, for the fumbled coins. Bodies shuffle and bounce, fists rip hair, elbows catch eye sockets. Every couple seconds a kid stands up, presents a singular coin triumphantly, and is thunderously tackled; the tussle begins anew. The spectacle rages until the oldest, biggest kid in the arcade gets tired of the commotion interrupting his game. He strides to the pile and, like an ogre, languorously grabs kids, one per hand, tossing them in all directions. The floor clear, he picks up an even greater number of coins, neatly stacked.

An hour later, Billy nears the end of his stint. He had spent fourteen coins on this single pinball game. He approaches the highest score in the history of the machine, and by this point, he and it had become one in the same. His thoughts wrap around the bouncing jungle, the buttons, and the scoreboard. He sees with strobes of light, thinks with the sound of bells and ding of synthesizers. He feels with the flippers, altering his world by batting the orb. The noise of the rest of the arcade is a buzzing baseline in his consciousness, a meditative cacophony.

BILLY'S ADVENTURES

Ping, Ping, Ping *High score!* He disconnects from the machine and is glad to be in the real world again.

“High score baby!” he says, throwing up his fists. He hears mumbled responses of “congrats” and “way to be”. He wanders through the games, pausing to watch anything particularly interesting. A kid plays a few levels on *Splash TV*, but the voice of a man rises out above the crowd.

“I mean, what the *hell* are you doing here?” he says to the blonde kid at the entrance landing. It is Mr. Brady. “I thought I told you to get lost. I don’t know what you’re hustling this time, but I don’t want it in my establishment.”

The kid pushes his hands in his pockets, looks toward the ground, and spins a shoe-tip. “Well I ain’t really doin’ nothin’...”

Another kid runs up to him. “Hey, I need some tokens real bad man, I’ll get you the money later-”

Mr. Brady perks up. “What kind of operation is this?” he says. “Let’s see your tokens.”

“I ain’t got any, sir,” says the blonde kid.

Mr. Brady waves his arm and grips a different kid by the collar. “Hey, I own this place. Show me your tokens.”

“Well all I got is two,” the kid says. He pulls out two coins and shows them to the man in the palm of his hand.

“Well I’ll be... you little punk!” Brady yells. The blonde kid sprints as fast as he can, up the stairs in his monstrous pants. Mr. Brady raises his fists in anger, pumping them in the air. “These are fake! You little shit!”

The crowd waits in anticipation of the owner’s next move. Mr. Brady just sort of looks around a bit, puts his hand to his chin, and ponders the best course of action for the moment. He nods.

“Okay,” he says, addressing them all, “None of you are in trouble, but you’re gonna have to give me your tokens.” Kids look from one to the other, checking each others’ non-verbal cues. One kid bolts and triggers a chain reaction. Everyone

INSTINCTS

bum-rushes the exits, scrambling in all directions at once.

The owner tries to grab as many as he can. "Hey you! Hey, kid, where are you going! Hey come back you little..." Small bodies swarm around him, thick but too quick to catch. Kids swarm the stairs and crash through the restaurant. More kids bust through the basement emergency exit, sounding the alarm. Kids, customers, and employees all flee in terror. And in a moment, the owner stands in an empty arcade, in an empty building.

He wipes his brow with a handkerchief. "Lousy kids."

Billy bursts into the alley behind the restaurant. Kids run in scattered directions; they tear into the streets, down the alleys, through the bushes, and into the used car dealership. Billy follows two boys his own age down a back alleyway. A few minutes of running, they feel safe and stop.

"Holy... cow... man," the taller kid says.

Doubled over and sucking wind, Billy checks his surroundings. Brick buildings line one side of the alley as far as he can see, and a chain-link fence and thick brush line the other side. The space between is filled with broken bottles, hubcaps, telephone poles plastered with fliers, big rolls of cables, and an odd rusty car.

"Hey guys, where are we?" asks Billy.

The kids straighten up. One is tall, pale, and wears shorts, far too short. Wiry prescription goggles stick out from his eyes like a jeweler inspecting a gem. The other kid is bristly; hair curls everywhere, especially in places it should not. He looks too old for his age and squat like a mini-refrigerator. Billy recognizes him from the shooting game. "Looks like a couple blocks away," says bristly kid. They hobble and sit at a stoop of concrete.

Billy stands before them. "Are you guys goin' back?"

"No, *hell* no, not for a while," the bristly kid says.

Billy motions to the taller kid, "You?"

BILLY'S ADVENTURES

“Nah, no way.”

“You guys pansies or something?”

Bristly looks at Billy with confusion. “No, valor's discretion dude. He'll be strip-searchin' every one of us, any kid who goes near the place. That owner's a dick.”

They examine the ground in unison. Billy kicks a few rocks. The bristly kid pulls out a couple pieces of gum, gives one to his tall friend, and scarfs the other. The taller kid grabs a stick and draws shapes in the gravel. The sun beams down hot in the afternoon.

Billy convinces the boys to, at least, walk someplace else. The tall kid brings his stick, the short kid takes his gum. They walk down the alley to a park. A gazebo stands in the middle, surrounded by swings, slides, and spinney-thingies. They sit and observe the life around them. Nobody speaks, but they exchange long glances.

Time passes as the boys sit in dejection, but talk does not do the day justice. They emerge from the gazebo, see the light of day, and materialize.

First, they throw objects at other, larger, objects. They chase the squirrels and throw things at them too. They sample the playground equipment but are too big to enjoy it. They search for items of value in the gutters. They pull wild onions from the ground for the fleshy root. They run from wasps, then attack with clapping hands. They gamble with almonds. They bark at the dogs and sing to the trees. They tumble and roll, arm-wrestle and attune their chi. They play the good guy, the bad guy. They hound the Baskervilles and burn the barns. They morph into lions, tigers, bears, sharks, mountain goats, and passenger pigeons. They caper, canter, cavalcade, cavort, and convert.

Billy checks his watch: seven o'clock. “Hey boys,” he says, “I gotta go.”

“Where you got to go?” asks Nate, the bristly kid.

INSTINCTS

“Well I gotta go home sometime,” he says. “Same as you... right?”

“Nope,” says Nate, “and my folks like it that way.”

“I gotta be back by eight,” says Billy. “So I need to go back to the pizza place and get my bike, even if the owner dick is there.” The boys look excited and terrified. “You’re welcome to come along... but, ya know, I understand if you’re too chicken.”

“Us? chicken?” says Nate. He gets up and kicks his friend in the leg. “Come on Lennon, this punk’s got a challenge.” Nate pokes Billy hard in the chest. “You’re on, buster.”

Billy smiles wryly. “Good.”

It is twilight by the time they reach the pizzeria. It is open for business, and crowds of customers file in and out, sit and dine. Billy and his new friends poke their heads out of the shadows, in an alley across the street.

Through the window, they see Papa cook up pies and hand them off to customers. Mr. Brady works the sidewalk, inspecting every living thing that comes within twenty yards. He sweats profusely, and his eyes dart. He apprehends a kid who comes near. He confiscates his tokens, kicks him to the curb, and says, “Come back when the investigation’s over!” His manner changes when a grown-up walks by, however. He assumes his most cordial look, a half-scowl, and peddles his spiel. Adults accompany the only unscrutinized children.

“It would appear that any minors in the vicinity are accompanied by majors,” says Billy, squinting. “I spy a distinct lack of arcade users, evidenced by the clear eyes and still fingers.”

“I copy that, Blue Tiger,” says Nate. “I could kick the ass out of any of them noobs, at games and for real.”

“Yes, noobs indeed,” says Lennon.

“I can *smell* the noob,” says Nate.

“A noob by any other name would still smell as

BILLY'S ADVENTURES

noobish,” says Billy.

“Their noobness knows no limit,” says Lennon.

“So much noob, I need a noobulator,” says Nate.

“Or a noob-lescope,” says Lennon.

“With noobvision,” says Nate.

“And a noobacus,” says Billy. Nate and Lennon exchange an unknowing look. “Because it’s like an abacus with noobs... so you can count them...” he trails off. “Forget it.”

"Hurm-hurm!" Nate clears his throat. “What’s the plan?”

Billy squats and draws a diagram with a stick. “So my bike is here on the rack. Right in front of the main window, just a couple paces from Mr. Sweaty-Face, here.”

“Tough deal,” says Nate.

“Tough, yes,” says Billy, scratching at the dirt, “but not impossible. So, you guys come from the south and draw his attention, while I sneak out of the alley to the north, here, and swipe the bike.” He looks up. “Simple enough?”

“Real simple... except one thing,” Nate says. “*We’re* takin’ the fall?”

“Yeah, that's right,” says Billy.

“Then howabouts we get the bike and you take Mr. Pants-Face?” says Lennon.

Billy shakes his head. “No good.”

“Why not?” asks Nate.

“Yeah, why not?” repeats Lennon.

“Because I have this.” Billy retrieves the token from his pocket and presents it like a magical trinket; it even glows with a silver hue. “And it ain’t leavin’ my person.”

Nate and Lennon gaze with awe. “Oooooo,” says Nate.

“Ahhhh,” says Lennon.

Billy pockets the coin. “So, guys, are we down?” He puts his hand out, palm down.

“I’m down,” says Nate, putting his hand on Billy’s.

“Me too,” says Lennon.

Billy grins. “Now that we’re down... it’s time to get

INSTINCTS

dirty.”

The crew takes the long way around to the backside of the pizzeria. They take their positions on each side. Billy creeps up to the darkened corner of the building, getting as close as possible to the sidewalk without stepping into the light. He is so close he can smell Mr. Brady, but he does not get rattled, though slightly nauseous.

Nate and Lennon jollily walk toward the parlor. Mr. Brady stomps about in his tight shirt. He’s ready for the plucking. Nate and Lennon advance closer... and closer. Nate has his opening line planned out perfectly, but before he can say “Mr. Brady’s gut makes a pot-bellied pig envious”, the owner makes a quick spin toward the parlor.

“What? He is? Don’t let him get away!” Brady hurries inside as fast as his fat legs can take him.

Nate and Lennon scurry into the shadows. Lennon collars Nate and shakes him by the shirt. “They got him, man! They got him! Oh god! He’ll spill his guts on us! We gotta bolt!”

Nate shoves Lennon against a wall, opposite. “Get a hold of yourself, man! We ain’t boltin’!” he says. “It might not be him...” He shrugs. “Probably is, but it *might* not be. Wait, I’ve got an idea...”

Nate starts back toward the pizzeria; Lennon tugs at his shirt. Nate shakes off his detractor, giving silencing gestures. He yells, “The clouds are moving! The clouds are moving!”

The clouds are moving? What the... he’s supposed to say “the sky is clear”. Billy peeks around the corner and sees Nate and Lennon approaching him at a rapid pace, but no sign of Mr. Brady. He fully expected to see Brady *eating* his buddies, sandwiched between two slices of bread. *Not exactly the plan, but fortuitous...*

Billy creeps toward his bike. He grasps the seat and met-

BILLY'S ADVENTURES

al piping, but hears a strange noise. "Sirens?" he mouths to Nate. Nate listens, hears, and bolts for the shadows. Billy yanks at the bike, but it does not move. The wheel is stuck. *This is not the time!* Billy pulls, and sirens get closer. He kicks, and the sirens get louder. He sees blue and red flashers reflect from the window. The cops' tell-tale siren gets louder. Rustling comes from inside the parlor. A struggle takes place in more than one. He should run, leave the bike, and come back for it later. But no. He plants his foot against the rack, bends his knees, uses all of his weight, every ounce of muscle in his body and... *Snap* A spoke breaks! The bike is free! He totes it to the shadows, joining Nate and Lennon.

"Jesus man, you had me scared for a second," says Nate. "Just for a second though."

"Jesus yourself! You could've helped me!" says Billy.

"Something's happening..." Lennon says. Strange noises issue from the parlor. Pots and pans clang, feet thunderously stomp, babies bawl, and Papa yells in his funny accent.

Mr. Brady busts through the front door, holding something big in his hand. "I got you this time you scalawag, you cur, you conniving little urchin!" He lifts up the object: it's the hustling blonde-haired kid, covered in tomato sauce and flour. "You thought you could sneak in, steal a few tokens, and get another scandalous operation going again? Eh? Hahaha... not bloody likely!"

The blonde kid spits a glob of tomato sauce. "Laugh it up, windbag."

Mr. Brady guffaws with glee. "Oh *you'll* be laughing up a storm with the bluecoats tonight, hohoho, yes you will." The cops screech to a halt at the curb, rush out with jingling and clomping, and apprehend the kid.

"Not that I don't like your spirit," bellows Mr. Brady, "but let's just say, *I win this round.*" He struts inside, and his laughs echo from within the parlor.

The blonde kid, hands cuffed, watches Mr. Brady's fig-

INSTINCTS

ure walk away. He spits on an officer's shoe, and says, "I want my phone call."

The cops take the kid away in the cruiser, wailing all the way to the station. Billy climbs on his bike.

"Well boys," he says, "what do you say we do this again tomorrow?"

Nate and Lennon answer in unison: "We're down."