HIDEKI SMITH

DEMON QUELLER

To anyone who feels that
the world doesn't quite get them.



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A. J. HARTLEY

WITH HISAKO OSAKO & KUMA HARTLEY



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1

MY NAME IS HIDEKI SMITH AND I'M A LOSER'S LOSER. Except that no one calls me Hideki. They call me Caleb because my parents – I swear to God this is true – actually searched for the most common boy's name the year I was born and went with that. Hideki – my middle name – was added to keep my Obāchan (my Japanese grandmother) from going ballistic, but my mom was determined to fully adopt my dad's Anglo ancestry, so I got stuck with Caleb. Her goal was to make us the most 'regular American' family in the neighbourhood, whatever *that* meant. If you go through our house you'll see nothing, and I mean *nothing*, that gives away the fact that one side of the family is Japanese. I'm probably the only kid in my school who doesn't read manga or watch anime. I've never used chopsticks except once at my grandmother's (when I wallpapered her dining room with food), I've never eaten sushi (not that raw fish is a highlight

of life on the edge of the Great Smoky Mountains), and I'm pretty sure that the only Japanese words I know are all in this paragraph.

I guess they meant well. Portersville, North Carolina, isn't what you'd call a cosmopolitan place and I can't blame them for not wanting us to stand out. Apart from my sister and me, the only other Asian kid at either our middle or high school is a Korean girl I've never spoken to called Sue Park. Everyone assumes she's my cousin. The town is little more than a railway crossing and a central square surrounded by half-empty strip malls. Population: 6,732. I know that number exactly because someone on the town council is paid to repaint the number on the "Welcome to Portersville" sign by the interstate every six months. Weird, right? Like saying exactly how many people live here will make you stay after you notice that the cotton and tobacco fields have dried up and the furniture industry has been deader than roadkill for twenty years. The only jobs available are working for Southern Shale Gas, who spend all their time blowing off the tops of the mountains. Which is stupid because, if you ask me, the Great Smoky Mountains are the only reason anyone might *actually* want to live here.

My parents don't work for the fracking company. They run an inconvenience store. It's supposed to be a convenience store, but it's way over on the edge of town behind the Walmart that closed a year ago, so it's not very, you know, *convenient*. That was where I was when this all started, when my status as a loser's loser got . . . complicated.

Actually, I wasn't there so much as I was *leaving* there. Fast



as I could run. I worked in the inconvenience store after school: stocking shelves, unpacking boxes of crisps and beef jerky, filling the fridge cases with soda and generally trying not to break stuff while avoiding my classmates. I was supposed to be there until we closed at nine p.m., but I'd had a bad day at school which had only gotten worse when I arrived home.

There had been WORDS. That's what my mom calls a screaming match, like that made it into a garden party or something. These particular WORDS had been about my grades, my forgetting to do homework, my utter bombing of the football try-outs my dad had convinced me to take a shot at – even though he knew I couldn't catch a ball if the lives of entire peoples depended on it – and my general and effortless skills as a screw-up. The usual, in other words. Today, however, I had managed to add an extra special ingredient to the whole nasty mix, which I'm not going to tell you about.

Anyway. I took off. Slammed the door and bolted. Past Desmond's Liquors – one of the few stores around here which does a roaring trade – past the CVS and through the forecourt of the McDonald's where my sister Emily – known exclusively to my grandmother as Kazuko – was hoping to get a part-time job next summer, because asking "Do you want fries with that?" was supposed to be solid preparation for her adult future. I went by the boarded-up church on the corner of Main Street, timed my run between two crawling pick-ups, and crossed into the car park by the old Walmart. When I reached the chain-link fence at the back – which was already starting to vanish under a strangling raft of kudzu vine – I checked that no one was coming after



me, then clambered awkwardly over. It took me three tries. At least the security lights didn't work any more, so no one saw me falling into the bushes on the other side like a sloth with its paws tied together.

I didn't mind the dark. It was easier to disappear, which was pretty much my goal in life. The last thing I wanted was for any of the kids from school to spot me, not that I had any cool points to lose. So I pushed hurriedly through the undergrowth, narrowly avoiding a patch of poison ivy, and slipping on to a deer trail that ran up into the wooded hills that surrounded the town.

This was my spot, the one place I was pretty sure I would be undisturbed. There were hiking trails higher up which drew backpackers and day-trippers from Charlotte, but once the sun went down I had even those to myself. I climbed, listening to the tree frogs and the throb of the insects all around me, wondering how late I would have to stay out to be sure everyone would be asleep when I went home. That was a tough one. Mom and Dad would wait up, and if I stayed out too late, they'd call the police; then I'd have to deal with Mark Halpern's dad coming over in his squad car and looking at my parents in that way that manages to be both pitying and sort of mocking, like my status as Lord of the Portersville Idiots was somehow their fault.

Which it wasn't.

Dad tended to go stiff and quiet, glancing around like he'd lost something (which he would find by turning on the game or working on – this is real, I swear – his model railway), and Mom would get overly efficient with her cooking or cleaning in a way that was hard to look at, but I couldn't blame them. Mary



Montjoy's dad was a drunk who people said lit into her and her mother once or twice a month with a belt, and Jamie Forstegg's whole family were supposed to cook meth in an old barn behind the house, but my parents had never done anything like that. They got mad at me, sure, but mostly they were kind, if baffled, and they had never laid a hand on me or Emily. So yeah, it could have been so very much worse. Although, in a weird kind of way, that only made it harder. I had no one to blame for my screw-ups but me.

I said I wasn't going to tell you why I had messed up more than usual, but it's not like saying it can make it any worse, right? And I guess it's only fair that you know the kind of Olympic Idiot you are dealing with.

There's an old barn on the edge of the playing fields that the middle and high school share. I say old because, whilst it's nothing special, it was built a little after the Civil War and is therefore the Oldest Surviving Structure In Portersville. That's how people say it: with capitals, like it's the Empire State Building or the Pyramids of Giza. When people visit from out of town, they are dutifully driven slowly by the barn so they can look and nod and smile while they start planning how to get out of here as soon as possible. At the beginning of sixth grade, Mrs Henderson, our social studies teacher, took us there on a field trip, which was as much fun as watching grass grow. I mean, you could see the barn from the school, but we were marched over there to gape at it like it was the Taj Mahal or something.

Anyway, that day (that Fateful Day, as I now think of it) there had been a combination lock on the side door and I watched Mrs

Henderson punch numbers to get us in. There was nothing to see inside – an old farm cart and a hayloft with a couple of pitch forks and a rake hanging on the wall – but we walked around like we were in the Louvre and then went back to class to write about 'All We Had Learnt'.

What I had learnt was the combination for the lock. A few weeks later, while I was busy not being chosen for our pick-up soccer game at lunchtime, I wandered over there and snuck in. There was a little clockwork timer that ran the light in the hayloft, and though it would run out after about five minutes, I found that if I braced the twisty bit with a nail, the lamp in the roof would stay on as long as I wanted. It was a good bolt-hole, a place to read, and I got into the habit of sneaking over there with whatever I found in the school library – first Captain Underpants, eventually Sherlock Holmes.

Four years later, I still went there when I needed a bit of alone time. Like today. Tyler – that's Tyler J. Miller the Third, if you can believe that – son of the mayor and voted Most Popular In His Own Head, had called me something. He'd said it before, loads of times, so I'm not sure why it bothered me today, but it did. I'm not going to tell you what it was, so don't ask.

I had no business trying out for the football team. I hadn't even wanted to. It was another one of my parents' ideas about infiltrating the American Dream, or some such thing: "Just join in and have fun, and you'll blend right in," my dad had said. It had, he announced – without a shred of self-consciousness – worked for him. My dad was originally from England, something he apparently thought no one noticed any more, though I saw

people's faces when they heard him speak for the first time or referred to my "mum". They had that "you're not from round here" look, which could be amused, curious or hostile. Dad either didn't notice or pretended not to, smiling and nodding: blending right in . . .

In any case, he had talked me into showing up for the stupid football trials even though I had the strength and agility of a drowning mouse. Portersville East wasn't a big school but the powers that be insisted on having Varsity, Junior Varsity and Freshman teams even though there were barely enough students to suit up. I figured that if I made the team I'd sit on the bench, part of the squad but not actually required to play on account of my massive incompetence. Better still, the coach might decide that no shortage of players would ever make them desperate enough to use the likes of me and he'd send me home. That way my duty to my dad would be completed with no harm done and we'd never speak of it again.

Unfortunately, before the coach could give me my marching orders, I had to actually, you know, *try out.* So I did: I strapped on the ridiculous, gross-smelling helmet; ran races (last!); caught footballs (dropped!); blocked running backs (touchdown!) and generally failed as few people have ever failed at anything. At one point, I realised I had attracted the attention of a cluster of baffled girls up in the bleachers, all watching with a kind of horrified fascination. Madison Haynes was with them, which kind of sucked. I mean, I was used to making a fool of myself, but I tried not to do it quite so obviously in front of Madison, who was a junior like my sister, and at least part goddess.



She was with Ayisha, DeMarcus Murphy's twin sister. They were sophomores like me, but DeMarcus made no secret of the fact that he wanted to be the quarterback for the JV team, and one day for the Varsity squad. Portersville East had never had a black quarterback. And he was up against Tyler J. Miller the Third, so you could see how that was going to go.

It was DeMarcus who threw me the pass. We were "scrimmaging", the coach's idea of a reward after our various exercises and drills. I had managed to look busy without actually getting involved, until all of a sudden the pocket around DeMarcus was collapsing and he had nowhere to run; the only person open – wide open because no one ever bothered to cover me – was yours truly. So having waited as long as he dared for a better option, he threw me a pass. He didn't look happy about it, but the ball came out of his hand in a beautiful, perfectly weighted spiral which lanced towards me, bypassing the defence completely and dropping into my outstretched hands like a Christmas present, complete with ribbon.

I'm not sure how I missed it. I am not certain that, even with hours of practice, I could recreate the way it bounced off my helmet as I fell face first into the dirt. I stayed where I was, not wanting to look up and see Madison laughing, DeMarcus raging, or the other team casually running the ball back for an easy, game-winning touchdown, though I know all these things happened. I lay there, wondering if I could burrow to the changing rooms from where I was, wait for everyone to forget I existed, before getting up and trudging off, trying to make myself small.

That was when Tyler made his remark. He said it casually,

smirking, like it was on me if I made a big deal out of it. I looked at DeMarcus, but he was pissed at me for not giving him his touchdown pass, and he glanced away. Tyler's jock buddies smirked too, and one of them – Bobby Davenham who had bullied me since third grade – stretched the corners of his eyes and said "Me Caleb. Me no understandy Amelican Football", in a stupid mock-Asian accent. My face got all hot. I wanted to tell them that I couldn't care less about their idiotic game and that I spoke English better than all of them, but what with the hot face and all I couldn't, so I went to the old barn instead.

I shut myself inside and sat really still, sort of pretending that I was looking for the king snake which kept the barn's rat population down, but really I just had to be still. It was hot up there in the hayloft. Hot as my face, probably. I just sat there, motionless, waiting for it to cool down and looking for the snake, which didn't show. Anyway, I lost track of time. One minute it was lunchtime and the next I was late for Maths, a subject where my grade – trust me – could not stand to take a hit.

I slid down the ladder from the hayloft and pulled the nail from the clockwork timer, but instead of it clicking off the seconds towards shutting off the light, it just sat there. I touched it and it span pathetically. I had broken it.

Now, if I'd been smarter and braver, I would have gone right to the principal's office and told Mr Grealish what I'd done, starting with learning the number for the combination lock four years ago and working my way up to the present. I might have done just that, but I could still see Tyler Miller's sneer. I could imagine only too well what he'd say when he heard I'd

broken something while hiding from him, even though I wasn't. Not really.

So I said nothing. I went to my maths class and stared at a whiteboard full of equations I didn't understand and imagined what it would be like to be Tyler J. Miller the Third, until I realised that I was jealous of someone I kind of hated, and that made me feel worse.

I didn't know there were security cameras in the school grounds, though it seemed obvious to me later. No one ever looked at the feed, I guess, not unless something happened, so the pictures of me carefully shutting the barn door behind me and trotting back to school didn't get looked at until after the fire trucks had gone. I was in homeroom by then, my face squashed against the window with everyone else watching Portersville's Oldest Surviving Structure burn to the ground. It had survived for almost a hundred and fifty years. Then it met me.

The principal arrived, then the fire chief and Mark Halpern's dad in his sheriff's uniform. Then my parents. And they sat me down and asked me why I'd done it, what I was upset about and what I was rebelling against. Mr Grealish asked me if I thought causing mayhem and destruction was funny, or if I was lashing out because I hadn't made the football team. Miss Malinski, my homeroom teacher, enquired what the barn had represented to me. I didn't understand any of that for a while and told them what had happened twice more before realising that they thought I'd done it on purpose. Then I got upset. I mean, I'd been upset before, but this was different. First I felt stupid and guilty, which I'd been feeling for hours. Then I got mad and sad in a wild kind

of way, like when old Mrs Clary died and her dog spent a week on her porch howling at the sky until her husband gave it to a family in Winston Salem. I felt like the dog: sad and confused and angry enough to bite. I didn't say anything about Tyler J. Miller the Third.

I mean, you don't, do you?

So, you see, when I said I was a loser's loser, I wasn't kidding. I mean, the kids at school all kind of hated the stupid barn and the way we were expected to treat it like it was a Great Landmark, and if it had been anyone else in the class who had demolished it, there would have been some secret congratulating, because anyone who could get rid of something that tedious and annoying in such a spectacular way had to be a little bit cool, you know? But it was me, so it wasn't cool, and even the bullies and incompetents looked at me like I'd peed on some treasured family heirloom. Then set fire to it. Tyler caught my eye for the briefest of seconds, and the smirk had been replaced by something like hatred; like rage. Even deep in my own anger, I was surprised by it. He had never liked me, and I didn't like him, but this felt different: upsetting, even a little scary.

So when I got home to more parental tears, more baffled anger and demands for explanations, I ran. That took me into the woods, where I felt like staying for ever. The woods were where I could think, where I could process what had happened and what was going to happen next. The woods were where the world made sense and where I could be alone.

Boy, was I wrong.



JED ASHCROFT, SENIOR ENGINEER, CHECKED THE pressure readings on one computer terminal, then the seismograph readings on another.

"Looking good," he said.

Gas production at the Red Scar Mountain site had been slow, even after the usual delays brought by local government, health and safety inspections, and industry standards checks. There had also been the inevitable interference by environmentalist do-gooders, though that hadn't been so bad in Portersville where people needed the work. Southern Shale Gas had been making inroads into this community for years, but the fracking operation had only been up and running for two. Output had been low so far, but they were just getting to the big gas reserves. Jed had heard that these mountains had once been mined for gold, even diamonds, but those kinds of finds had been rare, nothing like

what could be made from methane reserves now. And in spite of what the environmentalists said, natural gas was a whole lot better than coal and petroleum.

Jed Ashcroft, a big man who grew up less than fifteen kilometres from the very spot he was working in now and knew these mountains and forests as well as anyone at Southern Shale, was a believer.

"Increasing pressure," he said, tapping the keyboard, eyes fixed on the screen. "Now at fifty megapascals, 7500 PSI moving 130 litres of slurry blend per second."

Outside, in the Carolina night, he could hear the rumble of the truck engines responsible for pumping the water, sand and other additives, via the blender and slurry pump, down the well and 2.7 kilometres under the ground. He sensed the rising tremor of all that power and couldn't suppress a smile of satisfaction.

"All good here," said Vivian Singh, the assistant engineer and seismologist.

It had been a long day and Jed was looking forward to a late dinner and a beer or two, but this was the part of his job he liked best: the exhilaration right before the pressure hit high enough levels to actually fracture rocks deep under the aquifer. The sense of power was extraordinary and infectious. When they started drawing the resultant gas up through the well head and into the holding tanks, there was a feeling of satisfaction, of a job well done, but this part, as you got up near a hundred megapascals and 6,800 kilograms of pressure per square kilometre, that was the real rush.

"Increasing to seventy megapascals," said Jed.

The hum outside increased, seeming to reverberate through the ground and up through his boots.

"Seventy-five," he announced.

"Everything proceeding as expected?"

Jed half-turned to find Chris Collington, the company appointed overseer, hovering at his elbow. He was wearing that crisp suit he always wore, like he'd just stepped off one of those TV courtroom dramas. Too slick for Jed's taste.

"All under control," said Jed, a little irritable. He'd done this a dozen times or more. He knew what he was doing. He didn't need some corporate drone standing over him . . .

"What was that?"

Vivian Singh's voice. Jed gave her a quick look. She was staring intently at her monitor, her face tense.

"What?" he asked. "All looks normal here. Increasing to eighty megapascals . . ."

"No," she said. "Hold it. I'm seeing unexpected seismic activity in Sector Twelve."

"Richter reading?" said Jed. Minor tremors, so long as they were within standard operating parameters, were considered normal. They were, after all, looking to break up rock deep underground . . .

"1.7," said Singh. "We should shut down."

1.7! That was way higher than anything Jed had seen before. But they'd done all the geological surveys! It made no sense.

"Another. That one was 1.9," said Singh. "Shut it down."

Jed cursed under his breath but did as she said. All around, the thrum of engines, the thrilling build-up of energy under tension,

slackened to nothing. In the unwelcome silence, Jed scowled at the monitors.

"What the hell happened?"

"There must be an area of instability we hadn't identified," said Singh. "Unless the equipment is malfunctioning."

"Better check it out," said Collington unhelpfully, as if they couldn't have figured that out for themselves.

"I'll take a team there now," said Singh. "Sector Twelve is accessible through a cavern on the south side of the drill site. We can be there in ten minutes."

"Do it," stated Jed.

He sat down heavily, staring at his computer screen.

"These things happen," said Collington blandly. "The thing to do now is follow protocol to the letter. Hopefully we'll have the site up and running by morning."

Jed said nothing. Serious tremors were bad news. If anyone in the surrounding area had noticed them, they could be out of action for weeks or more. That was time – and money – down the drain.

"I'm getting a soda," he said.

For the next half an hour he sat on the back of his pick-up, the Coke can warming in his hand, staring at nothing. Then his phone rang. It was Singh.

"Hey," she said. "I have Peterson and Rodriguez with me. We're splitting up to check the seismographs, but they look like they are working fine."

Damn, thought Jed. More delays.

"I'm gonna set up some new monitors to see what's going on, but we'll have to wait to see if there are any aftershocks."

"How long?" Jed asked.

"A week, to be safe," she said.

Jed blew out a sigh.

"A *week*?" he said, forcing himself to stay professional. "And if it looks like the tremors are decreasing before then?"

"That would depend on . . ." her voice cut off. "Hold on. I think we're getting another." She sounded tense. "Yes. A big one."

And now he felt it, the ground beneath his feet shifting unnervingly, moving like the earth should never move, so that he felt weirdly cut adrift.

"We've got falling rock!" shouted Singh through the phone. "Everybody out! Now!"

Still the earth shook, and then there was another sound from the phone, a strange, distant booming; a thunderous noise which – impossibly – almost sounded like a voice, though the words it roared out were meaningless.

"*Hanashite kure!*"

Then nothing.

"Vivian?" Jed shouted. "You there? What's going on?"

But the phone was dead.