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Dancing in the ashes

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DANCING IN THE ASHES

by

Vytautas Adolph Malesh

Bachelor of Arts
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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College of Liberal Arts**

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ABSTRACT

An Abstract of the novel *Dancing in the Ashes*

By

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The following novel is the third draft of my creative thesis entitled *Dancing in the Ashes*. It is an exploration of the Detroit rave scene in its dying days, and it mixes real and imagined places and events in order to portray the essence of that time, if not the factuality.

The bulk of the novel follows just over two weeks in the life of Thomas Kowalski, a drug dealer living with his parents in suburban Detroit. He parties constantly and seldom works except as necessary to keep his job at a local record store – an invaluable source of connections. The rave scene has been dying a slow death for years, and when Thomas' friend Haas decides to throw one big party, the Detroit dance community is slapped out of its apathy for one wild night of revelry. The events stemming from that night become the defining incidents in the life of Thomas and his friends, and commence a stark epitaph for the carefree days of the rave movement.

Being set in Detroit and its suburbs, the novel cannot help but explore themes of race and urban decay, but the majority of the characters are suburban, and in attempting to portray them realistically and sympathetically I have made the characters occasionally confused, disinterested, misguided or apathetic. As much as this is a novel about Detroit's dance culture and the deleterious effects of drugs within it, it is also about

young people slowly coming to terms with the collapse of American industry and the narrowing of the middle class.

The novel is set in winter: the literal winter of January 2002, and the allegorical winter of the ironic mode - the fall from a low place. The characters within this novel do not lead great or heroic lives, but I have tried to treat them as lives worth considering nonetheless. Their environment is bleak and cold, their prospects dim, their city dying. I have only tried to tell the story of all of us who were there in an informative, entertaining, and faithful fashion.

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Chapter 1.

Antonio's Coney Island is in Dearborn, a Detroit suburb at the intersection of the black north, the white west, and the Arab east. Most Detroit suburbs exemplify such divides. Southfield is a hodge-podge of the Jews that fled Detroit in the 1960's and the Blacks that were wealthy enough to follow behind. Warren is the working-class cousin of Grosse Pointe, to which the Catholic Poles, Italians, and Germans, fearful of the rioting blacks and unwilling or unable to follow the Jews to Southfield or Birmingham.

Dearborn was a white suburb, notorious for its pristine white street sweepers with black lettering on the sides that read "Keep Dearborn Clean," well understood by Detroiters and Dearborn residents alike to mean *Keep the Niggers out of Dearborn*. Diametrically opposed and rigidly enforcing the black-white color line, nobody noticed when Arabs and Armenians moved in en masse to the East Side, effectively making a brown city within Dearborn's city limits.

Thomas Kowalski and Baxter Mancini drank coffee at Antonio's as a part of their post-party ritual. It was very early on January 6th, 2002 (or rather it was very late, January 5th). Both were twenty-two years old. Thomas was bone skinny and thin-haired, dark eyed and pale. He wore oversized khaki cargo pants, a blue hooded sweatshirt, and a black Fresh Jive baseball cap pulled down to his eyes. His father was mostly Polish and had given Thomas his thin hair and pale skin, his mother was mostly German, and she gave Thomas his strong bones and bitter mouth. He was darkly handsome, his face was charmingly cruel.

Baxter was yellow haired and olive skinned, a beautiful Mediterranean boy, a modern David. His father was proudly Italian, Florentine, with no trace of Moorish darkness about him. His mother was of French descent. Baxter swaggered when he walked, and his smile was the half-cocked smirk of an accomplished lothario.

Their man Darryl waited on their table that night. Darryl was black, not particularly tall, and round-faced. He had milk chocolate skin and black eyes. He wore his hair short and natural. He wore the uniform required of him by his job – a white short-sleeved oxford shirt and black slacks, with clunky thick-soled black shoes. Outside of work he was a breakdancer, a b-boy, and he had the dense, muscular physique to show it. He was also a student at Henry Ford Community College. He did okay. He didn't think about it much.

The few customers in the restaurant, stubble-chinned drunkards and losers laid off of third shift who couldn't learn to keep daylight hours, were all white, and middle-aged or older. They ate without savor, they drank coffee under their thousand-yard stares. They were not resentful of the boisterous trio in the back of the restaurant, nor were they indifferent – indeed, if they were even aware of the existence of Baxter, Thomas, and Darryl, they made no sign.

“Should have been up to Motor,” Baxter said as Darryl warmed up their coffee.

“Hot to death?” Darryl asked.

“It felt good – real vibe” Baxter replied, conjuring up the dusty and disused language of the rave scene, the impromptu dance craze cum social paradigm that had brought these three together years ago, and which now floundered and limped impotently.

Rave, now drug down by oppressive “crackhouse laws” and the somber tone of American social life post 9/11.

“You all givin’ out light shows and shit?” Darryl teased Thomas.

“Fuck yeah” Thomas joked, making his voice dumb and apish, “I be getting’ them club sluts all rollin’ and trippin’ out-“

“Tryin’ to get ‘em to suck his dick like a pacifier!” Baxter said.

“Shit yeah, them bitches be all like *nom nom nom*,” Thomas said before waving away this silliness.

“I’m-a tell y’all bitches,” Darryl said, referring to the pairs girlfriends, Rachel and Maria.

“Shit,” Thomas said, and shrugged.

“Go ahead on,” Baxter added.

“Where they at?” Darryl asked.

Baxter shrugged and said “Dunno – lezzing out or something.”

Darryl scrunched up his face and asked “Damn, ain’t they cousins?”

“Don’t you have sex with your cousin?” Thomas asked, his face blank and naïve until he couldn’t hold it in and cracked a grin.

“You dead *wrong*!” Darryl laughed, and then returned to the kitchen to put his coffee pot back on the warmer.

Motor was hot. Motor had vibe that night. Urb magazine had named it the best dance club in America a few years before, and the house-heads, techno hipsters, and junglists that continued to flood the venue every weekend agreed. The Bass bins thumped, the bars served good booze, the grisly meatheads at the door still let ladies in

for free and charged the men full price, and the bouncers didn't ask too many questions about who was doing what in the bathroom stalls.

That night, Detroit Beat Collective had held the fourth of their "Jungle Boogie" parties – a misleading name, since DBC had no DJ's that played the sinister-sounding *bum-bum-boooooom* of Jungle or Drum-and-Bass. Their DJ's preferred the four-fourths-timed *bahm-tchicks, bahm-tchicks* of house music, or the constant *stomp-bom* beat of true Detroit techno. Although deep house, aka sleep house, was in fashion, DBC kept the groove danceable and fun, and attracted a small but hardcore following of former ravers and house-heads.

Last night, DBC had approached Baxter. Megan Isom, the owner-operator of the label, had heard Baxter's demo (entitled *DJ B-X-T: The Hot Wax Treatment*) and was impressed. She expressed her interest in bringing him on board, and this opportunity was much on Baxter's mind as he sat pouring an endless stream of Sugar from a steel-topped glass jar into his coffee.

"She wants to hear me spin out first" Baxter blurted out, apropos of nothing.

"What?" Thomas asked.

"Meg, from DBC. I told you she liked my shit, but she wants to hear me spin out first, which is kind of fucked up since--"

"Right, right."

"--since I need a rep or contacts to spin out anywhere good, you know? I'm not just going to have her sit in my basement for whatever."

"Right," Thomas agreed.

They drank their coffee.

“What about Buddha, or Cloud 9?” Thomas asked.

Baxter shrugged and said “Cloud 9 is getting shut down I think, if it isn’t already. I haven’t been there in forever. Maybe Buddha though. Or One-X, maybe Lager House...I guess there’s some little places I could get in.”

Thomas nodded along. It was nearly five o’clock in the morning. The cocaine was wearing off, and against that, the coffee was as ineffective as spit on a house fire.

“I gotta get new needles,” Baxter said after a while.

“Sure,” Thomas said. It was understood that Baxter was asking to use Thomas’ employee discount at the famous DeeJay Deelight specialty store. It was really no trouble for Thomas, who despite an encyclopedic knowledge of Electronic music and a feverish penchant for dancing, could barely beatmatch, and so rarely bought any new equipment or records for himself.

Contrarily, Baxter could barely dance. When he did step foot on the dance floor he really only did the Chicago Hop, a hoppy rave dance that came about in the mid-90’s, or he’d do what his friends called the Tony Gino Bounce, a lame knee-bobbing *thing* roughly in time with the music but displaying no sense of grace or agility. The dance was popular among the open-shirted, heavily perfumed, gelled-hair-and-gold-chain set.

They’d known each other since they were students at rival schools in Warren: Baxter to Paul K. Cousino Senior High, Thomas to Warren Mott – but that didn’t mean much. They were east-siders – modern, quiet, and very suburban. They came from a suburb where a good kid got good grades, played on sports teams, and went to work in one of the clean offices of the Big Three automakers as opposed to kids from the west

side suburbs, who were also expected to play on sports teams, but good grades were secondary to cruising down Telegraph, winning fist-fights, and deer hunting.

So on the east side, if your best friend went to a rival school you might catch a little shit from the jocks, but they didn't matter. This wasn't Dearborn Fordson, where the captain of the football team could smash your head against a wall and get off with a warning, or where kids from Dearborn High picked fights with Arabs from the other side of town in the parking lot of Randazzo's fruit market. It was the east side – civil, suburban, and dull, and when Baxter took Thomas to his first rave, his first exposure to the loud music, the beautiful lights, the free and loving people, it was enough to put him on it forever.

They jocked hard at first, meaning that they looked and copied. Both became overnight audiophiles, learning the history of Detroit Techno and it's cousins House, Trance, and Jungle, how they traced themselves back to the German electro-pop of the 1980's and the funk disco of the 1970's. Thomas learned how to dance, Baxter learned how to spin records, they both learned how to dress – big bell-bottomed jeans called phat pants and strappy loose synthetic cargo pants called UFO's on the legs, everything oversized, huge hooded sweatshirts, polo shirts that fluttered and billowed around the wearer, baseball caps pulled down low, long wallet chains, and sneakers or skate shoes on the feet. It was still childish, still fun, even in 1997 when Baxter and Thomas came on. It was the late-middle-period of American rave, but no one knew that yet.

In 1997, parties were getting popular. Warehouses packed thousands strong with kids from fourteen to forty years old, dancing, grooving, moving – they popped ecstasy, they gave light shows with brilliant glow sticks, they gave each other backrubs and

chewed on pacifiers. It was fun. They made friends from across town, from across the world. A good party was worth traveling for. Baxter and Thomas had been all over Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio, out to Chicago, up to Toronto, to cornfield parties in the middle of nowhere, one-horse Canadian towns like Bobcaygeon and Dunneville.

But the best parties were right in their own backyard. The Whorehouse, the Slaughterhouse, The Firehouse, Mack and Bellevue, Better Days, the Theatre, Bagley Optical – famous venues, often ruins, in abandoned and broken-down parts of the city that, once or twice a month, would spontaneously combust into dance parties for bored suburban teens and twenty-somethings with enough money for cover and a few pills. People from all over the world came to Detroit just for the privilege of saying they had, for saying: *There ain't no party like a Detroit party 'cause a Detroit party don't stop*. It was the birthplace of Techno, a Mecca for dance music aficionados, and so they came: from California, from Europe, from Vancouver. Thomas and Baxter had even met Japanese tourists with neon backpacks plastered with plastic beads and anime stickers who spoke only enough to say *Detroit techno rave best!*

In the whole crowd, in the worldwide mess, were Baxter and Thomas, two among thousands. They met so many people that the raving mass blurred together into a gelled blob of light and sound. After a year, they nearly never bothered with names – a lot of ravers just used party names anyway – Mopsy and Flopsy, Bubbles, Rainbow, all manner of cutesy pseudonyms to enhance their weekend fantasy world.

It was over. That was 1997, when it was great. It was okay in '98 and '99. The whole thing was played out by 2000 and it didn't get better after that.

In 2000, a then obscure senator named Joseph Biden sponsored the RAVE act – Reducing American’s Vulnerability to Ecstasy, also known as the Drug Abuse Prevention Act, and more colloquially the “crackhouse laws” – which allowed police to treat event promoters like drug dealers if event attendees were found to be in the possession of controlled substances. Everyone thought it was feel-good legislation, the kind of bullshit law that senators push forward to shut up the busy-body old ladies in their districts who watch too much alarmist television, too many Dateline specials, or 20/20 exposes. Congress was full of clowns; the President was an idiot – what was the government going to do? Then two promoters from New Orleans were fined 250,000 dollars a piece and sent off to do time, and the scene lost momentum like a car with blown-out tires.

September 11th really put the breaks on the whole thing. Who was going to party when *that* could happen? What did it matter that your suburban life was boring and plain, that you felt a sense of dread and angst over not knowing your place in the world, that when you went underground, you came alive? They wanted to *kill* us! They hated our freedom!

There were only the clubs after that, and they limped along as best they could, so when there was a hot night, a good night, a night that felt at all like the old days, you made a note of it and you told your friends. Motor had had a few good nights – Haas had called Baxter, Baxter had called up Thomas, and now they were here, and had told Darryl.

Baxter was rich – that is to say, his parents were rich, or what passes for rich in Detroit. They were comfortable. Had he gone to college, it would have been paid for. As it was, he worked part-time technical support as a sub-contractor and sold dope and coke

on the side as a hobby and picking up monthly support checks from his parents while he *figured himself out*, which he was in no hurry to do.

Thomas didn't have that luxury. He wasn't in any more hurry to figure himself out than Baxter, but he didn't have the option of treating it like an academic subject. He had to hustle – three years out of high school and he had nothing, and no prospects. He worked, he sold coke, pills, ketamine, weed, whatever he had, and he partied.

“Why don't you take classes?” Maria asked him one night as they lay in bed together in the upstairs bedroom of her mother's house.

“Can't afford them,” he said with resignation.

“Even at community college?”

“Even that's, like, fifty dollars a credit hour,” he said, and said no more because of the unspoken sacrifice implicit in that sum. Fifty dollars per credit hour, for a simple four-credit class, plus matriculation fees, books, and so forth, could run up around five hundred dollars. Hardly an insurmountable sum, even to someone making just over minimum wage, as Thomas was. But Thomas didn't make his money selling turntables and PA systems – that was just his legitimate front. He made his money by selling drugs to the throngs of party kids around him. Schoolwork would be such a cut into his life – he couldn't party like he did now, and if he couldn't party, he couldn't sell, and that five hundred dollars would become even more dear.

“Fuck that” Maria said, lighting up a bowl and then cracking open her window. This was October, the wind was cold, but slow, and did not howl into the room. The blue-gray smoke disbursed lazily through the room, and as she passed the bowl for Thomas and he inhaled the sticky burnt-straw tasting smoke from the smooth glass pipe, he fell

into the crisp smell of frost and the dull aroma of burning leaves, thinking that this was so perfect he need never work, never go to school, but just sit all day smoking dope in this bedroom and teaching himself to love Maria, no matter how long it took.

He would have to stop thinking about Cassandra first. Redhead Cassandra, so called to tell her apart from brunette Cassandra, Cassandra Meijer, another party girl from Monroe who had burned out back in 2000, but whose name still floated around, causing confusion. Cassandra Mulgrew was a red-headed young woman from South Lyon who now lived in Chicago. She had broken many hearts in Detroit because she was beautiful and charismatic. She had a flirtatious will and a fun, liberal sexuality. Thomas was nuts for her. So was Baxter. They'd talked about it ad nauseum, and rarely discussed it any more.

Fucking the same girl was not necessarily a cause for enmity. Sometimes, you were friends with someone *because* you were fucking, or had fucked, the same girl or boy. It might start off antagonistically enough, like two bucks strutting for the same doe, but it usually settled down quickly. The girl picked a favorite and after a few weeks, or simply wandered off with a third player, leaving bruised egos and lonely hearts in her wake, and the boys who'd butted heads now sought one another out in a fraternity of grief.

Baxter and Thomas were in such a fraternity, though it was not exclusive. Within just their little circle of friends and acquaintances, there were five, counting Baxter and Thomas, that had come together over redhead Cassandra – Anthony “Tony Gino” Lee, the old man of the group and a well-to-do computer technician from Rochester Hills, his younger business party Nathan “Nate Dog” Malczewski, and Haasan Wuhleed, the club

promoter and drug dealer from Sterling Heights. They knew of others, of course, and calling Cassadra liberal and free was very nice compared to what the girls said about her.

“Ugh,” Rachel said to Baxter when she found out about his short liaison with Cassandra in 1999.

I hope you wore, like, six condoms,” Maria told Thomas when he admitted his own turn with the girl on the basement sofa of a house party in late 2000.

Privately, and among themselves, the girls called her slut, skank, whore, hotdog-down-a hallway, pin-cushion, every vulgar name they could think of. But publicly they said little, or expressed their distastes only in rolled eyes, sniffs, and headshakes because so many of the boys loved her, and there was no sense in getting them all worked up and defensive over their little piece of fantasy ass.

But Cassandra was gone away now, off to Chicago with some voodoo-guru-hoodoo mystic twenty years her senior who fed her bullshit and herbal tea, helping her to transcend the mundane and earthly enterprise of Detroit’s rave and club scene to which she had become so attached. She wasn’t hardcore – so few people were.

“Puff puff give, motherfuckah,” Maria had said in a throaty whisper. “You’re fucking up the rotation.”

He smiled and passed the bowl back. When it was cashed, she lay back and they stared at the ceiling, ten thousand miles away, until she asked: “are you gonna fuck me or what?” and they fucked noiselessly, warmly, with a grappling, pressing sense of two bodies trying to turn themselves inside out and enfold one another. That ended any talk of community college.

That was October. This was January, and Thomas and Baxter sat in their usual booth, blowing smoke up into the air, and thinking all the while of the futures that lay open or closed before them.

“DBC is a big deal,” Baxter said thoughtfully.

Thomas nodded and gave a weak “uh-huh” from somewhere near the top of his throat.

“Finesse and Mike Armstrong make enough to live off of,” Baxter said, excitement growing behind his blue eyes.

Thomas felt a pang of jealousy burn between his shoulders, and up to the back of his head.

“Yeah, that’ll be good – no more cover charges, right?” Thomas asked.

“I guess not,” Baxter said.

“Maybe I could open up for you, you know? Dust off the old tables?”

Baxter laughed and said, “yeah, soon as you learn how to spin.”

Thomas stirred his spoon around in his coffee, then put the spoon in his saucer. He forced a chuckle.

“Yeah, guess I’ll have to figure something else out then,” Thomas said.

“Get the money – dollar-dollar bill y’all,” Baxter said with a grin.

“Guess there’s always Ford,” Thomas said, but Baxter wasn’t listening.

Chapter 2.

The next day, Thomas groggily rolled out of bed at 2:00 in the afternoon. His sister Nicole was at school and his mother washed dishes in the kitchen. His father sat reading through a gray portfolio binder at the kitchen table, his thick brows furrowed in concentration as he turned the pages with his thick, nubby fingers.

Thomas tried to sneak into the refrigerator and fetch out a can of pop without attracting either parent's notice, but the silence was too thick, and when he cracked the top of the can, it cracked like a pistol shot. "You gonna sleep all day?" his father grumbled.

Thomas slinked into the dining room to catch his earful. He had nothing to say back to his father, and so he sat there idly fingering the rim and tab of his can and avoiding the big man's resentful gaze. The remains of Sunday breakfast lay on the table – one strip of bacon on a greasy plate, one sweet roll, a spoonful of scrambled eggs in a brown Pyrex pan.

Greg Kowalski looked like Thomas around the face, but the similarity emerged only after careful study. He was heavy-set and broad shouldered, a solid 250 pounds plus, and he bore the indignities of the working class like a man harassed by an agile mosquito on a hot summer day. He rarely smiled, and when he did, it was usually at someone else's misfortune. He loved to see the mighty fall, and he took a particular delight in the failings of politicians, bureaucrats, authorities, and academics while quickly excusing any indiscretions or faults of what he called hard-working Americans who had pulled

themselves up by their bootstraps. He idolized the working rich and aspired to join their ranks while never really understanding that he never could, that he was too boorish, too low-brow, and too coarse to ever be more than a low-level manager for one of the Big 3 automakers, which is exactly what he was.

He'd expected Thomas to follow his example, to graduate high school, get some sort of business degree from Macomb Community College or Wayne State University, and then queue up for a job at GM, Ford or Chrysler. He used to refer to a time when Thomas would "start working," but he didn't anymore.

"It's Sunday," Thomas said.

His father tried to stare him down, but Thomas knew an empty threat when he found one. He had never been struck or beaten as a child, never so much as paddled, and now at age twenty-two, he knew sure as hell that he wasn't going to catch it now. His father sat, sulking in impotent anger while Thomas' mother quailed and knocked dishes together in the sink.

Thomas' parents did not quite *hate* each other, but they certainly didn't share any love or companionship. Once, his mother had confided in Thomas that she stayed married to his father because, when his father died, she would receive the house free and clear. The idea depressed him – she was trading her entire life for a quarter acre of suburban backyard and a single-story ranch house with a furnished basement.

He lived with them as a low-rent boarder who tagged along to see the misery of half-hearted family holidays and received on his birthday and at Christmas little trinkets and gifts unfit for his position: ties, cufflinks, business card holders, all the trappings of a young professional.

His mother joined the conversation. She said “You never join us for breakfast, day off or not.”

“Or read the want-ads,” his father said.

Thomas let out a derisive snort of disinterest, a mean half-laugh. The last time they’d eaten breakfast as a family had ended very badly. Thomas’ sister Nicole had swallowed two bites of toast and a half-glass of orange juice before asking to be excused. Thomas’ father let his fork clatter onto his plate before launching into a tirade about family time, which he didn’t finish since his daughter got up and left halfway through, paying him no more mind than she did the television chattering in the next room. Thomas and his parents sat together, Thomas poking at his eggs, his mother staring at the napkin in her lap, and Greg Kowalski gnawing on the fingers of his hands that he’d crossed before his face, resting his mammoth forearms on the table. At last, the big man picked his fork back up and shoveled in a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

“These are dry,” he said.

Ellen Kowalski got up from the table and took her coffee to the living room. Gregg Kowalski deliberately finished his breakfast while Thomas timidly sipped his coffee.

“Eat something,” his father had said.

“I’m not hungry,” Thomas answered.

“What the hell did you put it on your plate for if you didn’t want it?” he asked, and when Thomas didn’t answer, added “I work hard to put food on the god-damned table and you just go and waste it.”

Thomas wrapped a piece of bacon in half a slice of white toast with margarine, and forced it down his throat before he too got up and left, feeling his father's angry stare in the back of his head.

That was two and a half years ago.

"I have a job" Thomas said taking a gulp of his drink. His father laughed mockingly.

"You work at a record store, for...how much?"

"Enough." Thomas said.

"And whatever you make you blow on clothes and that god-damned boom boom boom-"

Thomas turned his back on his father and walked back to his bedroom. There, he threw on a sweatshirt, then re-emerged through the kitchen, slipped past his father who still sat sulking at the dining room table, and walked through the ankle-deep snow over the un-shoveled walkway to his car.

Thomas knew where he was going when he left his house, and he was such a common visitor to Baxter's mother and father that they didn't even ask if he wanted a place at the table for Sunday brunch. Baxter's father was a lawyer, and he worked long four-day weeks. Baxter's mother was a housewife. Sunday was their day to laze around the house and eat well, and Baxter usually met up with them at mid-day to catch up over food, though last night he'd slept in his old room after Thomas dropped him off. They pulled out a chair for Thomas from the back room without the slightest break in conversation, this conversation in particular concerning the possibility of Baxter going back to college this year.

“I think it’s a fine idea,” his mother said. “If you went somewhere local, you could just move back into your old room to save money.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t want to move back in with us, Elyse” Baxter’s father said, but there was nothing evasive about it, nothing suggesting he wasn’t welcome, but a sly and sideways acknowledgement that his young playboy son didn’t want his parents cramping his style.

Thomas drank the coffee in front of him and picked at the slices of rye bread and prosciutto he had put on his plate. He was so familiar with this place that he knew every brick, every beam, and often in his dreams, when he dreamed of home, it was this house and not his own. In terms of dimension and layout, it was nearly identical to his own house, but Baxter’s family had only three members to Thomas’ four, and so the house was less cluttered, more focused, and more thoughtfully decorated.

In high school, Baxter’s parents could place his every trophy and award on the mantle above the gas fireplace and still have room to spare. Thomas and his sister’s tokens of accomplishment crowded together in a sloppy jumble, and would periodically be thrown out. In being thrown away, they were devalued, and being devalued, were earned less and less.

“What is it they call you now?” Baxter’s mother asked of him.

“DJ B-X-T, right?” Baxter’s father said.

“When do we get to see you play, mister B-X-T?” His mother asked.

Baxter only blushed and promised to make them a mix tape that week.

“See, he’s too big for his mom and pop now,” Baxter’s father chided.

Baxter's mother, taking her cue, clutched her sons head to her bosom and wailed "oh, my little baby is grown up so big!" and Baxter's embarrassment swelled up like an over-full balloon until he got up from the table and said "I'm out of here, you two are nuts!"

Thomas got up to follow, but Baxter's father called after him: "You gonna eat this, slim?"

Thomas hesitated before declining. Baxter's father shrugged, made a small sandwich, and wolfed it down in two voracious bites.

Thomas drove to Baxter's house. It was a small two-bedroom rental in Oak Park. Baxter picked it up shortly after dropping out of college and caught a lucky break – the owner was on hard times and looking to sell, but no one was buying. Baxter got the whole place for less than the owner's mortgage payment, and the owner had yet to find a more generous tenant – so it had gone for nearly two years.

Baxter by himself, working the sparse and irregular hours that he did, could barely afford the place on just his pay – but like Thomas he supplemented his income by selling drugs to his friends, and furnished the house with his parents monthly donations.

Baxter did not like to think of himself as a drug dealer per se, but then neither did Thomas. Even their friend Haas, who dealt in significant volume, preferred to think of himself as a promoter and a producer first. Baxter didn't sell very often, just when he wanted to make some quick cash for new records, or if he wanted to make some extra cash to hit up a big party out of town, but when Baxter *did* sell, he made a killing exactly because he did not need to. He had drugs which, should someone need or want them, he would happily sell. Haas was only slightly less amicable and laid back. Taking a cue

from Baxter, he pretended that his drugs were essentially communal property so long as, hey, if you don't mind could you chip in, say, ten bucks? Twenty? It hardly mattered, since he made his biggest money breaking up bricks, bags, and keys and selling them down to Thomas, Baxter, and a few dozen other such willing associates all over metropolitan Detroit, each with their own clientele and selling style. The nickel-and-dime stuff he was happy to let go because it got him laid, got him in the door, and made him a man-about-town.

Thomas *did* need the money from the nickel-and-dime stuff. As a seller he was okay, but he made too many people nervous – he was handsome, yes, but he looked shifty. He would approach revelers in clubs, at bars, or on the dance floor, or just as often outside the restroom, and casually say *pill* or *yayo* just inside his mark's earshot. Sometimes it worked, but more often the potential customer just looked at him screw-faced and dumb, not sure if Thomas was asking for or selling, and then after about half a second's consideration decided it wasn't worth the risk. There was no telling who might be a narc or a snitch.

So Thomas made his money by selling into his own group. Tony Gino bought coke at a premium so long as Thomas drove it out to Rochester Hills and spared Tony the trip to Warren. Nate Dogg was always good for 5-10 pills a week, and his own girlfriend had an understanding with him wherein she made token payments to help keep him afloat. Beyond this tightest group, he had many friends and acquaintances from days gone by, like his friend Stevie, who was usually down for a good bag of weed, or Salvatore – “Sally” – the rich Sicilian kid from St. Claire Shores who bought his pills retail and then sold them to his friends at a huge mark-up.

Baxter put on an old ATB mix CD and fired up a bowl of his best.

“You wanna call the girls?” Baxter asked.

Thomas said he wasn’t sure. On the one hand, there were the usual pleasantries of female company – sweet smells soft voices, contact, intimacy, and the inevitable quick lay – if not at Baxter’s then back at her place in Roseville. On the other hand, he didn’t feel especially amorous, or even interested in what Maria was doing, or where she was. Furthermore, if she came with Rachel (which she would) the two girls would inevitably fall into their usual snap-and-patter, roundly ignoring the boys and leaving them to play video games as they discussed whatever the hot news of the day.

“If we’re just going to play *Soulcalibur*, I don’t see why bother” Thomas said after some thought.

Baxter nodded, and shuffled over to the TV to turn on the playstation. They finished smoking the bowl, and packed another. It was good stuff without a name, what they just call KB’s or Kind Buds, big green clumps with little red hairs and frosty white crystals, smooth to smoke and very potent.

Thomas fetched beers from the refrigerator as the system warmed up. They sat in front of the couch rather than on it, and they lit up cigarettes and fell into the brutal back-and-forth of digital combat.

“You talk to Haas?” Baxter asked between matches.

“Thursday I guess – maybe Wednesday.”

“He’s got something going on I guess” Baxter said.

“Something like what?” Thomas asked, his Parliament burning down to ash between his lips.

“He didn’t say.”

They sat there for two more rounds of combat, about three minutes all told. Their spines relaxed, their eyelids sank, their faces grew hot and time slowed down all around them.

“What?” Thomas asked.

“What *what*?”

“Random,” Thomas said, and Baxter shrugged.

“Give him a call if you want to know,” Baxter said.

“Why would I want to know?”

“I don’t know, just, if you want to know I guess.”

“Oh. Okay, yeah. Thanks!” Thomas said, unsure of what he was thankful for, but thankful nonetheless.

“I’m gonna call ‘em,” Baxter said. Naturally, there was some confusion over just who he intended to call, but after a few minutes it became clear that he meant the girls, and not Haas, and Thomas was fine with that. He felt fine with everything.

Baxter went to the phone in the kitchen to call Rachel. Thomas watched the menu screen with its endless parade of demo matches that all ended the same, over and over again, while imploring someone to press “start.” Baxter came in and did so, beating Thomas soundly since Thomas “wasn’t ready.”

The girls were there in minutes. They were cousins, but they looked almost nothing alike. Roughly the same height, and showing proud chins and cheekbones, but that was as far as the resemblance went. Maria was round-faced and voluptuously shaped for her small frame. She wore her long black hair in twin pigtails and dressed in a raver’s

costume – baggy pants, an oversized polo shirt, a red visor, and plastic beads. Tonight, she wore only seven bangles on her wrist and two around her neck. This passed for conservative - were this a party, the numbers would jump to twenty and six respectively.

Rachel was pixie-faced and lean, small breasted and slim-hipped. She wore a gray turtle neck sweater and black slacks, which she felt looked much more sophisticated than it really did. She was trying to conjure up a timeless and urban chic – instead, she looked boring and dark.

In fashion, both girls were well matched to their boyfriends – both adopted symbolic extremes of their partner’s styles. Maria the overblown raver-chick seemed to say of Thomas’ understated party clothes: *this* is how it’s done. Rachel, an icon of suburban sleek catgirl perfectly complemented Baxter’s safe, conservative clothing. Beyond this most superficial aspect of self, they were all poorly matched. Baxter, laid back, easy going, pampered and privileged, had to constantly urge Rachel to unwind, to relax, to chill while she, high-strung and straining with nervous energy, asked indirect and leading questions about his career, their relationship, their plans for the weekend – oftentimes Baxter found all this worry exhausting, and she felt the same about his lackadaisical disinterest.

Thomas increasingly found Maria hard to bear. For one thing, she was too energetic, but where Rachel was super-charged to make what she considered progress, Maria spun and wheeled like a disconnected dynamo, energy arcing off in every which way but a focused conduit. She worked to party, slept between parties, got high to relax between parties, and then snorted dangerous amounts of cocaine so that she could party

longer and longer each night. Her life was a thin soup of fleeting contacts, drugs, and music which she had long since stopped enjoying in a meaningful way.

Not that Thomas was better directed. Clutching desperately through his depressive funks for something, anything, that might bring him real happiness, he snatched anything that floated by and found it wanting. To say he was depressed or bipolar or any other such diagnosis would be a gross over-simplification, an over-simplification implying that Thomas could take a pill and cough up a smile. He'd been trying that for years.

“You boys are fucking *high*,” Rachel said as she waved blue smoke out of her face.

“Hey Pumpkin,” Maria said as she flopped heavily onto the couch behind Thomas.

“Hey boo-boo” he replied, exchanging pet names before trading a quick, loud kiss. Thomas returned to the television and found the current fight paused.

“Get a room” Maria shouted loudly, too loudly, at Baxter and Rachel who were kissing languidly and deeply in the foyer.

“Okay” Baxter said, and grabbed Rachel by the sleeve of her sweater. He drug her behind as he walked towards his bedroom and she, fearful for the shirt, shrieked “No, no!” while letting him lead her away.

“Come on, I just want to show you something,” Baxter laughed.

“Baxter Christian Mancini I am warning you!” Rachel growled playfully as they disappeared into the back bedroom.

“So...” Maria said with trepidation as she began to rub Thomas’ neck and shoulders.

“So what?” Thomas asked as he surrendered his tension to her hands.

“Skin and bones!” she said as she counted out the clearly visible vertebrae of his neck. He said nothing, letting her work the knots out of his long and stringy muscles.

“Do you have anything?” she asked, as he expected she would. Wordlessly he pulled a slender metal phial from his pocket and handed it over. Her hands vanished from his neck, leaving a shadowy coldness in their place. He continued to stare at the paused video game on the screen. He heard the jingle of keys and the clatter of plastic key chains behind him, and when she sniffed one and then another bump of cocaine off her broad silver house key, he sniffed sympathetically.

“Are you sick, Pumpkin?” She asked.

“No, it’s – no, I’m fine” he said. He waited for the return of her hands on his neck, but they did not come. Her cell phone rang – she answered it and started talking a mile a minute to someone on the other end who she called “Bubbles.” Thomas leaned his back against her knees, trying to get her attention.

“What do *you* want?” she asked teasingly, knowing full well, and whispering “one sec, pumpkin” to him in preparation to hang up, but then another call came in, which she answered. This one from someone she called “Huggles” and she forgot about his massage.

Baxter and Rachel returned to the living room ten minutes later, smelling of lust and sweat. Baxter entered the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Maria kept talking on the phone. Rachel asked who it was, and Maria explained that it was Huggles and

Cuddles. Rachel asked Maria to tell them she said “hi,” and they began a four way conversation.

“Oh, Jenna called me,” Rachel said.

“Who? Jenna from Windsor?” Maria asked.

“No, from work – I used to work with her. I told you about her,” Rachel said.

“No, she used to work with her,” Maria repeated into her phone, and then said “Huggles wants to know who Jenna from work is.”

“She’s sort of a friend, I dunno – I haven’t talked to her in...this is stupid, somebody three-way me on the house phone,” she said, and she went into the kitchen. The phone rang, Rachel answered, and the conversation resumed.

Baxter, flush-faced and sleepy-eyed, sat down next to Thomas. He handed Thomas another beer, lit a cigarette, and pushed “start.”

Chapter 3.

The rumors began to leak on Monday, so Tuesday Haas made it official and put out the word that he was having a party – not some overblown house party, not a club night, but an honest-to-God old fashioned rave. Crackhouse laws be damned. The title was “PLUR-fect fit,” but almost no other real details were available. In keeping with tradition, party kids could pick up fliers at RecordTime in Ferndale, DeeJay Deelight, and a half dozen other record stores around the Detroit metro area.

Responses varied.

What the fuck, seriously? Why even bother one ex-raver posted on Detroit Luv, a local internet message board, to which another responded: *U R Just 2 jaded, so SHUT UP KTHX!*

Eventually, a sort of battle line drew up between those that thought throwing a party was a supremely stupid idea, and those that thought it was going to save the Detroit scene.

Thomas was guardedly enthusiastic, and he had more pressing matters on his mind. He had only two hundred dollars in the bank, his car was low on gas, and his father had resumed his old threat to raise his rent to 250 per month (he was paying 200 at the time, which gave him his room, bath, and kitchen – in short, his life as it has been for the last twenty-two years.)

“You are twenty-two years old,” his father reminded him. “When I was your age, I’d been at GM for five years and was already in line for promotion.”

Thomas poured his half-cup of coffee down the sink.

“Hell, I was almost married when I was your age. I was committed to things. Your problem is you’ve got no sense of commitment.”

Thomas didn’t bother to argue. He left the house and dropped in on his old friend Stevie. Stevie worked in Huntington Woods, at a little tool-and-die shop off of I-94. His job involved precision boring new machine parts on a per-order basis. He never, or rarely, knew what the parts were, and he stopped caring after the first week. He had been pulling the same drill handle for just under four years.

“Fuck that” Stevie said between bites of his hot club sandwich. “I’m plenty committed and it doesn’t get me a god-damned thing.”

They were the same age, Thomas and Stevie, but you’d have to study their faces, their manner, and their easy interaction to tell. Stevie looked careworn beyond his years. He was clean shaven and wore his hair neatly trimmed, but there was a grit of shopfloor filth rubbed into his skin, demarking the tiny creases in his hands and face. His nails were ragged and uneven, and he wore two big bandages among the criss-crossed web of scars on his left hand. He had a square jaw and a broad nose that in his youth had seemed leonine, but now seemed slow, dull, and ogre-ish. He shoveled the sandwich into his broad mouth and ate without tasting.

“You want some fries or something?” he offered to Thomas, who politely declined.

“I got a steady job and a kid and it hasn’t done a whole hell of a lot for me.”

Stevie gulped down another massive bite of his sandwich and then dipped three large French fries into ranch dressing. He paused with the fries halfway to his mouth before saying “don’t get me wrong – I love the little diaper-filler.”

“Just not the...” Thomas was going to say *just not the bills*, but this conversation already leaned towards Stevie *not* buying a bag of weed, what with his eyes misty with paternal responsibility and all. But Thomas didn’t know how to change the tack of the conversation, so he simply blurted out: “How’s your stash?”

“Why, you need some?” Stevie joked, but it was obvious then that he knew why Thomas had come, had suspected all along, and was now disappointed that this was the only reason for the visit.

“Nah, nah” Thomas said. “Just got a really good hook up and wondered if-“

“Oh, heh, yeah, I’m not really into that anymore” Stevie said. Thomas had not seen his friend in three months, a whole season had passed, his son had started walking – plenty of time to change your mind on what you were and were not into.

The rest of their lunch meeting was spent in awkward attempts at conversation. Stevie brought up the Pistons, but Thomas hadn’t followed the season. Likewise, he didn’t know about the Wings, the Lions, or anything about the new Tiger’s line up. Stevie ate now with torturous slowness, and since Thomas had only a cup of coffee, he could do little but fiddle awkwardly with sugar packets, stack creamers into towers and pyramids, and signal the waitress first for more coffee, and then at long last for the check

“I guess I’ll see you around,” Stevie said, and they went their separate ways.

Thomas was at work by 2:00, laboring with an unusual intensity, an intensity that only manifested itself when he was hard up for cash – really hard up. Nearly every month he participated in a cycle of earning, spending, and lamentation. He earned a little money from work, sold his stash, vowed to himself that he would put some of the money away,

and then spent it on parties, clubs, clothes, records or drugs. Then, as his bank balance approached zero, he would feel sick and stupid for wasting his money. This feeling dwelt in the back of his mind while he focused his attention on filling out order forms and invoice sheets. When he worked like this, it was a penance, as though he could suffer his way out of debt.

His poverty crawled over him like a wet rash. His last 200 dollars was as good as spoken for, and payday was not for another eight days. In between order forms, he ran a tally for himself on a spare sheet of graph paper: Two hundred minus thirty for gas, sixty for food, twenty for smokes, left only ninety— less than nothing, especially if gas went up again that week, or if he smoked too many cigarettes. He scratched out his first estimate, ran the numbers again, and decided he realistically only had seventy dollars left, but then re-re-ran them to cut his meal budget from sixty to forty. It was nothing for him to skip meals. He had not eaten in two days. He averaged five hours of sleep per night.

He wondered where the time went. He worked more-or-less full time, but was legally a part-time employee. Sure, there were weeks that he would put in fifty, sixty hours, but most weeks he was kept at thirty-two to thirty-six. No insurance, no savings, just a bi-weekly paycheck and the benefits of working at the best-connected record store in metro Detroit. Everyone came through here eventually, looking for new tables, needles, PA's, wire, covers, cases – anything and everything a DJ might need.

He always made the party. Five nights a week he made it out. Sometimes he'd crash and "call in sick" for a few days, but if there was anything worth doing, Thomas was there. Tonic on Wednesdays, Clutch Cargo on Thursdays, parties or One-X on Fridays or maybe Three Floors of Fun at St. Andrew's, parties or Motor on Saturday,

Majestic on Sunday, Buddha lounge on Monday. Only Tuesday was free with any degree of consistency, and even then, not always. Too many acts did good off-night shows on Tuesday. He'd caught both Basement Jaxx and The Orbital on Tuesdays at St. Andrew's, and paid dearly for it at work the next day, but you simply didn't miss something like that. It just wasn't done.

Thomas lost his train of thought and threw his figure sheet in the trash. Tomorrow he met with Haas. Tomorrow he would hand over his roll, nearly two thousand dollars, in exchange for a wholesale quantity of coke, weed, E, whatever Haas had on hand. He'd been doing this for six months and he had yet to pull ahead. Money out was significantly greater than money in. He could just take the roll and split. He did have that option – but even he knew that it was incredibly short-sighted. He could take that two thousand dollars, yes, and there would be no real hard feelings, but it was only two thousand dollars, and Haas would cut him completely out of the loop.

He paced around the front of the store. It was mid-day and there were no customers. He retrieved a brown feather duster from underneath the register and went to work cleaning the bins of records – dozens of crates holding thousands of 12" vinyl LPs, sorted by genre and name: Techno M-N, House A – Ca, Jungle X,Y,Z. There were three mannequins at the front of the store in the big display window facing Dequindre road, and he cleaned these too, dusting off their faces, hands and hats, and shaking the dust out of their clothes. They rarely sold any T-shirts or hats – the pants and sneakers on the mannequins were just for show – but they carried them. All displayed logos for electronic manufacturers or record labels – Sony and Technics, Plus8 and Ghostly International.

There were three news magazine racks at the front of the store. One was empty, the other held copies of *The MetroTimes* and the next held its competitor *Detroit Weekly*. These were competing free news magazines that delivered local news and event coverage in the front, and ran advertisements for events and call girls in the back – the *Village Voice* of Detroit. On top of the *MetroTimes* stack was the store’s supply of fliers advertising Haas’ party. Thomas picked one up and read it for the umpteenth time: *Mustang Productions and Detroit Beat Collective are proud to present:*

PLUR-fect Fit
Aka
Where’s Your Egg?
One nite of hardkore old skool. Dust off your UFO’s, polish up your
pacifier, and rave your face off!

The back of the flier named the DJ’s spinning: DreemKetcher, Mike Armstrong, DJ Finesse, and a special guest to be named later. There was a brief biography for each, stating where they were from, what they played, and how much they were looking forward to spinning at the event. There would be a ten dollar cover, and the info line number was one that Thomas recognized as one of Haas’ home numbers, a line that would ring to a phone in the basement and be immediately answered by a machine telling partiers where to go, and reminding them of the cover charge and line-up.

As he read, his own phone rang, and he answered to speak to a very excited Baxter.

“Dude, who the fuck is spinning at Haas’ party?” Baxter asked by way of a greeting.

“I dunno, some of the DBC guys?” Thomas ventured.

“AND one motherfucking DJ B-X-T!” Baxter exclaimed.

“You’re the special guest?” Thomas asked.

“Yeah, you read the flier? That’s me – I’m going on at three!”

“That’s great,” Thomas said limply.

“Yeah, well, just wanted to share the news,” Baxter said.

“I gotta go, I’m at work,” Thomas said, and hung up his phone.

Thomas put the phone in his pocket, and replaced the flier. He picked the feather duster back up and resumed cleaning.

“Good for Bax,” Thomas said to no one.

Chapter 4.

Wednesday, Thomas woke up at Maria's house. Pre-dawn gray moped in through the slits between the broken blinds and cast everything in a gloomy pallor. Thomas rolled out of bed, freezing cold outside of the blankets. The floor was carpeted and relatively warm.

He pulled on his pants, the same tattered blue jeans he'd worn the day before, an oversized yellow polo shirt, and a black stocking cap. The cap had been a gift from a pie-eyed candy raver at Hullabaloo in Toronto two years ago. The kid had told Thomas that he was "such an awesome dancer – I want you to have this so you remember me forever!" Thomas forgot the kid's name, but he remembered the monstrous neon beads, the flashing lights around the kid's face, the smell of vics vap-o-rub, and that the kid was disturbingly touchy-feely. Thomas was pretty sure the kid was gay, but on E, everyone was a little gay. Everyone touched everyone, talked too close, hugged too freely, and made lifelong commitments they could never keep.

It was a good hat though – real wool.

Thomas padded downstairs to the kitchen to where Maria's mother sat smoking menthol cigarettes and drinking coffee. He was very familiar with the kitchen - linoleum floor, breakfast bar, stainless steel sink, avocado-green refrigerator from 1977. It was clean insofar as it could be – there were decades of dirt and spills scrubbed into the cracks in the floor. The wood veneer countertop had been rubbed bare of color in places, and it had deep gouges and nicks from the times when people could not be bothered to

use a cutting board. Thomas poured himself a half cup, and filled it the rest of the way with sugar and cream.

“Have some breakfast, skin-and-bones” Maria’s mother called out to him.

Thomas did not want breakfast, and his mind was working ten steps ahead of him. Today he would make the rounds. The knot in his stomach unwound itself, and although he wasn’t hungry, he felt that he could, and should, probably eat a couple slices of toast. He pulled a bag of white wonderbread from the refrigerator, put two slices in the toaster, and mashed the lever down. He pulled out the huge brown tub of country crock and grabbed a butter knife from the dish rack.

“We have real butter, if you like,” Maria’s mother said.

“S’okay” Thomas replied. He couldn’t really taste the difference.

“Have some juice,” Maria’s mother said.

Thomas pulled out the glass bottle of orange juice and filled another coffee cup. He drank, but the sourness disagreed with him. He put it down. The house phone rang, and Maria’s mother went to answer it. She let out an exasperated “huh,” which Thomas had come to learn in his time at this house meant that Maria’s father was on the phone.

“No...no, this is your day!” Maria’s mother said into the handset in the other room.

The toast popped up. Thomas smeared it with margarine and took a bite. It was salty and rich, but otherwise almost flavorless. The orange juice was already making trouble in his empty stomach, and he wasn’t sure he could finish both slices of bread.

“Equal custody,’ Maria’s mother said from the other room, “means you have to take her on your days just like I have to take her on mine...No, it is not a goddamned *punishment!*”

They were discussing Maria’s 14-year-old sister Brittney. Thomas had heard this exact same conversation before, nearly verbatim.

His own cell phone chirped and buzzed. This alarm meant that it was time to leave for the mall, where he was to meet Haas. He poured his coffee and orange juice down the drain, rinsed out the cups, tossed one and three quarter slices of buttered toast in the trash, and walked out the front door.

Last night had been relatively warm, warm enough to dump six inches of snow on the ground, but today was freezing cold. The side streets would be treacherous. Thomas’ car was covered under a thick and uneven blanket. Snow is a significant part of life in Michigan – there is an old joke that says there are only two seasons in the state: shovel and swat (Michigan is mostly swamp and forest, and is an Eden for mosquitoes in the summer). Now it was time to shovel. The snow was even and softly piled, which meant last night had been nearly windless. The snow was fluffy on top and compacted on the bottom – a wet snow that had melted and re-frozen on his warm car. He couldn’t find his snow brush, hadn’t been able to find it all winter, and had meant to replace it but he hadn’t gotten around to it. Like an umbrella, a snow brush was the sort of thing you only think about when you need it and don’t have it.

Thomas swept his car clean with broad sweeps of his arm, pulling the sleeve of his sweatshirt up over his hand and pinching it off into a closed tube, like a cotton sausage. When the bulk of the snow was cleared, he pulled his driver’s license from his

wallet and began to scrape at the ice on his windshield. Halfway through he thought to start his car and turn on the heat so that the defroster would help him in his task, and he would not be so miserably cold when he got into the driver's seat. Already his fingers and toes were numb. His nose was running – he couldn't quite feel it, but he did feel a sudden warmth on his upper lip. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and regretted it immediately because his sleeve was soaked with cold melted and re-freezing snow.

He finally cleared his car and sat down in the blessed warmth of the driver's seat. He put his numb hands over the heat vents until they could bend and flex without pain, then he stomped his feet on the floor to regain some feeling and circulation in his toes. His pants were crusted with snow up to the middle of his calves, and it came off in clumps when he stomped.

He'd once helped a friend move to a new apartment in the dead of winter, a day much colder than this, and he dropped a table top on his foot, leaving a sizable gash between two of his toes. The cut didn't bleed for ten minutes, and when it did, the blood just sort of oozed out like strawberry jam.

Suitably warm at last, he felt a euphoric relief and smiled. He rapped three times on the center console, inside of which rested \$1,714.00. It was an old good luck ritual of his, that knocking, as if he were crossing himself – one knock each for the father, the son, and the holy ghost, or maybe one for each word of *fuck the police*.

He put the car in gear and inched it out of the drive way, down the suburban side streets, slipping, sliding, and barely keeping control of his car the whole way. The houses were buried in white, and were mostly identical. Single-story ranch houses with finished basements, one wide bay window in front, no porch, slanted roof. Some still had

Christmas decorations up, and some had more shrubbery out front, or a tree or two, but otherwise they were all the same. He turned right on Groesbeck, a six-lane highway flanked by bars, strip-malls, restaurants, and small corporate offices, and took that south to I-696. I-696 is a ditch dug through the northern suburbs, beginning in Farmington Hills in the west and terminating at I-94 to the east. A running joke among suburban police goes that if Detroit should ever have another riot, the plan is to flood the ditch and shoot anyone coming north.

He drove the freeway to Dequindre, which in this part of town so closely mirrored Gratiot that description would be redundant. He turned left on 14 mile, and then rode that down to the intersection of John R – the Oakland Mall.

Haas waited near the easternmost entrance. He wore a slick leather jacket with an unfastened belt around the waist. His hair was gelled back and shiny. He was clean shaven and when Thomas gave him a half-hug, half handshake, he noticed Haas smelled of soap and a liberal application of cologne.

“You gotta be freezing your ass off” Haas said.

“Yeah, forgot my jacket,” Thomas said.

Haas leaned against his car, a new, black Ford Focus. It made Thomas’ ’96 Grand Prix look old and busted by comparison. Thomas’ car was still half crusted with snow and road salt while Haas’ car was newly washed. Thomas didn’t like the contrast – he took a small measure of pride in his car: it wasn’t new, but it was in tip-top shape, well maintained and as rust-free as any car could hope to stay after six years in Michigan. The engine was a powerful V-6. The sound system was custom (although the power button

was broken and took several tries to click “on” whenever Thomas turned it off), and the bass from the bin in the trunk could rattle windows for blocks around.

The parking lot was nearly empty. The mall security cars sat huddled together in a specially reserved block of spots by the entrance, and otherwise there was only a chunk of conversion vans, minivans, and old model sedans indicating that the early rush of mall walkers were inside lacing up and stretching out.

“You hungry?” Haas asked as he pulled out a paper lunch bag from the side panel of his Focus. “I got this bitch that works at Sbarro, get you a slice of pizza or some shit.”

Thomas smoothly traded his roll of bills for the paper bag.

“Shits been blowin’ up,” Thomas said. He pointed to the square bulge in his pants pocket, his cell phone. “I gotta meet up with Baxter, the J’s, and probably run on down to Rachel’s place.”

Haas’ grin dipped.

“So you don’t want to hang out or nothin’ then?” he asked.

Thomas looked down at his watch and tried to excuse himself.

“Only time I hear from motherfuckers is when they want something,” Haas said while angrily cramming the roll of money into his jacket pocket.

Haas was a go-to guy for hundreds of people. He did very little serious business, but he was able to afford his new car and a busy nightlife by selling weed, coke, acid, mushrooms, ecstasy, ketamine, and GHB about a dose, hit, or bag at a time thereby skirting any necessary volume discounts and selling what he has for maximum profit. This made him many friends within Detroit’s factious and diverse nightlife scene, but they were only the bedfellows of commerce. Subconsciously Haas knew this, and it

affected him. He had friends because he had drugs, and he got drugs so that he could have friends. Consciously, he had long since lost sight of this and he was beginning to consider his fair-weather friends as disloyal or untrue, which of course, they were.

Haas had always been a second-tier friend for Thomas. They'd gotten drunk together, gotten high together, gone around with the same groups of people – both had enjoyed brief run-arounds with Redhead Cassandra - but Thomas has never called Haas out of the blue, just to hang out.

So he didn't know why he pushed back his errands when he agreed to go into the mall and have a slice of pizza with Haas, but when he tried to explain it to himself later, the only thing he could think was that he sort of felt sorry for the guy.

Haas introduced Thomas to Cecilia, who was a short, large-breasted Chaldean girl. She was nineteen years old. She put two slices of cheese pizza on a plastic tray and handed them to Haas who let her kiss his cheek.

“... so I got a little bit everywhere. I got this girl here, I got this bitch up at Recordtime – see this?” he asked, opening his phone and pointing the display towards Thomas, “all bitches.”

They sat at a table in the food court. The table was big enough for three. The stores around them had just opened. There were low chuckles here and there as workers greeted one another with old jokes and grunted good-mornings. There were nods, polite half-smiles, stories of hangovers, and muttered platitudes like *another day, another fuckin' buck* and *is it five o'clock yet?*

A procession of senior citizens, mall-walkers, about two dozen in all, marched around the perimeter of the court two-by-two. Haas and Thomas watched them go first

around the outside of one corner, the inside of another, and another, and then out of the food court and down past the kiosks selling cell phones, sunglasses, and exotic dead-sea-salt lotion.

“You still with Vee-vee?” Haas asked, using Maria’s party nick-name. It stood for “visor and vicks,” her two ever-present rave accessories, a red visor and an inhaler tube of Vicks vap-o-rub. They were a sort of trademark for her, and so some people called her “visor girl” and others called her “vee-vee.” The visor was a fashion accessory. She used the inhaler to give out *sea breezes* – blowing out through the inhaler into the face of someone on ecstasy to give them a tingly rush.

“Yeah, still doing that,” Thomas said.

“Don’t sound to excited or nothing.”

Thomas shrugged. “She’s alright,” he said.

“Gonna be *lots* of bitches at this party,” Haas said.

“I dunno – I’m trying to do the whole faithful thing, you know?”

“Well, if that’s working for you,” Haas said.

They finished their pizza, mostly in uncomfortable silence, and they threw their paper plates away.

“I’m doing a thing at the Slaughterhouse,” Haas says, “so if you aren’t doing nothing why don’t you come on down and party.”

“I know...everyone knows. It sounds good,” Thomas said. Haas’ smile came back, bigger than ever.

“I’ll see you there bro,” Haas said, and they parted ways.

The rest of the week, Thomas rushed from one side of town to the other. On Thursday, he picked up Baxter in Oak Park and sold him an eight ball for \$225. They drove down to DeeJay Deelight and Baxter bought his new needles – they chatted easily, any trace of jealousy on Thomas part had either subsided, or had been buried deep down so that he didn't feel it as he drove. At the store, Thomas talked to Simon, the night shift manager. He wanted a few grams and was willing to pay extra for the short notice.

After dropping off Baxter, he sped out to Dearborn to drop in on Rachel. One peculiarity of Baxter and Rachel's relationship was their monetary self-reliance – thus, Baxter would not buy drugs for Rachel, and Rachel would not buy drugs for Baxter. They went Dutch when they dined out; they paid their own cover charges. They said that this made it more special when one buys something for the other, even if it was only a drink at the bar or some other such consumable trifle. It was weird to Thomas, who never thought that hard about it. He didn't mind the extra trip since he always nibbled a little bit of extra money out of Rachel to cover his gas and time.

On Friday, Thomas drove to Rochester with a delivery for Tony Gino. Tony's apartment was Spartan in its furnishings, but his closet flowed over with designer clothes carelessly draped on wire hangers. The living room was a spider web of network cables and power cords – the tools of Tony's trade. Amid the uneven glow of four computer monitors, Tony paid Thomas \$275.00 for an eight ball, with a promise that he would see him that weekend downtown.

His friends and acquaintances, seemingly without number, called to remind him of their obliged meeting and he deferred several to either the next week or downtown at

the party, but still he drove back and forth relentlessly. He worked, he slept, he sold, and by Saturday he had just under \$2,500 cash.

Saturday evening, he stopped in at 7-11 for a red bull. He did a bump off of his house key out of his own supply from the tiny metal phial in his pocket, and his spirits, which had begun to sag under the weight of his obligations and the tedium of cross-town freeway travel, immediately revived. He shook his head and with a sudden welling-up of excitement turned on his subwoofer. His phone rang. The caller ID read Maria, but he was already on the way to her house. She would only be asking what he's doing, which she already knew, and if he was holding anything (likewise) and if he would spot her a few lines at the party (he will.) He rejected the call, and rapped three times on the center console and drove to Roseville.

He was there by 8:00. He let himself in and found Brittney sitting in front of the television, playing video games on her Super Nintendo.

"Hey brat," he said. She nodded towards him, but didn't look up. He watched the blue light flicker on her upturned face and thought of a lawn gnome in the rain. She looked like her sister in that she was lean-limbed and tall, but Brittney was darker, more Latin. Her hair was dark brown, almost black, but frosted with silver-blonde highlights. Her skin was darker than her sisters, as were her eyes.

"She's upstairs getting ready," she said.

"Your mom found you a sitter?" Thomas asked.

"I'm fourteen," Brittney answered.

Thomas went upstairs. Maria sat at her desk, which doubled as a vanity when she spread her makeup out over her workspace. A stack of papers sat shoved to the side, a

stack which held her diploma from Central Michigan University, her resume, and an 8x10 picture of herself shaking hands with former governor Jim Blanchard. Atop that stack she had placed her blood-red visor, and that itself encircled a heaping bundle of bracelets and necklaces made of brilliant plastic beads.

“Hey,” Thomas said as he stepped into Maria’s room.

“Hey,” she answered.

“Your mom find someone?” he asked as he reclined on her bed.

“She’s fourteen,” Maria said as she brushed her cheeks with sweetly-scented glitter.

Energy 52’s *Café Del Mar* was giving way to Binary Finary’s 1998 on Maria’s small plastic CD boombox. Thomas recognized it as Paul Oakenfold’s *Tranceport* mix, a huge hit from two years before that seemed to be holding up well.

“I know how old she is,” Thomas said, “that’s why someone should keep an eye on her.”

“I didn’t need to be *baby*-sat when I was fourteen,” Maria said.

“Well, your mom said she does, so-“

“So what? Who cares? Let her stay home then.”

“-so maybe you should stay in tonight, baby,” he said, and immediately regretted his choice of words.

“No, fuck that, I am *not* staying in tonight. Here, listen,” she said and went to the doorframe of her bedroom. “Brittney!” she yelled.

“Maria, seriously,” he said.

“No, hold on – Brittney!”

Thomas shrugged and studied a dusty snow globe on Maria's nightstand. Inside was Tinkerbell from *Peter Pan*, and the snow was sparkling glitter. It was covered in deep and settled dust, the plastic snowflakes unmoving.

Brittney came upstairs and stood just outside the door.

"Brittney, did you eat dinner yet?" Maria asked.

"No," her sister replied.

"Okay. There's some frozen chicken nuggets in the freezer--"

"I know."

"--and make sure you eat some salad or something. Or some green beans. Don't use the stove, use the microwave, okay?"

"I know."

"I want you in bed by midnight," Maria said.

"Can Justin come over?" Brittney asked.

"Who's Justin?"

"A friend," Brittney said.

"No. Be in bed by midnight. Got it?"

"I know," Brittney said.

"Got it?"

"Yeah," Brittney said, and went back downstairs.

"See? She's fine," Maria said.

Thomas sat up on the bed. "Where's your mother?"

"Out on a date or something -- look, she won't know if I'm not here, so whatever."

“What if something happens?”

Maria flushed angrily. “Nothing is going to happen!” she said. “She’s fourteen, she can fucking take care of herself, alright? Would you stop fucking worrying about it?”

“Fine,” he said, “forget I brought it up.”

Maria sat back down at her desk, took a deep breath, and went back to her makeup.

“I’m going over to Baxter’s before the party.” He said.

She lined her eyes and turned to face Thomas.

“I don’t have anything,” she said, “Can you leave some with me?”

Thomas frowned.

“I guess,” he said.

“Not a lot,” she said, “just for me.”

“Sure,” he said, “I can do that.”

He dumped out a small quantity of cocaine onto a black-framed hand mirror – about half a gram. Maria looked at it expectantly, but kept applying her makeup. Thomas leaned over her shoulder, gave her a quick kiss, and excused himself to go. He was halfway down the stairs when he heard Maria sniff up what he’d left her. He said goodbye to Brittney, who ignored him, and he left by the front door.

Chapter 5.

In Auburn Hills, Rachel had dressed her friend Jenna in old rave clothes. Jenna was taller than Rachel. She had thick brown hair and light brown eyes. Her face was oval and strong-chinned. Her nose was so perfectly normal that it demanded comment on its un-noteworthiness. She looked clumsy. If she tripped and fell, no one would be surprised.

“So do I have to do ‘E’ or whatever?” Jenna asked.

Rachel told her no. “Be yourself, have fun, dance,” Rachel said, and then began to recount the more well-known rules of the rave scene: no beer or booze of any kind, Rachel explained - weed, pills, acid, coke, and K are all okay. Glass was for grown-ups. Likewise, jaded veterans could drink if they were *in* – if they knew someone and would be allowed by security to bring a bottle in. There would be water, Gatorade, and Red Bull on ice. If Jenna wants to dance, she should. If she doesn’t want to dance, she should try anyway, and if she wants to dance but is afraid, she should pop a pill.

PLUR was an acronym, standing for peace, love, unity, and respect. This was the rule that encompassed all others. Rachel explained this, but did not tell Jenna that it was an old rule, a rule that no longer fit because as everyone knew, the scene was dead. Rachel thought there would probably be enough new people at the party tonight that Jenna wouldn’t feel out of place, and if she were told to go into it like a real raver she would shed enough inhibition to make some friends, which Rachel understands that Jenna desperately needs. Jenna was an old friend – not old like a confidant, but old like

outgrown clothes. Rachel had not seen Jenna for months – tonight she would learn if the fit was still good, but she already suspected that it was not.

The phone rang. Baxter was on the other end.

“Whatup sluts?” he asked, and Rachel told him that they are dressing up to go find some dick. Baxter wished her luck, and their game was over.

“What time are you showing up?” Baxter asked.

“Probably midnight,” she answered.

“So one then?”

“Shut up!” she laughed, but it was true. They would meet at around one o’clock in the morning.

“Did you see Thomas?” she asked him, and he explained through a long series of ambiguous circumlocutions that yes, they did meet and that he had enough powder for the both of them.

“I’ll see you down there – go back to your lesbian tickle-fight.” Baxter teased, and Rachel began moaning and panting into the phone, calling out Jenna’s name. She hung up.

“So?” Jenna asked, and Rachel explained the plan for the night. Jenna could not believe they were ready so early for a party that would start so late, but Rachel told her to relax and asked what there is to do out in Auburn Hills – the far north-east.

Jenna described her own house, her father’s house, as boring and gay. She suggested they go out to Denny’s for coffee or dinner, something. Rachel thought that sounded fine, since they had two hours to kill, but she could not fathom spending the next

two hours eating cheese sticks and playing with plastic creamer cups. She vowed that somehow she would persevere.

“How do I look?” Jenna asked.

The clothes took Rachel back years – she used to dress this way: “phat pants” that dwarfed and hid her stick-figure legs, a yellow extra-large Polo shirt on her petite chest, and a collection of colorful plastic beads hand-strung into necklaces and bracelets. Each one had its own story – the blue-and-pink bracelet came from *We Are Huffalumps* in Chicago. The Orange necklace with jack o’ lantern beads came from *SooperSpooky* at the Firehouse in ’97. Jenna also had a brand-new pacifier, which they called a woobie, hanging around her neck on a black shoelace. It was there to keep her from grinding her teeth into dust should she decide to take ecstasy.

Jenna’s red visor was Rachel’s finishing touch. Her cousin, Maria, has dozens just like it. The visor was old and tattered, but still brilliant in color. Rachel thought it would help Jenna look more authentic, as if she had worn out the cap herself. Rachel told Jenna that she looked fine, and they left.

At the door they met Jenna’s father Roy, who was home for lunch. He worked second shift at Allied Fabrication.

“What the hell are you wearing?” he asked his daughter, gaping at her outlandishly huge pants.

“I found your old bell bottoms,” Jenna teased.

Jenna’s father shook his head and said “Disco’s dead, dude.”

“I think she looks hot,” Rachel said.

“You can’t even see her under all that cloth,” Roy said as he walked past them and into the kitchen.

“I’ll be back later,” Jenna yelled to him.

“Where are you going?” he asked from the kitchen.

They told him they are going to Denny’s for coffee, which was true, if only for now. His presence reminded them that they would have to be back either before 4:00 A.M. or at least an hour after so that they wouldn’t have to deal with him when they returned. In the driveway, Rachel suggested that Jenna drive since Jenna’s car was a nice, new Chevy Malibu. Rachel’s car was in her own estimation a piece of shit – a ’96 Dodge Duster she’d had to buy when she wrecked her much nicer, if older, Ford Escort.

Jenna said she was nervous about driving downtown, but this was imprecise. She wasn’t worried at all about the driving – she was worried about the parking, and what would happen to her car if she left it alone on a Detroit street after midnight.

“This isn’t downtown,” Rachel explained, “it’s Eastern Market.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Downtown is fine during the day but fucking ghetto at night. Eastern Market is fine during the day and totally empty at night. There’s a couple of apartments and that’s, like, *it*.”

The emphatic stress in Rachel’s voice let Jenna know that she was on thin ice, that she had better play it cool and go along with whatever Rachel said unless she wants to spend all of her Friday nights watching reruns of *Friends*.

Jenna drove. The heater did its job and by the time the girls are on I-75, the car was toasty warm. They took off their jackets, they put them back on, they crack the

windows, and they danced the uncomfortable shuffle of clothing and position that was riding in a too-warm car in a cold dry winter.

Rachel lit a cigarette. Jenna didn't smoke, and didn't allow smoking in her car, but she said nothing.

Rachel knew that as they neared the end of their drive, Detroit would appear before Jenna as a buried jewel glinting out of blackened earth. They would pass I-696, 9-mile road, 8-mile, the sleazy old Guesthouse hotel, and after that they would race down the serpentine cavern of the freeway where the dull and dreary darkness of northern Detroit would blur by in a streak of orange streetlights. Then they would pass over and through the concrete bow-tie of the Davison freeway exit, and get their first glimpse of shimmering, glimmering Detroit city.

The tallest buildings would show off their lights: the Renaissance Center, the Fisher building, the Penobscot would all twinkle and jut from the swelling pool of light at their feet. At I-94, the spires of an old gothic church would align perfectly with the towers of the Renaissance Center, and Rachel hoped that Jenna will see it, and that she would fall in love with it the way Rachel once had.

The spires align with the towers, and Jenna said: "This is so cool!"

Rachel smoked and told Jenna go get into the right-hand lane. They were getting off on Mack Avenue.

In bursts and flutters of feeling, Rachel warmed to her old love for this city. She dwelled on her first rave at The Firehouse and thought: *that was four years ago!* She listened to Jenna hum and tap her fingers on the steering wheel along with the stereo, but

when she looked at her friend, she did not see herself there like she thought she should. Her feeling of love for Detroit vanished immediately.

She tossed her cigarette out the window and thought: *Fucking newbie raver*. This is what she had done to her old friend – painted her up like a figure of her own ridicule in the interest of rekindling a failed friendship, and she didn't know why. Guilt or obligation maybe – she thought maybe she missed her friend, maybe she wanted to bring her along for this ride.

They'd not had a good reason for falling out of each other's social circles. It was just the sort of thing that happened. Jenna was pretty, and complicit, but not particularly smart, and often boring.

Jenna had worked at the same telemarketing firm as Rachel. They shared lunches, sat in adjacent cubicles, and occasionally had drinks on Friday evenings at the local T.G.I.Fridays. Jenna only lasted six months before the boring ritual of asking people if they were happy with their long distance service, their auto insurance, or their shampoo ground the sparkle out of her eyes. They'd traded cards a year ago, and now here they were.

Two cars followed them down Mack Avenue. Rachel figured rightly that they were fellow partiers out, like her, for an ironic dip of nostalgia. She lit another cigarette and decides that she is completely over it – the scene, the music, the playful childishness – it was saccharine sweet and tiresome to her. They passed a McDonalds with a tall glass window out front that advertised the PlayPlace within. It was all a jumble of primary colors, bright lights, and plastic tubes. She told Jenna to turn right, down Russell.

Eastern Market is the largest farmer's market in Michigan. It is the arrival point for much of the produce bought in the southeast, and on Saturdays it is a bustling bazaar of fruit sellers, gardeners, butchers, jazz musicians, and a teeming mass of buyers, both *urban* and *suburban*. That night, there were only a few homeless vagrants rifling through dumpsters for food – half a watermelon here, a crate of squishy peaches there, all frozen solid and covered in dirt. Fluorescent lights shone down from the pavilion roofs, and Jenna and Rachel saw a giant brown chicken painted over the yellow south gate of a brick barn, a failed attempt at a kid's cartoon that instead came out too real, like a desperate death-row inmate clutching at the bars of his cage; they saw a huge painting of a cow on the white wall of a distribution plant to the east, its body and face made up of vegetables, grazing cannibalistically on the painted grass and staring down into the plaza below; the barns and pavilions themselves, sturdy, solid, but old; relics built before the memory of anyone living today.

They found a parking spot and approached the venue – the Slaughterhouse. There was an *Abstrakt Lighting* truck out front, and a pair of burly men leaned on the back bumper smoking cigarettes and bobbing their heads to the beat from inside – the music was so loud that even through the antique brick walls, it was perfectly clear and danceable.

It was bitter cold. Rachel and Jenna's breath came out in billowy white plumes. Rachel tossed her cigarette into a snowbank and led Jenna towards the door. Nobody seemed to know if the Slaughterhouse was still in production. Rachel hoped not, more for the meat's sake than her own. Dancing on a cold stone floor which had hours ago been packed with steaming blood and guts, she could handle. A porkchop covered in rave

gravy - the slimy mix of industrial residue, dirt, grime, spit, sweat, mold, spilled water, rain, mashed-up flyers, and shredded cigarette butts that coats the floor of a large dance party - she could not.

It had been a venue for so long that even the sinister sound of the name had taken on a playful exhalative quality: *the Slah-ter-hahz*. The inside was a bomb-blast of laser lights and strobes, and the heat of the dancing bodies inside forced drifting steam out from the cracks in the doors and windows, appearing for all the world like the building was burning from the inside out.

Chapter 6.

At Allied Fabrication, Roy nodded to the night shift supervisor to indicated that he had returned from lunch. He was the acting production manager for the weld line which had been down since October. They had a two-week inventory surplus which was quickly becoming a three-week surplus, and would only get bigger unless Pontiac Validation called for more parts, which they wouldn't do until they expended their own growing surplus. All the line welders were attending training classes or had been temporarily laid off, which left Jenna's father with time to catch up on his paperwork, time he spent reading the Detroit News and talking to his co-workers.

Bill Heller, the night shift loading supervisor, came over to Roy's cubicle and slaped the latest copy of the Detroit News down on Roy's desk. Roy glances down at it without much interest, and asked, "what's this?"

The cover story described an auto-industry slow-down. SUV's, which had been the bread-and-butter of the auto industry for the last five years, were getting more and more expensive to fuel, and Detroit had not yet retooled. It was 1981 all over again – the industry refused to abandon their biggest cash-cow, insisting on squeezing every possible drop of money before they took action. Twenty years before, it was performance muscle and huge luxury cruisers. In 2002, giant four-wheel-drive land yachts with twenty-gallon tanks rolled off the line and into dealer showrooms, unseen and gathering dust.

Bill told Roy that it was a goddamn travesty. Goddamn Bill Clinton and goddamn NAFTA. Goddamn all the wetbacks taking American jobs, and why didn't goddamn someone close those goddamn loopholes that were ruining the manufacturing sector. He

came very close to damning George W. Bush, but it was not the time to go around damning the commander in chief of the American armed forces.

Roy shook his head and agreed, not as emphatically as Bill would have liked, and so Bill asked if Roy had heard anything from upstairs, meaning the upper management. Roy had not, but he said he wasn't too worried. If it were all that bad, he was sure they all would have heard. Besides, he pointed out, it was wartime. Wartime was traditionally good for the automotive sector.

“God bless the troops,” Bill said.

Roy nodded in agreement.

He didn't really understand the rules of Minesweeper – he just clicked on the squares until something blew up. He knew there was a logic behind the placement of numbers, and that each numbered square indicated how many mines were in proximity to that square, but he had a hard time making the necessary deductions of which squares were mined. He felt compelled, as Bill chattered, to immerse himself in the game.

Sensing that he was losing his only source of conversation for the night, Bill asked Roy if everything was good at lunch.

“You should've seen my girl when I got home,” Roy said.

“That right?”

Roy chuckled and said, “She looked like a goddamned clown.”

Bill cocked an eyebrow and Roy continued: “She had these giant pants on, this giant shirt.”

“You better hope she's not going down to some rave party,” Bill said.

This had not occurred to Roy, and he still didn't quite understand.

“Learned about those on Fox a few years ago. These kids dress up in big huge clothes, do drugs, go down to Detroit and have sex in toilet stalls or wherever.”

Roy's face went slack as Bill recited everything the special report told him – that the parties were a breeding ground for crime and disease, that little girls like Roy's were routinely raped or worse. He rattled off a few percentages and statistics that he thinks that he's heard – that fifty percent of murders in the city of Detroit were ecstasy related, that ninety percent of all rave attendees are suburban teenagers. Gangs targetted raves for easy money in drug traffic and stolen cars, but Bill did not dare mention the one obvious truth on both of their minds: Raves were where black Detroit men go to find willing, white suburban girls.

Bill had been saying the word “Detroit” with a conspicuous emphasis. Even when he wasn't saying it, he was saying it – *down there, those people, below eight mile* and so on. If they were not in an office where someone might hear, even an office as empty as this one where they are the only two people surrounded by sixteen vacant cubicles, they could just come out and speak plainly, to say what was foremost on their minds, that *niggers* ruined Detroit, that everyone had better stay out of Detroit for the *nigger* gangs, and that Roy's daughter had better beware or else a *nigger* was going to have his way with her.

Roy thought about his little girl is down there, surrounded on all sides by *urban* people. Ashen-faced he excused himself, but Bill did not take the hint and continued to stare dumbly at the back of Roy's head. Roy called his own house, but there was no answer. His daughter didn't have a cell phone – he vowed that he would buy her one and

staple it to her hand so long as he can get in touch with her. He stood up to go and see his supervisor.

He walked across the empty production floor, a cluttered cathedral the size of a high-school basketball court. Hanging spot welders and robotic conveyers attracted a fine coat of chalky-white dust. Three years ago, every machine was being pushed to its limits and the staff was working overtime, which the company gladly paid. They produced new parts, prototypes mostly, by the thousands – helping to fuel the booming market for SUVs. Last year, when gas approached two dollars a gallon, the market for those suburban tanks followed an inverse trend – you couldn't *give* them away. Allied Fabrication started the first round of layoffs, and the shop floor began to accumulate dust. Roy had been paying nearly sixty dollars every week to top off his Ford Expedition.

Looking at the desolate production floor, Roy began to reconsider his course of action. What would it mean to ask his boss to go home for another hour so soon after lunch so that he can handle personal business? How would it look to admit that he can't control his own daughter? Why did he even suspect her?

What the hell does Bill know, anyway, he thought.

He took a lap around the welding line, and that cooled his head. He saw Raymond - Raymond was the night shift lead, the most senior welder, and he'd attended all the training classes he needed to and had too much seniority to be laid off. He was leaning back in a plastic chair, his gloves and goggles nearby and collecting the same chalk-white dust as was on the machines. Raymond sipped coffee from a thermos and flipped through the comics section of the Detroit Free Press. Raymond saw Roy and waved a casual hello.

“How do boss?” he asked. Roy smiled and says that everything was fine, that he was just stretching his legs.

“Ready to get back to work?” Roy asked.

Raymond looked up expectantly.

“Gas took a big drop, you know. When it levels out, we’re going to ramp right back up!”

Raymond nodded again and went back to his paper unconvinced.

Roy returned to his desk. There was one number he could try, and it was publicly available. He looked up the number for Denny’s restaurant and called. He described his daughter and her friend, but the man who answered said that there is no one there by that description, and that if Roy didn’t mind, they were very busy tonight and he could put him on hold and try again. Roy didn’t mind, but the lady who came on after wasn’t any more help – she hadn’t seen anyone matching the description Roy gave, but she said she could ask some of the waitresses.

Roy realized that he had called the Denny’s closest to his house, and that’s not the one that Jenna liked. Jenna liked the Denny’s in Sterling Heights because it was cleaner, and the food was better. Roy thought: why would his girl, who would drive twelve miles out of her way just because she was particular about the cleanliness of her coffee cup, go down to goddamned disgusting Detroit to smoke dope and dance with strange men?

Roy thought, *what the hell does Bill know about anything, anyway?*

Chapter 7.

At One O'clock AM, the slaughterhouse was packed from wall to wall. There was a ten dollar cover, and with the exception of specially invited guests, every party kid in the abattoir had handed it over like it was burning holes in their pockets. People had driven all the way from Chicago for this taste of the old days, for a sample of what it used to be like before the crackhouse laws, and before 9/11 made the fun music, flashing lights, and easy drugs seem superficial and frivolous. Throbbing bass rattled the teeth, bones, and guts of the hundreds assembled in the old slaughterhouse, and those hundreds were blinded by flashing strobes and searing laser lights as they danced with such zeal and energy that it was as if they had just learned how, and were afraid that if they stopped, they would forget.

Outside, it was too cold to snow – the mercury read seven degrees Fahrenheit. Inside, a steamy cloud rose up from the dancers, and condensed on the grimy windows to run down in rivulets. It was raining indoors – the slaughterhouse had become a greenhouse. Everyone danced, everyone sweat, and there was an overwhelming feeling of energy and love.

Haas' right palm was getting sore and raw. He had shaken hands and hugged everyone present at least once, mostly two or three times. He'd gotten blown twice, and sold seven thousand dollars worth of ecstasy at an inflated rate of twenty dollars per pill. It was good stuff, and people were paying anything to roll. It was frightfully hot inside, and so Haas gave the water sellers six hundred dollars and told them to give their bottles away for free. He was feeling good – the vibe was contagious. He indulged himself by

popping one pill, but only one, because it didn't do to take two on a business night. He had already given away too many freebies and although he knew this, he couldn't quite be bothered to care.

DJ DreemKetcher was starting his set when Jenna and Rachel arrived. It was 1:15 in the morning.

"This is trance. Nobody listens to it anymore." Rachel explained coolly, but Jenna didn't hear and it was just as well – it was all new and fresh, the very air was shaking with bass, and the laser lights turned the walls into a neon dreamscape. Immediately, Jenna wanted very badly to dance, but she didn't know how. She asked Rachel to teach her. Rachel looked around for anyone she knew, saw no one cool or important, and agreed.

She explained a kick step, also known as a "Chicago Hop" – one-and-two-and-one-and-two-and, both feet bend the knees, kick the left foot out, bend the right knee, both feet bend the knees, kick the right foot out, bend the knee, repeat.

"What do I do with my hands?" Jenna asked.

"Like this, make like you're holding a jumprope," Rachel explained.

After two tracks, Jenna had it. She was clumsy and inexperienced, but the basics came easy. No spins, no downrock, all footwork, but the music lent itself to that sort of repetition. Jenna watched break-dancers battle playfully in the center of the floor while old school ravers made elaborate liquid dances, playing kinetic waves and ripples through their bodies, from their fingertips to their feet. Along the walls, party kids gave their friends light shows with chemical glow-sticks. Rachel put a finger over Jenna's ear, making a sort of sounding board, and explained.

“It’s cool for when you do E. The light makes trails and they’re really trippy.”
Overcome by spectacle, and a need to fit in, Jenna asked if she could get a pill. Rachel asked if she was sure, and when Jenna said yes, Rachel went off to find Haas.

Haas was behind the DJ and his turntables. When he saw Rachel he waved her up to him and gave her a hug.

“Your man goes on at three, whatup with you?” he asked.

“Good,” she said, answering the question wrongly. “You got any party favors?”
Haas grinned and asked her how many. Rachel asked for ten. Jenna would only need one, maybe two, but ecstasy was getting harder and harder to come by. She decided to stock up, and maybe she would take two later herself if she went home with Baxter.

She paid one hundred fifty dollars, a real bargain - so good that she had to ask Haas if the pills were decent. In response he showed her his pupils – huge and black. He told her that his jaw was sore, and he’d only taken one. Convinced, she returned to Jenna.

Jenna grasped one pill between her thumb and forefinger, and looked at it skeptically. It was smaller than an aspirin tablet, and not quite as smooth. It was pink and plain on one side, and embossed with a smiley face on the other. She popped it in her mouth. The taste was terrible – like baking soda, but more so. She grimaced, and Rachel fetched her a bottle of water. Jenna drank and then looked expectantly at Rachel.

“Give it time,” Rachel said, “Go dance or something.”

Jenna danced, but for ten minutes nothing happened. She began to get antsy. She told Rachel that the pill wasn’t doing anything, that maybe it was a dud.

“Give it ten more minutes,” Rachel said, “If you don’t feel it by then, I’ll give you another.”

Rachel turned around and saw Thomas and Baxter come through the door. They looked ready to party – both wore phat pants and hooded sweatshirts, baseball hats, and plastic bead bracelets on their wrists. Baxter dressed in orange, Thomas in blue. The door man waved them in, no cover, and gave them VIP wrist bands. It was 1:45.

“What the fuck?” Rachel said to Baxter. He explained that they were playing video games and smoking weed, and that they lost track of time. He shrugged. Rachel fumed and called Baxter an inconsiderate asshole. All the same, she didn’t have anything better to do and so she settled down and asked Baxter if he wanted a pill. He declined - he was spinning in an hour, and he didn’t like to play fucked up. Thomas nodded to Baxter and Rachel, then left to check in with Haas and find Maria.

Jenna pounced on Baxter, stopping just shy of jumping into his arms and knocking him down. The pill had kicked in – she was a squishy sack of love. She let the pacifier fall out of her mouth and planted a huge kiss on Baxter’s stubbly cheek.

“Oh my god...I’m so happy to see you!” she squealed, barely audible over the percussive music. Behind her back, Rachel rolled her eyes, but Baxter grinned. There was something disarming about Jenna’s innocence, her spirited embrasure of this whole new world she was encountering for the first time. It was 1:50 AM.

Thomas found Maria near the DJ Booth. She had her face very near one of the giant stacks of speakers, and the bass bin at her feet kicked so hard that her pants fluttered. Thomas tapped her on the shoulder and she turned around, burying her face in his bony chest.

“How’d you get here,” he asked – she was obviously too fucked up to drive.

“I rode with the J’s,” she answered.

“Are you rolling?” he asked her, and she nodded emphatically.

She put her thumb over his ear, making the same sort of soundboard as Rachel made for Jenna, and asked if he had a bump. He nodded and took her by the hand to a discreet corner of the building. In that corner, sketched-out ravers sat shoulder-to-shoulder and back-to-back in a giant puddle of dingy, baggy clothes and neon glowsticks. The ravers passed water bottles and vibrating toys back and forth while savagely mauling pacifiers between their teeth. By the light of the glow sticks, Thomas fished out his metal phial of cocaine and offered it to Maria.

“Is this all you’ve got?” she asked.

“How much do you fucking need?” he asked in reply.

Maria dumped some of the powder out onto a long fingernail and snorted it up her nose before putting the cap back on the phial and returning it to Thomas.

“You’re not mad are you?” she asked. Her eyes were wide-open and watery, like she was on the verge of crying although she was not – she was just fucked up.

Thomas had been waiting for this fight for weeks and although the lead-up was right, the timing was all wrong. He wanted to tell her that even by the scene’s liberal standards of conduct, she was ruining her life. He wanted to tell her that she needed to face reality, get a job, move out of her mother’s house, and live her own life. He wanted to tell her he didn’t love her – but the crowd was happy and the mood was infectious. This was neither the place nor the time, so Instead he said, “no sugar bear, keep dancing,” and left her alone.

The crowd was thick around the front of the DJ booth, so he walked back around the packed mass of bodies, through where people danced. He saw Tony Gino, and gave him a quick handshake and hug. It was 2:00.

“Bust a move, bro” Tony said, and Thomas stepped back and broke into a quick liquid routine from the old days. His torso twisted in two directions at once until his knees jerked simultaneously to the left and his whole body followed in an easy spin, timed perfectly to coincide with the down-beat coming through the speaker. When his spin finished, he pantomimed a wave of energy coursing from his fingertips, through his arm, and back down his leg, and then bouncing back up around through his body like a wild racquetball, shivering left and right, up and down. He finished his few simple steps and was immediately swamped by jack-jawed, wide-eyed ravers eager to hug him, to shake hands, to tell him what a great dancer he was – and it was true: Thomas had an amazing style and impeccable rhythm. He could dance for hours, when he wanted to, and every step and twist would attract an enthusiastic crowd. But this was only when he wanted to, and he wanted to less and less. Thomas broke free of his new-found fans and passed by Rachel, who was giving an earful to Baxter for whatever reason he could only guess.

Jenna danced nearby, but drifted farther and farther away, gravitating to the space between two groups: the first was a small band of candy-kids, ravers dressed in pink fluffy jumpsuits, cartoon masks, and white gloves, all bedecked with hundreds, if not thousands, of plastic beads. The second group consisted of B-boys, break dancers from the Hot Motor City Clique, who had cleared themselves an eight-foot circle of dance floor in which to battle. The ground was too rough for the acrobatic headspins, windmills,

and backspins these dancers preferred, but they made do with impressive up-rocks and freezes.

Darryl was their leader, and it was his turn to dance. He started with a relatively tame up-rock, something like an Irish jig. Darryl dropped down into a quick six-step before going up on his hands into a move called “the turtle”: he balanced himself on his palms, his body perpendicular to the ground, and proceeded to walk about on his hands. This got a few cheers from his crew, but he quickly broke the pose and crouched down low to the ground. He leapt up on piston legs and performed a back somersault ending in a “suicide.” The flip came off with ballet precision, and then he fell pancake-flat on his back – it looked for all intents and purposes like he had broken his spine. He laid still for half a measure, and then broke the illusion with a kip-up which left him standing on his feet, shrugging boyishly as if to say *did I do that?*

Thomas found Haas behind the DJ booth. Haas waved him past security and handed him a vodka-and-redbull. The space was very small, and what wasn’t taken up by the DJ, the lighting rig, and several crates of records was only big enough for three folding chairs. Haas was sitting in one, and two blonde club-bunnies were sitting in the others – they were good looking girls, a bit over-made. Their lipstick was too shiny, their eye shadow too dark, their hair too blonde. They wore fuzzy cowboy hats and *Hustler* T-shirts, like they had dressed for a show at the State Theatre and not a filthy underground party in the middle of Detroit’s working district. They look uncomfortable, and they didn’t object loudly when Haas told them to get lost so that Thomas could sit down.

“Whatup jaded raver?” Haas asked.

“Who says I’m jaded?”

Haas said, “everyone’s jaded now.”

“I was just dancing, like, two seconds ago.”

“Yeah, for what, a minute? You ain’t even sweatin’.”

Thomas took a sip from his drink and said, “I’m too cool to sweat.”

They grinned and make a toast to the scene, to PLUR, and to success, and for a while they sat and enjoyed the sound. Haas poured them another pair of drinks, and they made small talk as best they could over the bass. They talked about the turnout, about the girls, about the music.

Haas said, “I’m glad you made it out tonight.”

“Yeah, good party,” Thomas agreed.

Haas allowed himself a second thought before he went on, saying “yeah, right, but I’m glad ‘cause there’s some people coming I could use your help with.”

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked, hoping that this was not a confrontation because he knew that he was absolutely useless in a fight. He didn’t have a fight-or-flight reflex – just the latter. He’d run track in high school, and before a sprint he would talk himself into a near panic, thinking of the neighbor’s fearsome dog, a bully from sixth grade, a monster from a movie he’d seen the week before – anything that wasn’t just scary, but intimately scary. The chill in his spine pushed him forward.

Haas grinned and said “Wait until your boy goes on. That’s when they oughta be here.”

Thomas nodded. His stomach ached and he took a long gulp of his drink to quiet it. It was 2:20.

Baxter explained to Rachel that he needed to go back to the car to get his records, but she was not done with him. She said that she totally could not believe that he would rather smoke pot and play video games with Thomas all day than to hang out with her. He reminded her that he knew she wanted to go shopping and that he said he wanted to come along, and she kept recreating the conversation for him.

She said “no, this was last fucking Tuesday and you said you’d go with me because you didn’t have anything to do and you wanted to get a new hoodie for this party because your old one has a hole in the elbow. Remember?”

And Baxter said “last Tuesday I was in Bad Axe visiting my uncle.”

And Rachel said “That was two fucking weeks ago!”

And so on, until Baxter threw up his hands and walked outside. He had a VIP wristband, so no one even reminded him that there was no re-admittance. Rachel followed him out to the car, but didn’t say anything the whole while. His records were in a heavy matte-gray case which looked more suited to hold a high-tech bomb. When he closed the trunk, Rachel finally said “I’m just asking you to be a little bit considerate of my feelings. I was stuck with fucking Jenna all day and it would have been nice to at least have heard from you.”

“A,” Baxter said, “I called you at like nine and B, if you don’t like her why are you hanging out with her?”

“Because she’s my friend, duh!”

“That makes no fucking sense, Rachel” Baxter said as he returned to the venue. He asked if she was coming. She had lit a cigarette and was leaning against his car. She waved him away with the back of her hand, so he left. It was 2:30.

On the dance floor, Darryl was teaching Jenna how to do a six-step. She was crouched down to the ground with her legs out behind her, like she was doing a push-up.

“Alright, now bring your right foot across – good! Now bring your left foot up – no, up like this – no, up like this – good! Now bring your right foot over here...” this went on until she completed one rotation of her legs around her hands in six steps and Darryl said “Now do it again.”

She brought her right foot across, her left foot up, and then kicked her own left arm and plopped onto the bare ground. She giggled recklessly as she sat up. Darryl helped her to her feet, and she threw her arms around him. She kissed him on the cheek and said “Thanks for trying!” Then she kissed his other cheek, and once more on the lips. Then, she danced away towards the speakers to bury her head in a bass bin alongside Maria.

At 2:40, Rachel glared at the man with the cash box at the door.

“I was just fucking in here!” she groaned before pulling out her last ten dollars cash and re-paying the cover charge.

At 2:45, Baxter opened up his matte silver case and double-checked the order of his records. They were lined up in a composition, like bullets in a magazine, to be fired one after the other. He has played shows with DJ DreemKetcher before, and they had worked out a seamless exchange between DreemKetcher’s last album and Baxter’s first. Baxter could fade between one and the other, starting his set and building up to his specialty – disco house.

Baxter put his first record on the turntable, and a mob started to crowd around the DJ booth. These were house-heads, some were dressed to a tee, their outfits stylish and

flawless, haute couture at street level, tight designer shirts showing off flawless physiques, tucked into skin-tight thousand-dollar jeans. Others dressed like the ravers of the late nineties – loose, comfortable jeans, sweatshirts or T's, baseball hats, nothing outrageous or extraordinary, mostly fun clothes that let the wearer move, which is what these people were here to do.

Dreemketcher leaned down to the microphone before him and said “Thank you all for being so great tonight – up next is my man, DJ B-X-T!” and the crowd began to call out to him – *B-X-T! Spin something hot!*

At 2:55, they started their segue. The trance disc was slowing, slowing, like a roller coaster car petering out uphill. Then, discreetly, quietly, an off-beat joined the steady 4/4ths trance rhythm. Along with the ethereal moan and wail of the synthesizer came claps and high-hats. The dancers around the DJ booth began to bob their heads and move their feet, and by 2:57 the theme for the evening had gone from one of supernatural transcendence to hedonistic excess. This was music for casual sex, cocaine, glamour, funk, and fantasy. The light shows slowed down and warmed up. The dances were less technical, less showy, and more about making body-to-body contact, or showing how that body-to-body contact might look behind closed doors. Circles formed, but the dancers looked less like they were battling and more like they're taking turns hosting the spirit at an old-time revival.

Megan Isom joined Haas behind the turntables. She ignored Thomas, hugged Haas, and stood to the right of Baxter, watching him intently. She was a very attractive woman, if a little older than most of the people here. She wore a black hooded sweatshirt and tight blue jeans over black Doc Marten boots. Her hair was medium length, down to

her shoulders, dark blond, curly, and highlighted. Her face was pleasantly round, with a wide Italian mouth and alert brown eyes. When Baxter saw her, they hugged and said hello, but she pointed back to the turntable and he immediately went back to his records.

To the side of the dance floor, Darryl sat down next to Jenna and asked if she was all danced out. She shook her head, but didn't speak because she is mauling her pacifier with her teeth. Darryl leaned back against the cinder-block wall, and Jenna put her head on his shoulder.

“Do you want a backrub?” he asked.

She nodded emphatically and said, “That would be fucking *amazing*,” which of course was unintelligible through the hunk of rubber in her mouth.

They adjusted their position so that she was sitting between his knees. He kneaded her shoulders expertly. The pacifier fell from her mouth, her jaw slack. Every sensation was amplified and filtered for her by the drug – everything felt *amazing*!

At 3:05, Haas answered his phone. He couldn't hear anything, so he yelled “hold on bro” very loudly into the mouthpiece. Thomas cocked his head to the side, and Haas nodded to confirm that this was what he needed help with. Haas said again that his caller should hold on, and kept doing so as he gestured *come-along* to Thomas, who followed him outside.

Haas gave a few smiles away while they crossed the dance floor, and then outside he was all business.

“Where you at?” he asked, and he listened patiently for a few minutes with only the occasional *uh-huh* and *alright*. Thomas began to shiver from the cold because unlike Haas he had no distraction from it. He lit a Newport and drifted away from Haas.

A gaunt black man in an oversized and oil-stained blue coat approached Thomas. He had his hand out before he said anything, and when he spoke it was with a scratchy old voice through a mouth full of big and crooked teeth. He said “man, can you just spare me some change? I’m hungry man, I’m just tryin’ to get back to Pontiac.”

Thomas reached into his pocket and pulls out some coins – seventy-five cents. He said, “here you go man, good luck” and handed it over.

“I know you got more than this man,” the beggar saod.

Thomas turned his back and began walking towards Haas. The man behind him said “K-K-K all the way – Ain’t got nothin’ for a nigger then. Ya’ll too good to help a nigger out, aint’ that right? K-K-K all the way.”

Thomas tried to block him out, to ignore him. Haas saw the scene and said “hold on bro” into the mouthpiece of his phone.

“Muddy, what the fuck are you doing?” he yelled to the beggar, who stopped in his tracks.

“Ain’t doin’ nothin’” the man replied.

“I told you I pay you to watch these cars, not to fuck with people.”

“That what I been doin’.”

“Fuck you are. Get the fuck out of here. I don’t want to see your ass until sunrise” Haas said.

Muddy shuffled off through the snow, back around the corner of the building. When he rounded the corner, he said “Bin mother fucking Laden.”

“Yeah, Bin Laden mother fucker,” Haas yelled back, “You run your goddamn mouth,” and then into the phone said, “hold on bro” and back around the corner yelled

“I’ll go Sadaam Hussein on your ass I see you again. And don’t be fucking with no cars neither. I know where you stay.”

Haas returned his attention to his phone and said “Alright, Wednesday. I’ll see you out there” before hanging up.

“Nevermind, we goin’ back inside” Haas said. Thomas stopped him, and asked what’s going on.

Haas explained “A couple of country boys were gonna meet me out here. Now they ain’t. It’s nothing – I’ll let you know.”

Haas tossed the ice out of his glass and stuffed his plastic cup into the pocket of his jacket.

“Just making moves – I thought it’d be better to have a back-up, you know? I’ll tell you about it later,” Haas said, and he turned back towards the Slaughterhouse. Inside, a tremendous cheer went up. They went back indoors and found the entire crowd bouncing around with frantic energy. Absolutely everyone was dancing, even the water sellers are bobbing up and down in their seats, and the girl at the RaveSafe booth was tapping her feet as she tested scrapings of people’s pills with a series of chemical solutions that changed color in the presence of real MDA or MDMA, and stayed clear in the presence of other, sometimes more lethal substances.

Even along the walls where sketched-out kids sat in heaps, near the point of collapse, some teetering on the edge of overdose, the light shows went on along with the music. They waited for their energy to surge, and they moved to mingle with one another in between bouts of resting their tired feet and staring off into space.

Jenna was there with Darryl in the throes of boiling passion, faces and lips and tongues and teeth and bodies smashed together in a fevered need to become one being, one body.

Rachel and Maria danced together near the center of the dance floor, oblivious even to each other as they kicked, spun, and jumped to the music. Tony Gino was chatting up some young candy raver, no doubt telling her all about his sweet place in Rochester and his brand new BMW with the killer sound system, and she listened with half an ear already convinced to go back to his apartment, never mind that her parents told her to be home by two.

Adrift in this sea of sweating bodies, the mood saturated Thomas like it has not done in a long time. He was giddy with nostalgia, with camaraderie, and so when Haas offers him two pills, he swallowed them without a second's hesitation. Tonight, he would go all the way. The pills acted fast, and soon his pupils dilated and the light around him streaked and bubbled. Everything was *alright!* Everything was *amazing!* He grabbed Maria about the waist and kissed her, and she returned the kiss deeply. Rachel hugged them both and soon Thomas found that he was surrounded by other familiar faces that have faded into the background of the last year – he saw Jason and Jack, “the J’s” from Sterling Heights who spun tag-team sets at Tonic Night Club and the Buddha Lounge. He saw Nathan, “Nate Dawg” from Warren, a newcomer to the scene who did freelance computer work with Tony Gino in order to fund his five-night-a-week clubbing habit. Lissa was here, the darling downriver candy raver who made custom necklaces for everyone she met, necklaces with the name of the recipient spelled out in glow-in-the-dark beads, and she was with “Sally,” the rich kid from Birmingham who buys his pills at

retail price from Haas to sell them for twice that to his yuppie friends. They were *all* here, every Detroit raver he ever knew, out to celebrate this – their scene.

At the head of this gyrating mob stood Baxter behind the turntables. He was awash in adulation, warm with the love of this room and flush from the heat of all these dancing bodies. His face was streaked with grime, as are all their faces, and he was already beginning to cough up the black dust disturbed by the stomping, kicking feet – but this was good. This was real. This was *immediate*.

Baxter turned down the sound as all the spotlights turned on him. He was irradiated – glowing, shimmering, bathed in light. He bowed down to the microphone and said in time with the rhythm: “This is for the music! This is for Haas, who put this together! This is for Abstrakt Lighting! This is for the water sellers! This is for the people I love, all of you! This is for us! This...is for the scene!”

The music came back up, but even at maximum volume it could not overshadow the screaming cheers and applause of the ravers here, who began to chant:

Long Live the Scene! Long Live the Scene! Long Live the Scene!

Chapter 8.

The party ended. Ravers began to trickle out at 4:00, midway through Baxter's set. The flow increased at 5:00, and by 5:30 only a few dozen of the most hardcore partiers remained, and by 6:00 it was all done. DJ Finesse let his last record peter out, gave it a quick rewind, and without any additional ceremony stopped the music. The lighting crew began putting the PA's and spotlights back onto their truck. The water sellers were gone, and the last few cliques moved outside.

The come-down started. Some partiers took vitamin C, B-6, and 5-HTP supplements to ease the effect, and others just suffered the misery with downcast eyes and slow steps on the way to their cars. The venue itself was trashed – glowsticks, broken whistles, discarded fliers, torn clothing, cigarette butts and water bottles littered the floor. Daylight oozed in through the filthy windows, washing away the manufactured magic of the night before.

Thomas, Maria, Baxter, Rachel, Jenna, Darryl, and Haas stood smoking cigarettes outside the front entrance. Jenna leaned heavily on Darryl, appearing on the verge of tears. Baxter had one hand in his pocket, and he stared off out into the parking lot. No one wanted to speak. They were streaked with black grime, caked with dried sweat, and tired beyond measure.

“Anyone want a drink?” Haas asked.

Thomas and Baxter shrugged and sort of half-agreed. Darryl said a quick goodbye and went off to his own car. Jenna followed him. The rest stood shifting their weight from one foot to the other.

Haas led his friends around two corners to a secluded corner of a different parking lot, but he stopped short. The lot was empty save for some discarded garbage and criss-crossed tire tracks.

“Oh no, no, no!” Haas moaned, putting his hands to his temples. He didn’t have to explain – this sort of thing had happened before.

It had happened to Cassandra Meijer back in 2000 – it was one of the main reasons she gave for dropping out of the scene. She had a beautiful 1999 Ford Mustang, and when she emerged into the orange dawn after *Diggin’ It*, she only found some broken window glass where her car had been. Shit got stolen – usually someone just smashed out your window and took whatever CD’s, clothes, or change happened to be sitting out in plain sight. Sometimes they took the car. This was such a time.

“Oh man, I’m so sorry!” Baxter said, patting Haas on the shoulder.

Haas took five deep breaths and walked around in a few tight circles.

“At my own fucking party,” he said.

“Was it insured?” Thomas asks.

“Yeah – I didn’t have nothing in there except the Vodka,” Haas said. He raised his hands to his head again, and quickly put them down.

“Fuck it – someone give me a ride home?” he asked.

They rejoined their friends and told them about the theft. There were sorries all around, but Haas was recovering quickly.

“I’m more pissed about the vodka,” he joked.

They discussed who would drive home with whom. Baxter would ride with Rachel, who would take Jenna as well. Thomas would take Haas and Maria. There was

nothing left to be done, nothing left to say about it, and so they left after a round of hugs and handshakes.

Thomas, Maria, and Haas were quiet on the drive up to Troy. Maria slept in the back, and Haas smoked one Kool after another while Thomas fought to stay awake.

“Hey, take the wheel for a second,” Thomas said as he fished his cocaine phial out of his pocket. There was barely enough left for a pitiful little half-bump. He snorted it off the back of his thumb and shot a dirty look at Maria before putting his hands back on the wheel.

Haas’ parents had a big house, not too far off of Crooks road. The houses in the neighborhood were large, two stories, brick or brick-and-siding in the colonial style with big footprints and attached two-car garages. These were no McMansions, they were halfway to being the real thing. They all had ample front yards which were all buried under thick caked snow. Thomas suspected there was not a single leaf to be found under all that whiteness.

Haas’ house blended in seamlessly with its neighbors. Thomas drove past it, reversed, and pulled into the driveway. He shook Haas’ hand, but Haas held it for a second too long.

“Hey, come out here with me for a second,” Haas said.

Thomas turned off the ignition and got out of the car. Maria remained asleep. Thomas and Haas walked together to the front door of the house. The walk was spotless concrete, cracked only where the masons had allowed.

“How’d you like to take a trip out of town this week?” Haas asked.

“I dunno – I’m working. What are you thinking?” Thomas asked in reply.

“That redneck I was supposed to meet out here – I told him I’d go down and see him on Wednesday, only now -“

“Right, no car,” Thomas said.

“So this is a run – like big-time. Are you cool?” Haas asked.

“Let me check my schedule, but yeah – I’m cool,” Thomas said.

“I just wanna be sure bro, ‘cause this is felony level shit,” Haas said.

Thomas looked at his car: inconspicuous, clean, well-kept and blue. Fast enough to run if it came down to it, nice enough to not warrant a random stop- it was a fine car for the task.

“Shit – ain’t no thang,” Thomas said.

Haas grinned weakly, relieved but too tired and depleted to be happy. “I knew I could count on you, bro,” he said.

“I want in though,” Thomas said.

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever you’re putting up, I want to go in on it. Like an investment, like a partner” Thomas said, his eyes sharp and awake, his face eager.

Haas considered for a moment and said, “alright – I’m going in for ten grand. That’s what we said over the phone. How much of that do you want to cover?”

“I’ve got twenty-three-hundred on hand,” Thomas said.

Haas shook his head. “I’ll take you in for fifteen – you hold that eight for whatever.”

“Deal,” Thomas said.

“Deal,” Haas agreed, and they shook hands.

Thomas sped away down Crooks road and merged onto I-75. Traffic was light. It was too early for the church crowd, and too late for the bar-hoppers. Sundays were often this way.

Just before twelve-mile-road, Maria woke up.

“Pull over, I want to get up front,” she said.

“What? We’re almost there, I’m not pulling over,” Thomas replied.

“Fine,” Maria huffed.

Thomas rolled his eyes. He was irritable beyond measure. The chemical cocktail in his brain swung his mood around erratically and he quickly raced his car up the off ramp, turned right on twelve-mile, crossed Stephenson highway, and pulled into the lot of a Marathon station. Maria changed seats, and Thomas raced out of the lot, his engine roaring, tires spinning.

“Fuck, settle down, would you?” Maria whined from the passenger’s seat.

“What? Let me fucking drive,” Thomas snapped.

“Okay, drive like a human being then and not a psychopath.”

Thomas rolled his eyes and turned up the music. The album was *Rooty*, last year’s album from the British house duo *Basement Jaxx*. It’s a great album, but it sounded stale and old in the car. Thomas looked at the EQ, and guesses that it’s been bumped or jiggled, or that someone fiddled with it. Maria mashed the power button on the car stereo.

“God damn it!” Thomas groaned. The power button tended to stick in the off position, or rather, it would depress but not click and hold. He started pushing the button over and over again waiting for the magical one time in one hundred when it would stay on. Every time he pushed the button down, a beat or phrase blurted out of the speakers in

an obnoxious start-and-stop cacophony. He was still fiddling with the button when he merged back onto I-75. He kept playing with it for another mile, until it was time to switch over to I-696. He left it alone as he made the change, and then started up with the button again.

“Leave that fucking thing alone!” Maria yelled.

“Maria would you shut the fuck up?” Thomas exploded. He held down the power button and hit eject on the stereo. His car veered over into the next lane, but at 7:00 on a Sunday he had all four lanes to himself.

“Watch out!” Maria yelled. Thomas got a handle on the CD. He rolled his window down and threw the CD out.

“What the fuck did you do that for?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. Maria started to laugh, but Thomas didn’t. They drove for another twenty minutes until they were in front of Maria’s mother’s house.

“I’ll talk to you later?” Maria asked.

“Sure,” Thomas said.

“You want to tell me what’s wrong?” Maria asked, and Thomas did, but he refused. He shook his head and insisted nothing was wrong.

“Are you trying to break up with me?” Maria asked angrily.

“No,” Thomas said too slowly, too quietly, and too nonchalantly to be true.

“Whatever,” she said.

Maria slammed the door and waded her way through the drifted snow on her front lawn. By the time she reached the door her blue jeans were white from the knee down, and Thomas was gone.

Roy was sleeping on his couch, the television playing an early showing of *The 700 Club*. Jenna thought quickly. She slipped off her clacking plastic jewelry, bunched her fluttering clothes in her arms, and slipped upstairs to her room. She changed into her nightclothes and came back downstairs. She shook Roy awake and said “Daddy, what are you still doing down here?”

Roy blinked and shook his head. He saw that outside everything was glistening white-orange at sunrise. He was still wearing his work clothes. They felt uncomfortably tight where they had settled down and bound him around his arms and middle and, as is often the case with men woken up unexpectedly, he had a terrific erection.

“Where the hell were you last night?” he asked.

“What?”

“Don’t what me,” he said. “What did you do last night?”

She told him the story she rehearsed, the story that echoed so many old explanations about going to Denny’s and staying up late and everyone else smoking cigarettes (thus explaining the smell). Rachel, naturally, wanted to go out to some party but Jenna said she was too tired, they went to Rachels, she fell asleep, and that was it.

“And you’re just now getting home?” Roy asked incredulously.

“No, I got home at 5:00 I guess – I saw you sleeping here,” she lied.

“I was here and awake at 5:00 – Star Trek was on,” he said.

“Five-ish, I guess – I don’t have a watch!” she whined.

Roy backed down immediately and said “I’m sorry baby, I guess I just missed you.”

“Dad, I wasn’t doing anything – don’t you trust me?” she asked, thinking that a well-timed tantrum might completely end the matter.

“No, of course I do sweetheart,” Roy said, confused.

That was what she wanted, but she couldn’t stop the tantrum from coming. She had never felt the bottomed-out emptiness she felt right then, the feeling like sad reminiscence, of nostalgia for a dead pet, of a drunk’s remorse over what was said or done the night before. It’s called *Black Tuesday* – her serotonin was spent. Her brain was utterly devoid of the chemicals that manufacture happiness and in their absence a crushing sorrow settled in.

“I can’t believe you don’t trust me,” she bawled. “I’m twenty-one! I can make my...I can make my...”

Roy put his arms around her and petted her head. He let her cry herself out.

“I was scared baby, I wasn’t thinking,” he said between cooing and shushing.

“Bill put this stupid idea in my head and...I’m sorry.”

They sat together on the couch for a few more minutes until Jenna sat upright and remembered to pretend that she’d been sleeping.

“I just came down for a glass of water,” she said.

Roy laughed, told her to go and get it. She did, and he slunk off to his room with the blanket wrapped around his waist.

Chapter 9.

Wednesday at 2:15 PM, Thomas made the M-60 Spring Arbor exit off of I-94, circling around a broad cloverleaf of spindly black trees reaching up into the quicksilver sky.

Haas fiddled with the radio, putting CDs in, popping them out, letting the radio play folksy Christian rock stations or classic rock from the '70's, making fun the whole time.

“Man, this is some boondocks shit,” he said.

Thomas nodded, but Haas was waiting for a reply. “Right?” he prompted.

“Yeah, for real,” Thomas said, but he wasn't thinking about it at all. He was thinking about what to do about Maria, if there was any point in doing anything at all.

Once or twice, as I-94 cleared Jackson, cutting through miles and miles of forest on its way to Chicago, Thomas remembered a time, he was 11 or 12 years old and he'd taken a color tour up north with his family. They had driven through the twisting two-lane highways around Oscoda, Mecosta, and Cheboygan before settling in at a two-bed roadside motel near Bad Axe. They went to the tour site, where massive wooden towers stood peeking out over the trees, rewarding their intrepid climbers with spectacular views of autumnal Michigan. Glacial moraine bursting with warm reds, oranges, and gold rolled out at mid-day like a world on fire.

His sister was only five years old then, and his mother waited down below, reluctant but patient. He had followed his father up the steep stairs.

“Come on, hustle up,” his father told him when he lollygagged or stopped for breath, or to ease the burning in his legs.

At the top, the view was utterly spectacular, and his father took it in, appraised it, and then took on the air of a man waiting for the next act after intermission.

Thomas surveyed it breathlessly. The climb had been difficult for him, and as he surveyed the hillside, he felt as if he had truly earned the view, deserved it, won it. The colors opened themselves to him in manifold ways, and in a moment of accidental inspiration he took off his glasses. All the edges blurred and the colors ran together. The transition from red to orange to yellow, to the blue of the sky and the green and brown of the field below was seamless. Everything became luminously complete.

“Where are your glasses?” his father asked, his voice weighted and honed by the one hundred fifty dollar cost of a replacement pair, and the dread of an afternoon in the optometrist’s office.

Thomas held his glasses up, feeling silly.

“Put them on your face and leave them there so you don’t god-damned lose them,” his father said.

Thomas put the glasses on, and everything fractured back into its component parts.

His father said “Come on, we’re going.”

Thomas wore contact lenses now, but he adjusted a phantom weight on the bridge of his nose and slowed to 55, then 45, as he drove through the Spring Arbor city limits.

“Pull over here,” Haas said, shaking the last bit of water and ice around the bottom of his Big Gulp cup.

Thomas pulled into the Amoco station, which stood by itself on the road side. It was fairly new, built sometime in the 1990's. The front and one side wall were all glass and the rest of the building was clean brick and khaki aluminum siding. The gas pumps all had LCD digital readouts, which this far into the sticks was more than Thomas had expected. He pulled his car up to the first pump and told Haas that he was topping off.

Haas went inside. Thomas pumped in five gallons of 87 Octane and shook his head as the price rose up over ten dollars. He took a deep breath of super-cooled country air, enjoyed the sweet bread-and-maple-syrup smell, and went inside to pay.

He didn't see Haas, but he saw a thirty-two ounce cup of Dr. Pepper and reasoned that he was in the bathroom getting rid of the last drink. He pulled out a crisp twenty dollar bill.

"Number two," Thomas said.

"Is that your friend in there?" the clerk asked.

"Yeah – Arab dude? Yeah," Thomas said.

"What brings you around here?" the clerk asked.

Thomas tensed up, unsure of how to answer. No one came to Southwest Michigan in the middle of January. Southwest Michiganders didn't even want to be there. There was no skiing, no scenery. Ice fishing? Not dressed like that, he wasn't – simple blue jeans and an oversized T-shirt underneath a zippered Cousino High School sweatshirt. .

"Chicago," Thomas blurted out, "going to Chicago."

"What are you doing in Chicago?" the woman asked.

"Visiting a friend."

The woman considered him for too long. She still hadn't rung up the sale, and didn't look like she had a mind to. Thomas felt his gut drop to his groin. He tried to tell himself that he hadn't done anything wrong, that he wasn't even carrying anything. Maybe a half gram of coke, he thought, half a joint in the ashtray – two pills that fell down in the crack between the driver's seat and the console two years ago, but those were probably dust ground into the carpet by now.

“Why?” Thomas asked, as if holding up his end of the conversation.

Before the woman could answer, Haas burst out of the bathroom, the toilet flushing loudly behind him.

“Whew!” Haas said grinning. “Didn't think I as gonna make it!”

He came up beside Thomas as the clerk rang up the gas.

“You got this?” Haas asked, holding up his drink and an extra-large Snickers bar.

“What? No.” Thomas said.

“This guy!” Haas said to the clerk who, caught off guard by the sudden address, dumbly said “yeah, yeah.”

Haas laughed. The clerk laughed Thomas took his change and waited while Haas paid for his goods.

“Bye bye,” Haas said as they left, “God bless America!”

In the car, Haas' face became a cold and bitter mask.

“Don't know what's so fucking funny,” he said.

They drove for a few more miles, past rolling stretches of corn and soybean fields, each punched through in the middle by a single tree, or otherwise a small and clumpy copse, that used to provide a rest stop for workers before the field work was automated,

before rotary discs and tractor tillers made it possible to rip up, row, and plant the land at the rapacious rate necessary to feed an exploded population.

Like a light switch, Haas turned his face around. He pulled out a CD from the black carry-case he had brought with him. The beat began to thump from the kicker box in the back, and the incident from the gas station rolled easily off of them. The sun, making a determined effort to escape from behind the clouds, lit up the snow-covered countryside in a spectacular shine. The glare was blinding, but beautiful. Unlike Detroit and the surrounding suburbs, the snow in the country could remain undisturbed for miles at a stretch, and without the dulling stomp of booted feet or the griming black and gray of excessive car exhaust, it shone like polished glass.

After a few more miles, they found their exit: Old Farm Road, leading to Four Pines. They turned left at a broad and empty yield-only intersection and immediately cross over the St. Joseph river. To their left, they saw a single white house with a solar collector on the top and two wheel-less cars on cinder blocks out front. Immediately opposite was a small billboard advertising Glickman's new and rebuilt furniture - ten miles ahead. Otherwise there was nothing but forest and field for as far as they could see.

They drove for another twenty minutes, and the rare little roadside houses began to appear with greater frequency. Signs advertised gas, food, and lodging. Glickman's new and rebuilt furniture was just seven, four, then three miles ahead. They saw the town open up before them.

It was like any other small town in the area that called itself a city – built with aspirations of self-sufficiency, but hosting only 12,000 people. In Detroit, it would have been consumed up by one of the larger suburbs. It had been built up in the late 1800's

from a row of stores and a stable into an over-ambitious Victorian fantasy. Broad porches lined the streets, jutting out from high-gabled wood-plank houses. The oldest buildings were ornamented with Corinthian flourishes, Romanesque columns, and impressively weathered brick and carved stone. By the library and in the wider expanses of the city stood bronze and granite statues dedicated to the cities founders and dignitaries, and to the city's thirty-five civil war dead. Trees along the streets leaned over the road and pushed up the sidewalk. In the summertime, the streetscape would erupt into rich greens, and shade and shelter the surrounding buildings and the cars driving down the street. In winter, the black branches blended in with their companion power lines, and the crows perched in their midst looked like warts on flesh.

Its neo-classicism was pathetic and quaint. The first National Bank building at the corner of Old Farm and Maybach roads proudly showed off opposed corner finials depicting Zeus Dike and Zeus Nike, while between them spanned a vinyl banner offering hassle-free checking and 50 dollars free for signing up. On the opposite corner, an old apothecary with an Apollonian staff in poured concrete above the door, was home to an internet café. Under the intricately carved rose vine motifs of the second story, a comic-book cartoon of a young spiky-haired punk sat electrified by his computer in a splash of neon orange exclaiming "T-1 Speeds – Yowee!"

Everyone had something to sell – chicken wings, Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, the best chimichangas in town – but there was almost no one on the streets. A few intrepid souls, their faces buried in layers of wool and acrylic, dared the nipping cold enough to walk from one door to the next, but this was no day for pedestrians. Cars crept by on knobby snow tires, all smeared with road salt and thin tan mud.

The street corners are piled high with snow. This area was more susceptible to the oddities of the lake effect than distant and built-up Detroit. It had been positively slammed by the snow of the preceeding weeks. The street signs barely poked their heads out from the piled-up drifts, and by those signs Thomas and Haas finally made their way to Priam street, number 87, where they were to meet their man.

“Lock it” Thomas said as they get out of the car.

“Seriously?” Haas asked with an eyebrow cocked after looking up and down the vacant street.

“You didn’t lock it at the gas station. It’s just my thing. I’m OCD about it.” Thomas said, trying to shrug it off – *hey, if you don’t mind, could you indulge me my little bit of craziness*, but he was quite serious.

“Yeah, don’t have to tell me twice bro,” Haas said, and locked the door.

“Locking a car door will not make the automobile theft-proof, but it will make your automobile a less attractive target than the wide-open automobile next to it,” Thomas said, quoting from his driver’s-ed handbook.

“I had that same book,” Haas chuckled.

Thomas and Haas walked up the creaking front steps to the screened-in porch. On the porch were an assortment of dirty and broken toys – a Bigwheel missing a handlebar, a dollhouse missing its roof – and power tools in various states of disrepair and leakage. Underneath all this was a perfectly matched set of filthy, threadbare furniture – sofa, loveseat, and cat-scratched recliner. The broken toys and tools, the old milk crates, the dirt, the oil, the dried leaves packed in the corner, seemed to have squatted here for the winter and made themselves a fitting and neglected home.

There was a sheet of wide-ruled notebook paper taped neatly to the front door. Its faded letters, made by an orange magic marker, said: *Go Around Back*

Thomas and Haas walked back the way they came and then around to the rear entrance. The lawn was completely snowed over. A doghouse sat in the corner of the lawn, its broken roof sagged under the drifted snow. Between two T-shaped poles, three clothes lines bowed low to the earth, empty. A fourth hung down broken and was lost in the snow.

Cracked concrete steps led up to the door. Haas went first, steadying himself on the rusted railing. He knocked on the door and a few flecks of paint fell down to the steps. There was a faint sound of music from the other side of the door, something familiar, but Thomas couldn't quite put his finger on it.

The curtain on the door window parted, and Haas waved. They heard an old woman yelling inside.

"Justin," she screamed, "get the door!"

A minute later the door opened and a man answered. He was around thirty, maybe a little older, but not yet thirty-five. He was stockily built, thick arms and broad shoulders, but he slouched and so didn't look at all powerful or proud, but apish. He had a messy goatee that barely distinguished itself from the surrounding week's beard growth, and he wore an extra-large blue hockey jersey that read *ICP* across the front and displayed the rap duo's hatchetman logo in yellow across his ample beer belly. His outfit was topped off by a grease-stained John Deere baseball cap.

"Whatup motherfucker," the man said, "Come on in, wipe your feet or the old lady gets pissed."

The door led to the kitchen. Dishes were piled high in the sink, and they spilled over onto the counter. Open containers sat out on the available counter space – jam and peanut butter on the stove, margarine, bread, and lunchmeat on the table.

“Don’t mind the mess,” the man said, “I had my kids this week and they’re hell to clean up after.”

They walked into the dining room, past the antique oak table which served as a workbench for a disassembled lawnmower, and past a tall maple hutch covered, literally covered, in old mail. Cobwebs hung from the electric chandelier.

In the living room, an old woman in a floral-print bathrobe reclined back in an easy chair. Her slippered feet rested on a lumpy ottoman. Across from her was a giant television on shelves made from cinder blocks and pine planks. It was so big that it blocked the front door, and intruded into the mouth of the stairwell. The air was hazy and blue with smoke, and the old woman lit a Marlboro 100 even as the butt of another smouldered in the overflowing ashtray.

She is watching *the Price is Right*, but when Haas, Thomas, and their host started up the stairs, she turned her attention to them and wailed “Justin, when are you going to clean the damn kitchen?”

“Shut up, ma,” Justin yelled back at her as he rounded the corner of the narrow stairway.

The three stepped over a basket full of dirty clothes and entered the first room on the right. Blacklight posters hung on every wall. It was very dark. There is a blanket nailed over the window, and even the single bare light bulb overhead seemed diffused and tired. A queen sized bed, unmade, dominated over half the room. On an end table sat

a lava lamp, turned off, and a fiber-optic mushroom – both looked cheap and dusty. There was a desk in the darkest corner of the room, and like the dining room hutch it was covered with old mail, and also old action figures from the 1980's – He-Man and G.I. Joe – and a few Reagan-era textbooks that were wrinkling with water and age.

Justin sat down on the bed and, with a broad sweep of his arm, indicated that Thomas and Haas should find a seat where they could. Haas, thinking quickly, snatched the chair from the desk. Thomas looked at the ample room on the bed, looked at the sloppy stack of Penthouse and Hustler magazines by Justin's feet, and then sat on the floor.

Justin pulled a cigar box from under his bed. Inside was a bag of weed, a glass pipe, a grinder, and a bottle of Visine. Justin started breaking up the buds and, indicating Thomas with a nod of his hat brim, asked Haas: "Who's this?"

Haas introduced them.

"Thomas is cool as fuck bro, he's alright." Haas said.

"That right?" Justin asked.

"Trust him with my life," Haas said.

Justin didn't say anything. He packed the weed into the bowl, pulled a lighter out of his pocket, and handed the whole works to Thomas.

"Here you go Tom – peace pipe," he said expectantly.

Thomas took the pipe and lighter with trepidation. He wondered where the pipe had been, what lived on the filthy mouthpiece, and what kind of shit weed he was about to smoke. He had a vision of three fat Billy-Bobs in overalls cutting a brick of marijuana

with pig shit, as much for fun as for profit, laughing through toothless mouths, dressed in nothing but blue bib overalls, barefoot, chaw drool running down slack chins...

“Thomas,” he said.

“Come again?” Justin asked.

“It’s Thomas – I don’t go by Tom,” Thomas explained.

Justin cocked an eyebrow and said “Well mister Thomas sir-“

Before he could make a big deal of the offense, Thomas hurried the bowl up to his mouth and took a hit. Revulsion swam in his mind. He could practically feel the little microorganisms wiggling in his mouth as they swam up old canals of tobacco spit up to his lips. He inhaled deeply and passed the bowl back.

The weed wasn’t half bad. Thomas said so.

“Yeah, I know a guy that grows it up in Croesus Township,” Justin said with a small gleam of pride.

Justin took a big hit himself, held it, and let it out with savor. He passed the bowl to Haas, who wiped the mouthpiece on his sleeve.

“Y’all be chewin’ skoal and shit before you smoke,” he laughed, and Justin laughed too.

They passed the bowl around four more times, and Justin reached over to his stereo. He hit the play / pause button and the music started.

If it wasn’t Paul Oakenfold’s *Tranceport 1*, it was a damn fine imitation. The stereo was cheap, a K-mart special that so proudly displayed its CD capability that Thomas guessed it was a product of the 1980’s like everything else in this time capsule of a room. The speakers were half gone, not that they were ever something to brag about.

The bass was non-existent. If it did hit, it buzzed like a farting bumblebee in the mid-range.

They all sat for a while, trying to feel that easy stoner's fellowship, but the room was fraught with impatience. The mood didn't want to stick. Everyone was getting lazy and tired with the effort.

"So how's the raves in Detroit?" Justin drawled.

Haas gave a sort of snort, meant to be a sigh of reminiscence, but it comes out all wrong, and it sounds mean and derisive.

"We had a good one last week," Thomas said.

"That was the one you were supposed to be at," Haas said.

"Yeah, yeah, had the kids here" Justin explained.

"Yeah, good party," Thomas continued.

"Get some pussy?" Justin asked, and there was something about the way he said it that made Thomas feel hot and uncomfortable around the neck. Justin, Thomas thought, would describe a beautiful woman in the same way he would a breeding heifer.

"I got a girl, so same old, you know?" Thomas said.

"What about you, Osama?" Justin asked Haas.

Thomas marveled at Haas' composure. Haas didn't normally take that sort of thing. Either Haas was desperate for something to sell, or the quantity in question was truly stupendous. Both would explain why they were all the way out here in the middle of B.F.E. and not working closer to home.

"Nah, I was too fucked up," Haas grinned.

“You aint’ turned queer, did ya?” Justin teased, but there was a cruel edge to his voice.

Haas laughed and waved the thought away.

“That’s what I love bout raves man,” Justin said “you get all these little raver sluts all up on E and shit and they just wanna fuck all night long.”

Haas and Thomas knew this for bragging. Girls on E usually did *not* want to fuck, and even if they did, they sure as hell didn’t have the attention span to do it all night long. E was a sensual drug, yes, and it heightened empathy, but it wasn’t a *sexy* drug. The constrictive effects of the stimulant make it hard for a man to maintain an erection, for one thing, and for another, a roll is a sort of bubbly and childish thing – mushrooms are the same way. Yes, people could fuck on E, some people even think it heightens the experience, but for most people it just makes sex feel *icky* and cheap.

“I fucking love pussy,” Justin continued: “I wonder about fags, you know? Like, how the fuck could you be a dude that fucks other dudes? Fucking nasty.”

Thomas and Haas said anything, naturally. There were a lot of gays in the scene – a lot of gays in the city, for that matter – but they knew better than to try to give a lesson in tolerance to the man with the goods. Justin took their silence for agreement.

“I’m not saying someone ought to *kill* them, but someone ought to show them one good pussy and see if they keep doing that fag shit. Fucking pussy therapy” Justin said, and caught up in the sound of his own voice repeated: “pussy therapy.”

“Pussy therapy?” Haas laughed. “That’s good bro.”

Justin beamed with pride over his cleverness.

“That’d be a good name for a party, you know?” Like a booty party” Haas suggested.

“Fuck yeah!” Justin agreed. “Get all these bitches on E, have ‘em dancing naked in cages and shit. Naked DJ chicks. Fuck yeah – pussy therapy.”

“You like that bro? Would you hit that up?” Haas asked Thomas, who would not be caught dead at something so trashy.

“Hell, why not?” Thomas said, and there was an unspoken understanding between he and Haas that they would humor Justin.

Haas took advantage of the newfound levity to change the subject.

“Do, you got the shit here?” he asked.

Justin seemed excited to fetch the drugs.

“I got about a third of it here” he said as he crouched down and turned over the mattress. He reached down into a hole in the box spring and pulled out a large zip-lock freezer bag filled with a pastel rainbow of pinks, whites, purples, and mint greens.

Haas frowned. “This shit’s uneven,” he said.

“I promise, it’s all good,” Justin said.

There were a few small bags of what was evidently ecstasy, and these were identical. They were a light pink color with grasshoppers stamped into them. They had golden brown flecks, the kind which many ravers thought were heroin but are in fact little burnt impurities – usually sugar or baking soda, or some other filling agent. Heroin was never used simply to cut pills – one did not use expensive drugs to cut cheap.

The meth was not of the same quality. Haas got two good pills two weeks ago and was told that the rest would be the same. Instead, rather than a quantity of neatly pressed

pills there were raw crystals, tiny baggies of powder, and a few pills like he had seen last week. The multiple shades and hues in the bag told their own story: much of the color could be attributed to bad cooking - purple almost certainly indicated left-over dye from children's cough syrup, green could be the same, or it could indicate that it was cooked off in a copper pot. In any case, it did not signal a high-quality, consistent, and professionally manufactured batch of methamphetamine. It signaled a widely disbursed network of tar-paper shacks in the ass end of nowhere housing bone-thin toothless rednecks hunched over boiling kettles of Robotussin.

“Why don't you try some?” Justin suggested.

Haas pulled out three pills, took one for himself, and handed one each to Justin and Thomas. They were the three sorriest looking pills of the batch, rough-edged, blotchy, and of three different colors.

Thomas gingerly rolled his strawberry pink pill around the palm of his hand. Justin reached for a half-full mountain dew bottle by the nightstand and swallowed his down. Haas worked up a good spit and did the same, then Thomas followed suit.

“You guys done crystal before?” Justin asked. Haas had – twice before. Thomas was no tweaker, but he'd done his share. Usually he took it like this – orally. He had his reasons. He'd previously been offered the opportunity to smoke it, and when smoked it was just as often called glass or ice. Differences in name, however, much like differences in color and shape, were incidental. Delivery was more important.

For Thomas and his clique, there were modes of drug delivery that were unpleasant, distasteful, or downright taboo. Smoking hard drugs out of glass pipes was

near the top of that list. Shooting shit into ones veins was another. These were both for skeevie crackheads and back-alley junkies.

These were the unspoken mores: if it grew out of the ground, you could smoke it, eat it, or dissolve it in tea. If it came out of a lab, you could snort it, swallow it, or shove it up your ass (a “booty bump”). If you smoked synthetics, you were either on your way to ashy lips and turning tricks, or taking the plumbing and light fixtures apart at 4:15 in the morning.

If you shot smack, you were beneath consideration. You could smoke it in a joint provided you could even get it, and opium was fair game too.

No crack, no smack, no meth in a pipe. The rules were flexible, but one broke them at their own peril. Girls could smoke a little glass, for example, if they wanted to lose weight quickly, but they stopped when their ribs showed. You could do heroine in Amsterdam for the sake of telling a story later, but you didn’t do it at home. These were the rules that separated drug use from abuse, though they varied from clique to clique and scene to scene. At that time, at that place, that moment, that scene, among Thomas, Haas, Maria, Rachel, Baxter, Tony Gino, and everyone worth their consideration, you didn’t break the cardinal three: no crack, no smack, and no meth in a pipe.

The hard time with swallowing a pill was that it took much longer to take effect than smoked, snorted, or injected drugs. Furthermore, the effect came on more gradually, and it was significantly muted.

Still, Thomas, Haas, and Justin knew what to expect. The weed might temper the pie-eyed, jack-jawed, fidgety rush, and if any of them wanted to quiet the rush down they could try to get drunk, but they would fail because methamphetamines act in direct and

overpowering opposition to alcohol. They could drink all they wanted, and they would get chemically drunk, but it would *feel* like nothing more than a slight dampering around the edge of reason, a very mild relaxation of impulse. There was no drinking it into submission.

It was better to ride it out through the screechy high-tension peak all the way to the giddy blood-flushed come down. The fidgeting, the jaw-clenching - if any of them were to become sexually aroused, they would have a nearly invincible hard on. As they swallowed the pills, this is what they expected, what they were waiting for, because if it didn't happen – no sale.

A few minutes later, Thomas felt absolutely fine. He was trying to braid the thin strands of carpet shag under his legs. Haas started giving Justin an Arabic lesson at a mile-a-minute.

“Shar-moo-tah,” Haas said.

“Shar-moo-tah?” Justin repeated.

“That means slut,” Haas explained.

Justin laughed loudly. The laugh was infectious – it all seemed hilarious. Not stoner funny, not like sounding out the word “rural” or “mahogany” inside your foggy head, but the whole moment, the actuality of learning Arabic curse words in the upstairs bedroom of a tumble-down hundred-year old house in the middle of God's green acre, was really, honestly funny. Their hearts felt light, a consequence of endorphins, thinned blood, increased blood pressure, and an accelerated heart beat.

“I'm gonna clean,” said Justin.

“What?” Haas asked incredulously, as if Justin had just announced that he was Santa Claus, and Haas would believe him if he only pulled a red suit out of his closet.

“I’m gonna clean the house. Ma wants the house clean. I’m gonna do it,” said Justin.

“Can we help?” Haas asked. The urgency was upon them. They were saturated with energy, and it had to be directed to some sort of meaningful task.

“Sure,” Justin said.

“I can sort mail,” Thomas offered, in part because he had some important deas about how the mail should be sorted, and also because he didn’t want anything to do with that fetid kitchen.

They sprang to their feet and went downstairs. They walked past Justin’s mother, who had fallen asleep in her chair, the television station having moved on to Jeopardy, and her cigarette having burned to ash between her yellow fingers.

Justin went into the kitchen and Haas followed, emerging five seconds later and holding his nose. Together, Justin and Haas took the lawnmower engine off the dining room table and stacked the parts up neatly in the corner. Haas took some paper towels from the kitchen and started wiping everything in sight, clearing and smearing the dust, staying very busy.

Meanwhile, with the table cleared, Thomas started to sort the mail. He produced eight neat stacks – first separating the mail into opened and unopened piles, then sorting it by addressee. J. McAffrey, E. McAffrey, O. McAffrey, and Resident. Initially, every single addressee got his or her own stack, so one for E. McAffrey, one for Edward

McAffrey, one for O. McAffrey, one for Olivia McAffrey, and so on, but eventually Thomas realized that this would be counterproductive, and that he would run out of room.

After he arranged the stacks by name, he sorted them by size, from smallest to largest, top to bottom, by height and width. For envelopes of the same dimension, he sorted them by thickness, and for envelopes of the same thickness, by weight. If two envelopes were absolutely the same size and weight, he checked to see if they were different colors, and put the darker envelope under the lighter. If the envelopes had the same color, then he sorted them alphabetically by sender. If the size, color, weight, and sender were all the same, he checked the postmark and arranged them chronologically, and on the freak occurrence that the size, color, weight, sender, and date were identical between two envelopes, then he put the envelope in his right hand into the duplicate pile, which itself was organized by the above stacking rules. There were three envelopes in the duplicate pile. Thankfully, none of them were duplicates themselves.

Thomas was in the process of aligning all the mail stacks by their upper-right corner so that he could arrange the eight stacks into two neat pyramids when Justin emerged from the kitchen.

“So what do you guys think?” He asked, drying his wrinkled hands on a dish towel.

Thomas looked around for the first time in hours. Haas had dusted this room, every corner, nook and cranny. The electric chandelier above Thomas gleamed, and the burnt-out lightbulbs had been removed and neatly lined up on the spotless window sill. The porcelain figurines, picture frames, hurricane oil lamps, and the shelves they sat on

were all perfectly immaculate and neatly arranged. Haas himself had started on the living room, trying not to wake Justin's mother as he scrubbed the television with a dry cloth.

"I'd say it's pretty good," Thomas said, and the words hurt his clenched jaw.

"Cool. Let's go get the rest" Justin said.

Chapter 10.

A parent tends to believe either the best or the worst about their child, and evidence be damned. Roy was of the former case, so the sudden changes in his daughter's behavior – her new baggy clothes, her lighthearted way of speaking, her sudden interest in that unlistenable techno music – well, she'd gone through phases before, and they kept saying that adolescence lasted longer and longer, that people were essentially teenagers into their thirties now, and that gave Roy some comfort. That told Roy that whatever Jenna had grown into, she would grow out of.

Roy felt his own perspective changing that week. He'd been learning something about workplace dynamics. He'd learned that a lot more people were being a lot nicer to him now that there was a round of layoffs on the way. Everyone wanted to be his friend - his esteemed colleague. They obviously thought his esteem was important, and that he'd have some say on the matter of who stayed and who went.

He knew it wasn't true. He could speak up for one, maybe two guys in his department, but he wouldn't even be the one to make the cuts. He might himself be cut. He didn't worry too much about it – he'd saved well, and would land on his feet, and he had enough seniority that when they make the call-backs, he would be one of the first re-hires. Coupling that with the notion of unemployment benefits, Roy even started to enjoy the idea of a few month's vacation.

Others weren't, of course – namely, anyone under Roy. Roy had found a pretty predictable relationship between a man's position, his seniority, and his savings. Roy could float for a year, maybe eighteen months if he had to, and even then he'd just have

to lean more heavily on his credit cards and start skimming his investments. He was a long, long way from going hungry or homeless.

His own boss, Mark Denafrio, was a half step from retirement. The old man would be best advised to take the early-out package when it's offered, and hit the road. Sure, he might not get as far as Australia during his much-anticipated trip around the world, but he would be just fine with his pension, savings, and early retirement bonus. He'd be okay.

As a rule of thumb, if you made at least \$35 an hour and you weren't stupid, you didn't fear the layoff. Nevermind that you were also less likely to be laid off than the people below you.

Roy felt a passing pity for the linemen that were about to lose their jobs, but it was easy to dismiss. They could have saved too, after all. They could have been just as smart with their money as he had been with his own. Sure, the standards of living were a little lower, but parallels were parallels for a reason. If he could make sixty thousand per year, keep gas in his car, feed himself and his daughter, and still have a safety net, he didn't understand why someone making half as much couldn't do the same. *It isn't hard*, Roy thought, *don't spend what you don't got!*

Bill Heller wasn't a lineman – that made his situation worse. Bill was in a very close pay scale, Roy guessed within 5k per year, and they both had a fair amount of seniority, though Roy could remember when Bill came on. For all intents and purposes, they had the same job in different departments.

But Bill, Roy thought, spent his money on complete *crap!* Roy had been to Bill's house on several occasions – one such occasion being a movie night where all the

managers of their plant had piled into Bill's living room to watch movies on his enormous projector television, and have their teeth rattled by Bill's state of the art surround-sound home theatre system. Bill's house was absolutely enormous. Roy could have easily fit his own home inside this newly built "McMansion" and still have had enough room for his garage.

The walls were decked out in high adolescent style. Bill must have had at least two dozen framed and signed Jerseys, and just as many commemorative game balls and replica trophies. He had a pool table with a removable ping-pong top, an electronic dart board, a fully functional wet bar. Bill lives alone in a house built for four, which occupies the same room as an older house built for six. Roy estimated the heating and cooling bills to be easily triple what he paid himself.

"This is nothing though," Bill explained as he showed Roy around his house on Roy's second visit, taking Bill up on an invitation to *just come and hang*, about two years ago.

"Here's my real pride and joy," Bill said.

At the east end of the upstairs hallway, bill punched a code into a key panel next to a formidable looking door. It was painted to match the other doors of the house, but this one was special. It had no handle, for one, and it was perfectly flat. When Bill entered his six-digit code, there was a definitive *thunk* sound from the door frame, and Bill pushed the door open with a grunt.

"Welcome to the Arsenal of Democracy," Bill exclaimed, and Roy wasn't sure if Bill was punning poorly or just completely missing the point. During World War II, Detroit had been dubbed the Arsenal of Democracy for its pivotal role in supplying arms,

armor, and ammunition to the front lines. Roy thought that at least Bill should have said *My* arsenal of democracy, or *the new* arsenal of democracy.

In any case, an arsenal it was. Bill closed the door behind them and there was a hydraulic whine as the door sealed itself. On the inside of the door, behind them, hung a police issue paper target with a neat cluster of ragged holes around its heart and skull cap. Long chains of machine gun bullets hung from the ceiling like streamers at a birthday party. Two impressively dark and solid safes faced each other from opposite sides of the room. There was a futon here, folded up into a sofa and covered with a black-and-white POW / MIA blanket. Above that was an array of swords – a Japanese katana, a German Zweihander, a damasked Turkish saber, and others that Roy didn't recognize at a glance. Opposite the futon was a long shelf, about waist high, made of unfinished planks and cinder blocks. On the bottom shelf, technically the floor under the bottom shelf, sat a long row of olive green ammo boxes, sixteen in all, and Roy was sure they were full. The second shelf up contained MRE's – ready to eat, vacuum-sealed army rations that would stay edible practically forever. The next shelf contained books, dozens of books, most with titles like "TM-31-210 Improvised Munitions Handbook" or "FM-531 Booby Traps," but Roy also spotted a copy of "Living Off the Land: A Surviving Man's Guide" and a few ominous titles like "The Fall of America and What You're Going to Do About It" and "The Truth About 9-11: UNCENSORED!"

Above this shelf were two rocket launchers: a soviet-era RPG and an American LAW. Between them, a framed print of the Manhattan skyline, twin towers smoldering, and a photoshopped eagle's head shedding a single tear. A yellow ribbon at the bottom read: Never Forget.

“A real safe-room,” Bill explained. “Keyless entry, easy-out. No one gets in without the code, and that door is solid steel. Someone’d have an easier time going through the damn wall than trying to bust down this door.” Roy agreed, considering that the wall was probably nothing more than Tyvek and widely spaced two-by-twos.

“Of course, I pray to god I never have to use it,” Bill said. When Roy didn’t answer, Bill said “Freedom isn’t free. I think you understand that.”

Roy nodded. It seemed like the thing to do.

“Smoke?” Bill asked, and opened up one of the ammo cans on the bottom shelf. He pulled out two long plastic tubes and took the tops off each.

“They’re not real Cubans,” Bill explained. “Dominicans, but they’re damn good.”

Roy took one and listened to Bill’s well-intentioned lecture on smoking etiquette, about how to and how not to light one, the virtues of cutting the tip off versus just puncturing the end, and so on.

“You like scotch?” Bill asked, and before Roy could answer, he opened another ammo can and pulled out a bottle of Glen Livet and two tin camp cups. He poured a hefty shot of scotch into each, handed one to Roy, and kept the other for himself.

“So you actually have bullets in any of those?” Roy joked, and immediately wished he hadn’t. Bill started pulling out the ammo canisters and showing Roy their contents.

“7.62mm, AK-47 ammo for my semi-auto SKS,” he said of the first. “.223 hyper velocity for the AR-15 Carbine, .45 ACP for the twin 1911’s, just like The Shadow. You remember The Shadow?” Bill asked.

“My Grandpa used to listen to it on the radio” Roy said, and then they said in a clumsy half-unison: “who knows what evil lurks in the hearts and minds of men? The shadow does!”

They laughed together, the scotch and close quarters, the cigar smoke, the smell of gun oil, all coming together to conjure up visions of hunting lodges, stag parties, and rear echelon bunkers that every man believes are his home and birthright.

“He was a good one, that Shadow,” Bill said.

“Yep.”

“But you don’t gotta be the Shadow to know it’s an evil place out there.” Bill said, becoming serious again.

Roy swished his drink around in his cup.

“They proved that,” Bill said, pointing to the poster above the ammunition. “They want what we’ve got so goddamned bad they’ll...you know?”

“Yep,” Roy said, nodding encouragingly.

“They’ll wreck it because they want it so bad,” Bill said.

The smoke was thick in the room, which itself felt too small and close.

“I just think you’ve gotta take care of your own is all,” Bill said, and tossed back the last of his scotch. He went to the door, and it opened easily.

Stupid shit, Roy thought. More guns than he had hands, artifacts and mementos of games he’d never seen but had blurred into so many others that they had lost all distinction and had no more meaning than any other, and iconic images of athletes – their photos, their jerseys, their autographs, that would never know or care if Bill was alive or dead.

Bill wasn't unique. Roy saw it in a lot of these new kids, making twenty dollars an hour and thinking they had it made, buying new homes at sub-prime rates, making minimum payments on their student loans, car notes, and maxed-out credit cards. The layoffs would hit them like a cold slap to the face, and they'd be back living in their parent's houses trying desperately to sell their showroom-new cars at rock-bottom prices, in competition with all the other out-of-work, out-of-luck new graduates. Graduates who'd been told since the third grade that if they went to college, worked hard, and got a job with the big three, then their lives would just sort of work out and everything would be alright. But nobody told them to be so stupid about it. He didn't know where these kids got the idea that from cradle to grave, someone would take care of them – or maybe someone did. He saw the way these kids acted, he heard them talk about the money they got from mom and dad.

Christ, he thought, twenty-five, twenty-six years old, working full time and still getting an allowance! They talked all the time about how college was a joke, college was a big blow-off, how if they ever got a bad grade they could just whine or beg their way out of it, and once he even heard that a junior sales rep had passed a college Algebra course because his mother called up and complained to the appropriate dean.

Mommy bailing you out of college. Roy was disgusted, but it made sense. These kids, he thought, graduate college and they are worse than useless. They didn't retain a thing from their lessons, and they *bragged* about it. They laughed about blowing off class, getting drunk, frat parties, cheating their way through and whining their way to a barely-passing grade.

The professors just made it worse. They were so easily bullied into handing out As and Bs to C and D students. Roy remembered his own professors, hard-nosed old engineers, real professionals that didn't take any guff. He remembered studying drafting at Cousino High School in Warren, and his teacher had taught him the hard and fast rules of industry: good citizenship, no horseplay, hard work, and meritocracy. He was pleased at the head start he'd had in college, where they knew these rules as well. In industry, a man knew what he was worth, really knew what he can do and be. There was none of this self-esteem bullshit. If you wanted to feel good, you went out and did something you could be proud of, end of story.

He'd even instilled some of those values in Jenna, he thought. He didn't think he had to, of course – he still had some of the old sensibility about girls and what they are for, but since his own wife had proven such a bad bet, leaving him when Jenna was only eight, he figured he had better raise her up in his image than in her mother's. If Jenna knew a good example of a hard-working American man, well, the better she could recognize one when she saw one, and what was wrong with that? So she wasn't taking classes anymore – well, she'd never been much of a student, so what was the big loss? There were plenty of jobs that still only required a high school diploma, no matter what the know-it-all career counselors and economic talking heads said, and so long as she could cook and keep house, her future was as good as set. It sounded old fashioned, he knew, but Roy was proud of the fact that someday, his little girl would make a nice wife for some good, hardworking man.

You gotta take care of your own, he thought.

Across Detroit, in Dearborn, Rachel and Baxter sat in Antonio's diner, waiting for Darryl to end his shift. They weren't waiting for any particular reason or topic of conversation, but they ate for free and felt they owed Darryl a courtesy.

"I don't even know why you'd mention it," Baxter said moodily.

"I think it's sweet," Rachel said.

"Well, if they didn't trade numbers, I don't know why you think...you know?"

"They probably just got distracted," Rachel said.

"Or maybe you're making a big deal out of nothing."

Doesn't Darryl ever talk about her?" Rachel asks.

Baxter looked at her crossly. "What, you think we sit around talking about our feelings or some shit?" he said.

"Oh whatever. Whatever. I know you talked to Thomas about me when we started going out, so don't even act like you're some macho asshole."

"It's got nothing to do with that," Baxter said.

"Uh huh. Whatever," Rachel said smugly.

Darryl approached their table. "What's up?" he asked.

He had changed from his busser's outfit of black polyester slacks and a white wrinkle-free short-sleeved oxford into his street clothes: loose blue jeans, gleaming white sneakers, a hooded sweatshirt, and a baseball cap. The cap read *Ecko* across the front in black lettering, but it was black-on-black, and only readable when the light hit it just right.

“Hey sweetie,” Rachel said, and made a big production of getting up, hugging him, and air-kissing his cheeks. Baxter stayed in his seat, shaking his friend’s hand when he sat down too.

Baxter had nothing to say except a friendly “hey,” and Rachel just grinned from ear to ear so that Darryl asked again: “what’s up?”

“What’s up with *you*?” Rachel asked in a playful and teasing tone.

Baxter snorted derisively, which increased Rachel’s determination.

“I think you made an impression on *someone* this weekend,” Rachel said.

She had no way of knowing this. Jenna seemed unusually happy on the drive home Sunday, but Rachel didn’t ask why. It occurred to her that it might be the afterglow of the drugs, the fatigue of dancing – she wasn’t stupid – but she *wanted* Jenna to be infatuated with Darryl. *Liked* the idea of them making a fun, cute couple, and decided that that was the case. In time, Jenna would realize that she was infatuated with Darryl from the get-go. In fact, she was sure that if she’d talked to Jenna since Sunday, that’s just what she’d say.

“Well, she didn’t give me her number, so she must not be that impressed” Darryl said.

“Oh, she meant for me to give it to you,” Rachel lied, “so get a pen and write it down.”

Baxter considered kicking her under the table, but there was no persuading her when she got that way. He knew first hand. Thomas and Maria were a perfect example of Rachel’s meddling - they had nothing in common except for good dance moves and a growing cocaine problem, which was hardly enough. Thomas had told him before that

the sex wasn't that great, or even that frequent. Thomas had told Baxter about the blow-up over the phone, and Baxter thought it was long overdue. They were really only together because Rachel had a cute cousin who was also her best friend, and she thought that two pairs of best friends would be perfect for double dates.

Baxter didn't know why she did it, why she always got so involved, but he came from a big Italian family, and enduring nosiness was second nature for him. He didn't pry into anyone's business that isn't family, but Rachel did. Baxter knew that Rachel didn't care for Jenna that much, and he didn't understand her big rush to play match-maker.

Maybe Rachel thought she really was looking out for her cousin and Thomas' interests never came into her mind. And hadn't they been happy enough for a while? Baxter realized that he always preferred to watch these sort of things unfold than to step in and interfere with the interference himself, and that interfering doesn't do him much good, and that Rachel would have her way anyhow. If Rachel thought it would be super-cute to have three best friends dating three best friends, well, how fun would it be when it all blew up in her face?

"This is her home number. She's getting a cell this week, but this is it for now," Rachel explained as she wrote the number on a torn-off corner of napkin.

"Yeah, I don't have one either – I been thinking about it though," Darryl said

Baxter, understanding that the conversation still didn't have anything to do with him, gazed out the window as he fingered the handle of his coffee cup. He'd been thinking about getting a cell phone too. He thought that since he was going to be a DJ in demand that he should carry one, so that producers and agents can get a hold of him, and there was a brief flirtation across the back of his mind that there are girls that will want to

call him too, girls that he might not want popping up on the caller ID when Rachel is over.

“So she has her own place then?” Darryl asked Rachel.

“No, she lives at home with her dad.”

“Is her dad cool?” Darryl asked, meaning: is he okay with his white daughter dating a black man.

“Her dad is such a sweetheart!” Rachel answered, misunderstanding the question. “He’s kind of quiet, and he works a lot, but he’s just kind of a dork – I don’t know, he’s *so nice!*”

“I’m going to get one,” Baxter blurted out suddenly. There was a moment of confused silence while Rachel and Darryl put together that Baxter was talking about a cell phone.

“What for?” Rachel asked.

“Well, just – DJ stuff, you know.” He said.

Rachel rolls her eyes and said “yeah, DJ B-X-T has to be ready at a moment’s notice to lay down hot wax.”

“Maybe,” Baxter said, a little hurt at her incredulity.

“He spins at one party and now he’s hot shit,” Rachel said, and sounded even meaner than she had intended. She kissed Baxter on the cheek and touched his chest and said “right babe?”

“Right,” he said, deciding to go along with her, making a mental note of her bitchy jealousy, and contemplating ways to use it later.

“Well, I’ll give her a call this week,” Darryl said. “I figure it’s already been three days, so I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“You boys and your three-day-rule,” Rachel teased. “You know - we know all about it, so it’s not even slick.

“How long you wait to call her?” Darryl asked Baxter, pointing to Rachel.

“She called me,” Baxter said.

Darryl laughed, and Rachel began to sulk.

Chapter 11.

Sunny Acres was a trailer park, and little about it defied stereotype. Cars on blocks, mean dogs on long chains, rotten wood porches, potholed dirt roads, and a general mustiness of disuse and disrepair. Thomas drove, Haas sat in the back seat, and Justin navigated from the passenger side.

He guided Thomas through the convoluted turns of the park by memory of repetition. None of the small alleys and avenues were named, though they must have been at some time because their numbers only made any sort of sense if they weren't supposed to be sequential.

“This is it,” Justin said, pointing to a brown and white trailer with a wide porch on one side made of unstained wood. There were some bare and broken bushes out front, and on the side opposite the porch was another trailer, leaving only enough room for a person to squeeze between them. The front bay window, the living room window, shone with an amber warmth from behind a tangled cluster of Christmas tree lights and a big greej bow that read “Happy Holidays.”

Thomas parked, and they trudged through the snow to the door. The stairs were slippery with compressed snow. Justin tried the door and found it locked, so he banged heavily on the corrugated tin wall. A pale and freckled face peeked out at them through the window, the face of a pretty young woman – it came and went in a heartbeat, but Thomas saw her clearly and his heart skipped a beat. The door opened. A thick cloud of smoke billowed out – tobacco, weed, and incense – and Thomas and Haas followed Justin inside.

Four young people sat around the living room. Two girls sat on the plaid couch, another girl in a beanbag chair, and a boy sat on the floor in front of the television. The TV was massive, dominating the wall behind it. It flickered in silence, showing an episode of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. Under the TV was a complicated cable box and beside that, the first of seven modular stereo components – EQ, preamp, tuner, CD, and so on. A mix of mainstream epic trance played through the system’s six speakers plus subwoofer, but the volume was comfortable.

“This is Jenny, Gwen, Crystal, and Ron” Justin said, introducing in a counter-clockwise circle. Ron, the boy on the floor, looked about seventeen. He was stringy in build and wide-eyed. He wore his thick blonde hair in a crew-cut, and nodded to the two strangers as he scraped out his bowl into a small skull-shaped ashtray, preparing to refill it. Crystal smiled briefly at Thomas and Haas, but gave no more acknowledgement as she eagerly watched Ron pack the bowl. Jenny was older than the others by a good five years. Naturally, Thomas and Haas didn’t know that it was her place, but she had an air of ownership about her, like she was the most comfortable person in the room.

Thomas recognized Gwen as the pale face that poked out from behind the curtains. His attraction to her was chemical, primal; it took him as a pleasant surprise. She was thin, but with wide hips and pronounced breasts, a barbie-doll body, except for the little sign of a raver-belly, a slight pudg around the middle indicative of a fatty, starchy diet kept in check by stimulants and dancing, but nothing to tone and tighten the muscles of her mid-section. She was wearing a tight Four Pines High School t-shirt, white with red lettering and a red ringer collar. It showed her body off nicely. She wasn’t showing off though – she just happened to be wearing tight and incredibly flattering

clothes with no effort involved. She wore no make-up, not because she didn't need it, but because it would have been an awful lot of work to get all nic-ed-up and then go smoke weed at Jenny's house.

"Whatup girl?" Justin asked Jenny. It was obvious to Haas and Thomas that they had a history, but in a town that size, any two people would. They interested Thomas. He wondered who picked up whom. Was Justin the type to go cruising the high school ten years after graduating or dropping out, picking up on barely legal beauties? Thomas didn't doubt it. What the hell else was he doing here? He wondered if Justin had ever had Gwen, and he felt a lump of anger rise up in his throat. He told himself the idea was ridiculous – a girl that hot would never look twice at an old, busted hillbilly like Justin. He breathed in slowly and lit a cigarette. He checked himself, quieted his nerves. He was only three days out of a breakup, or at least what he thought of as a breakup, and he had to remind himself how to play the game.

"Having a little Party" Jenny said to Justin. "Why don't you boys sit down and make yourselves at home?"

Justin ushered Haas and Thomas towards the living room, and then went to the kitchen to fetch himself a beer, leaving the pair to try to seat themselves. Haas sat on a plastic and steel chair that matched two more in the kitchen, and Thomas sat down next to Gwen. They trade a friendly hello, and then everyone settled into nervous waiting. No one had anything to say.

Thomas studied Gwen subtly from the corner of his eye. She had long red hair and dark brown eyes. Her sparse freckles spread across her nose and cheeks. She was very pale. He felt like he was fifteen, fumbling around for something to say to impress a

pretty girl, but he could think of nothing. He dried his hands on his pants and lit a cigarette. Gwen waved the smoke out of her face.

“Sorry,” Thomas said.

“Oh, no, it’s fine – just went right in my eye,” Gwen said, and as if to reassure him, she lit a cigarette of her own.

Justin came back into the living room with a bottle of Coors in hand. The room was smoky, dry, and too hot by ten degrees.

“Anyone else want one?” Justin asked.

“Yeah” Ron said as he finished packing his bowl.

“Better go get one then,” Justin said, suppressing a laugh at his own wit.

“So you guys are from Detroit then?” Jenny asked Thomas and Haas collectively.

“I’m from Kuwait – I live in Troy,” Haas said.

“I am. I mean, I don’t live in Detroit. I live in Warren. I was born in Detroit,” Thomas said.

“It’s all Detroit to me” Jenny said with a shrug.

“You have any problems up there” Crystal asked, meaning did they, two basically white guys, or one very white guy and one white-ish guy, have any problem with the largely black population of Detroit – a population that she visualized based on three sources: movies that portray blacks as violent thugs or lazy pickaninnies; the hatefully racist gossip of her family and community; and Marcus Clemens, the only black man with whom she has ever had a conversation. He was a mildly retarded farm hand and stall mucker who worked at the old Macabee farm, and who was a popular weekend fixture at the Corner Café, where he sat drinking coffee and eating pie, exclaiming “it’s cold today”

or “it’s hot today” to anyone who passed by, depending on the weather, and when pressed for more said either “Brrr, cold!” or “Whew, Hot!”

Crystal knew there were black families in Four Pines, but the Mexican field workers had largely displaced them as the outsider community, and now the sixteen black residents of Four Pines were by and large ignored, except when a white resident took particular attention of one and says something like “Those Jacksons are good people, hard working – they ain’t *niggers*, they’re just black, and they can’t help that.”

Thomas and Haas didn’t know this, but they have a sense of what she’s driving at.

“Shit gets stolen sometimes,” Thomas offered.

“Fuck, my car got stolen last weekend,” Haas said with a sort of pride, as if having his car stolen had made him tougher, bigger, more impressive – as if he had stolen a car himself. The others in the room whistled approvingly or gaped in astonishment.

“That’s rare though, a car getting stolen at a party. I mean, in Detroit it’s common, but we had security,” Haas explained.

“If you leave shit in plain sight, mostly,” Thomas said.

“Cars, CD’s – girls get their purses stolen,” Haas continued.

“That’s mostly it,” Thomas concluded.

“Ever get carjacked?” Ron asked.

“They don’t really do that anymore,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, that’s some ‘90’s shit right there,” Haas agreed, referring to the sensational media coverage that accompanied a wave of car-jackings around 1990 and 1991. Of course, people did still get carjacked, but not as often, and it was old news, like arson, robbery, and homicide. Detroit crime was only exciting if it is particularly brutal or

horrible, if it happened to or was committed by someone famous, or if it was perpetuated by a black Detroiter on a suburban white. Black-on-black crime got the page three treatment.

“I wouldn’t go there,” Crystal said, “no way.”

“Not even to party?” Justin teased.

Crystal shook her head.

Ron says “I went to a party in Detroit. I didn’t really see the big deal.”

“Where at?” Haas asked, his interest piqued.

“Let me think – some bear park or something” Ron said.

“Four Bears Water Park?” Thomas asked, as if the name offended him.

“Sounds right,” Ron said.

“Well, you weren’t even really in Detroit” Haas said.

“That’s what, Sterling Heights?” Thomas asked.

“Sterling Heights or Auburn Hills. Something like that.” Haas said.

“Well, I didn’t see the big deal. Hardly anyone there after a three hour drive” Ron said with a shrug.

“It’s all Detroit to me,” Jenny said again.

“It’s not though.” Thomas said, his blood starting to rise. He wasn’t angry, but he felt it was important, even vital, to make the distinction clear, to illustrate to these hayseed nobodies what made the city special, why it needed to be loved and understood – but mostly he wanted to prove to Gwen that he knew something about something, especially something as big, mysterious, and dangerous as Detroit.

“You’ve got the city and you’ve got the suburbs, and they’re really different,” he said.

“Yeah, one’s full of niggers,” Ron quipped, and drew a laugh from Justin, Crystal, and Jenny. Gwen smiled, but hid it quickly. Thomas saw her teeth, white, but not perfectly straight. He wanted to take her to Detroit, teach her how to sit up straight, to learn the difference between the city and the suburbs, to teach her that it’s wrong to make fun of blacks, to take the country out of her, to make her perfect.

“Well, sure, Detroit is black – but it’s got something. I don’t know. It’s more interesting. More alive” Thomas said.

“It’s got soul,” Haas offered.

“Soul,” Thomas said in agreement.

“But you don’t live there, do you?” Gwen asked, venturing into the conversation for the first time.

“Practically,” Thomas said “I mean no, I live in Warren, but Detroit is home.”

“So you work there, right? Isn’t that what you said?” Justin asked.

“I didn’t say that” Thomas said.

“So you don’t work in Detroit?” Jenny asked.

“So what do you do besides party?” Gwen asked.

“Partying’s enough” Thomas said with an authority that ended the interrogation.

“So do you all want to hang out for a bit?” Jenny asked. Haas looks at Thomas, who was of two minds. His infatuation with this girl whom he has just met was overwhelming, and he didn’t have any problem with sitting around getting high for a while, but the conversation has struck a nerve. He’d been “claiming” Detroit for years –

most Detroit area party kids did. Some of them felt a sense of falseness about pretending to be Detroiters, and Thomas realized he was one of them. The scene allowed partiers to cross a lot of boundaries – color lines, class divisions, even distances shrank away as people flew halfway across the continent, even the world, for a good party – but that one border remained, refusing to fall down. Thomas was no Detroiters – he knew it, the city knew it, anyone from the suburbs or the city proper knew it. Only hicks like Justin didn't know the difference. Thomas knew about the small but growing gentrification movement in neighborhoods like Corktown and Woodbridge, and he wondered what was stopping him from moving to the city and making it official.

But the girl to his left was warm and sweet, and every time he brushed against her arm he felt a little thrill. She wore some sort of fragrance, a lilac scent – not strong enough to be perfume, too strong to be soap – and it was driving Thomas mad. When he listened to the music, he imagined himself on top of her, thrusting up inside her, she wrapped around him like a kudzu vine and he regaining the lust and vigor that he had not felt with Maria for a long time.

Haas, hearing no answer from Thomas but apt enough at reading body language to know that his friend was working game, said “Sure, why not.”

“You want a beer?” Justin asked.

“Yeah, I'll take one” Thomas said, and smiles at Gwen, who gave him a small, tight smile back.

“Well, guess you better get up and get ‘em” Justin said, and this time he laughed, and everyone else along with him. Haas fetched beers for himself and for Thomas.

They smoked and they drank. Justin and Haas disappeared briefly to fetch the rest of the coke, crystal, weed, and E from the back bedroom of the trailer, and the small party broke off into pairs and threes.

Ron and Crystal were having a close, fervent conversation in hushed tones, but everyone could tell what they're talking about. They were having an argument, a couple's argument, the kind that masks itself as an honest conversation about self-improvement and then pops up days later as recrimination, an hour-long fault-finding mission. They discussed travel – neither of the two had ever been more than 100 miles from home. To them, Haas and Thomas were urbane travelers from another world.

Haas was talking in his easy and charismatic manner to Justin and Jennifer about anything and everything that crossed his mind – mostly parties, and where they were, what was happening now, when the scene would come back – but the conversation quickly became more personal when Justin mentioned his impromptu Arabic lesson.

“I can understand it, but I can't really speak it too good” Haas said.

“You was teachin' me plenty” Justin said.

“Well, your English is fine,” said Jennifer, “not like those people you hear come over and don't know how to talk.”

She was referring to the Mexican immigrants, the huge and semi-migratory pool of farm and field labor brought up to plant, detassle, and pick corn, and to shuck, pack, and wrap it after it's grown. They bought or rented out whole buildings, whole blocks, and had begun in recent years to open up restaurants and stores of their own, stores in which, Jennifer suspected and gossip confirmed, whites were not welcome. They spoke to each other in Spanish – that's how she knew. About a year ago, she stopped into a

small corner Carniceria, assuming it was still essentially the same Stop-In convenience store it had been before, only under new management.

“Can I get a pack of Marlboros?” she asked the short, tan, mustachioed man behind the deli counter.

There were no cigarettes to be seen. It was so obvious, so self-evident, that the man found it odd, even funny, that she should ask. This was a carniceria after all – who wanted cigarettes with raw pollo and ropes of chorizo?

“No cigarettes, señora,” he said with a chuckle. It came out in half-spanish. He hadn’t meant to, but he was only two months in the country, working at his brother’s store, hoping for a visa and knowing that a true green card was beyond his grasp. He was nervous, lonely – he tried to lighten the mood with another joke.

“Valentin,” he yelled to his brother in the back room “tenemos algun cigarillo?”

“No, no cigarettes,” came the disembodied reply.

“No cigarettes,” he said with a chuckle.

It seemed cruel to Jennifer, and that was her first and so far last real contact with a foreigner.

“No accent or nothing,” she said of Haas.

“Well, just like Chicago or somewhere close,” Crystal said loud enough for the others to hear.

“What about Chicago?” Justin asked.

“Man, I love Chicago,” said Haas, starting another story.

“I’ve been to Chicago,” Gwen told Thomas. “Not for a long time though.”

“I was there about two weeks ago,” Thomas told her.

“My mom took me to the aquarium and the Field museum,” she says.

“I’ve never seen them.”

“They were great – but I don’t remember much except feeling bad because the fish only got to swim in tiny little circles all the time,” she said.

“They don’t know any better” Thomas said, calling on an old nugget of wisdom his dad passed down when Thomas said the same thing about his first pet goldfish.

“They only have a three-second memory. By the time they get to one side of the bowl, they’ve forgotten about the other,” he said.

“You want to step out for a cigarette?” Gwen asked. “I think it’s already too smoky in here.”

“Sure,” Thomas said, catching the unsubtle hint and following her outside under the knowing stares of Justin, Haas, and Jennifer.

Outside, Thomas asked her how she liked living in Four Pines.

“Fucking sucks,” she said with a slight country drawl. “Nothing to do, no one to meet. You know?”

Thomas nodded sagely, but he didn’t know. He’d been in the scene for five years, and there was always something to do, someone to meet – at least there had been until last year when the laws tightened down. Before that, he’d made friends from all over the continent.

“Why don’t you leave then?” Thomas asked.

Gwen shrugged, then threw away her half-smoked cigarette and pushed herself close to Thomas. Thomas kissed her and pulled her in tight to him. She felt warm and alive, all flesh, blood, and pulse. It felt right and sudden, spontaneous and thrilling.

“Come on,” she said, and led him to another trailer two doors down.

The trailer was blue and white, and heavily bogged down with snow. The steps were clear, but the walkway wasn't. There was a blue Mercury Sable in the driveway, buried under a foot of snow. The windows of the trailer were dark. Thomas followed Gwen up the stairs to the front door. Gwen opened the door and took a tentative step inside, then turned around and signaled for Thomas to follow quietly.

Inside, she left the lights off and led Thomas by the hand. Her palm was soft and dry, and she walked slowly through the darkness. As Thomas' eyes adjusted he started to pick out shapes – a couch, a chair, a television set, little figurines on shelves that could have been anything but he guessed they were probably Hummel's little kids with big eyes. The trailer smelled clean, unlike Jennifer's trailer. There was only the slightest hint of cooked food and cigarette smoke, mostly covered over with plug-in cinnamon air freshener.

Gwen opened the first door on the left past the living room and hurried Thomas in behind her. She closed the door and flicked on the light. It was a spare room, containing only a single bed, a dresser / vanity, a nightstand, and a stereo. The walls were covered in wood paneling, and simply adorned with a black-and-white photo of a vase of flowers (a leftover from a Junior year photography class) and a framed poster of a panther stalking under a full moon. There was also a small picture of the Four Pines High School cheerleading squad stuck to the wall with poster putty, and a poster promoting a football game between Four Pines and their rivals – it was a picture of a computer-generated football stadium with matching lightning bolts, over which was written “Grease Croesus” in gold letters.

There was a half-full ash tray on the nightstand, a purple lamp, and an alarm clock. The vanity was covered with make-up, brushes, and bottles of perfume, all mostly full. The air was heavy with old perfume and spent cigarettes, but it wasn't terribly offensive – it was more cloying than foul.

She turned on the stereo and pushed play on the CD player. It's a house mix that Thomas didn't recognize, but it was real disco house, the kind that rarely got played in Detroit as it was upstaged by minimal techno and pop-house. It was sexy and soulful.

Gwen didn't waste any time. She pulled Thomas to her and put his hand on her breast. He reached around and squeezed her ass with the other and kissed her lips. She kissed back hard, driving her lips with her teeth, and her tongue forced itself into Thomas' mouth. He pushed back. He tore at her shirt and unfastened her bra, then took off his own shirt as she pushed him back on the bed and followed after.

They were a fumbling mass of groping hands. Thomas pulled off his pants and they bound infuriatingly around his ankles. He was nearly angry by the time he kicked his legs free. Gwen pulled her jeans and panties off in one motion. Thomas tried to go down on her, but she said "no, I don't like that." She went down on him with the same intensity of her kisses. She was quite expert. Thomas stopped her, afraid of cumming too fast.

"How do you want it?" he asked her. She laid back and said nothing, only pulling Thomas forward onto her.

"Do you have a condom?" Thomas asked her.

"You're the guy" she said.

"Sorry" Thomas frowned.

"I'm on the pill, so whatever" she told him.

His cock was inside her before it even dawned on him that if it were this easy for him, well, how easy was it for someone who knows her better? He wondered if she fucks everyone this fast, or just impressive young studs from the big city, and his jealousy drove him into her with harsh power. He didn't wonder for long. His brain was gone, and he began pumping away furiously before he could give anything a second thought. She moaned, he groaned, he drove in harder and faster, her nails dug into his back, his mouth burned her neck. He was insane with lust and the strength of it gave him endurance, but when it was over, it was over. He rolled off of her half asleep.

They lied together listening to the stereo, and as one song segued into another with a peculiar start-stop fade over, Thomas recognized the record: it was Baxter's *Hot Wax Treatment*. He laughed and put his hand to his face, but before he could explain himself, Gwen pulled a blanket up over herself and fetched a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her jeans on the floor. She lit one and offered it to Thomas, who took it. She lit one for herself, and reaches over Thomas. Her breasts, covered by the blanket, pressed against Thomas's face, but there was no flirtation in the contact.

"Excuse me," she said, and took the ashtray from the nightstand.

"I wasn't laughing at you – just, this is my buddy's mix CD," Thomas explained.

"We should get back," Gwen said as she squirmed out of bed. She was suddenly body-shy, and she kept herself covered as best she could by crouching low. She fetched her underclothes off the floor and stayed semi-concealed behind the blanket as she dressed herself.

"Yeah" Thomas agreed limply, surprised by the suddenness of her disinterest. He didn't think they were missed. They hadn't been gone that long as far as he knew.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. Gwen didn’t answer.

Dressed, Gwen turned off the CD and walked to the door. Thomas blocked her, bent his head down, and kissed her mechanically. He didn’t know why, it just sort of happend. A parting shot? A consolation prize? An invitation to have another go? It just happened.

“You’re sweet” she said, and that was the end of it.

He followed her back to Jennifer’s trailer. Haas was still sitting in the kitchen chair, looking very bored. Justin had fallen asleep on the couch. Gwen walked straight through the kitchen and down the hall without a word.

“Must have been a good cigarette,” Haas leered.

“Yeah, we just got to talking” Thomas said.

“Yeah, I didn’t see you out there,” Haas says.

Thomas gave Haas a wink. “Don’t hate” he said.

Haas kicked the couch. “Yo J-Dog, wake up” he said.

Haas kicked the couch again and Justin sat up like a shot.

“What the fuck?” He growled, then seeing Thomas and Haas, he ran a hand over his face and said, “alright yeah, yeah.” Justin slowly and groggily roused himself and they trudged back out into the cold and snow. With the sun fully gone, the temperature had plunged down to near zero. They piled into Thomas’ car. It started on the fourth try, and they drove in silence to Justin’s house.

“You guys know where you’re going?” he asked when they dropped him off.

“Yeah, right out there, turn left” Haas said.

“Yeah, be careful. Just go to I-94” Justin said over his shoulder as he walked around to his back door.

“No problem,” Thomas said.

“Go straight up M-60 to I-94. That’s the best way,” Justin insisted.

“Hey, good to see you bro – catch you next time,” Haas said.

“Yeah – see you,” Justin replied, and with a wave he went back into his mother’s house.

They drove out of the city limits, listening to Baxter’s mix and trying to warm up. Haas sat shivering and rubbing his arms. Thomas traded hands on and off the wheel, flexing his fingers to restore feeling. When the car finally warmed up, they became chatty and loud.

“You good to drive?” Haas asks.

“Yeah, maybe I’ll get a redbull later.”

“Damn bro, redbull, readhead, you all read tonight” Haas jokes. Thomas laughs.

“The carpet match the drapes?”

“Hardwood floors,” Thomas said.

“Why the gloomy face man?” Haas asked.

“I dunno – it was weird. It wasn’t how I thought it would be,” Thomas said.

“What? She have a dick?”

“No, dude, I’m serious – I dunno. I think I’m just kind of fucked up over the Maria thing,” Thomas said.

“Bro, you know what you sound like right now? You sound like a bitch bro. No offense, but seriously, you sound like a woman,” Haas said.

“Yeah,” Thomas said glumly.

“No, dude, for real – look at it like this: you’re done with a girl that you thought was boring, you just got laid by a *hot*-ass country girl, and you are about to turn your fifteen hundred into...into – shit, I can’t do the math. A fucking lot!” Haas said, picking up steam as his little speech went along.

“Get the money,” Thomas said, coming around to Haas’ good mood.

“Dollar dollar bill y’all!” Haas sang.

“Cash money!” Thomas whooped.

“Player, play on!”

“I’m backing the game baby!” Thomas cheered, and he felt good. He was driving fast with a small fortune in saleable merchandise, swimming in a cocktail of stimulant come-down and post-coital afterglow. There was nothing to say about it, so Haas turned up the music.

The streetlights got further and further apart, and the car cut through the darkness between them until Thomas pulled into a gas station.

“Hey, get me a Dr pepper,” Haas called after Thomas as he went inside.

Thomas walked the aisles of the convenience store. He picked up a four pack of redbull, some beef jerky, a box of crackers, some hostess fruit pies and a can of Pringles. He put everything on the counter and then went back to the aisles for donuts, pretzel-and-cheddar combos, tortilla chips, cheese dip, and Haas’ Dr Pepper. He paid cash and brought everything out in two plastic bags.

“Damn son, you get enough groceries?” Haas teased as he pulls his soda out of its bag and opened it. Thomas opened one red bull and slamed it, then he opens the can of Pringles, greedily shoving five and six chips into his mouth at a time.

“I’m fucking *hungry!*” he said, and laughed at the sudden giddy rush of sugar, fat, and salt. The calories felt very good.

“Let’s go to Antonio’s,” said Haas.

“Fuck yeah! I’m getting cheese sticks, pancakes, motherfucking spaghetti, giant cup of cofeee...”

“You’re making me hungry now!” Haas said.

“Antonio’s in this bitch!” Thomas cheered.

“I’m gonna get that big old double cheeseburger and fries with ranch dressing” Haas said.

“Oh fuck, I’m getting one of those too. - and you know how they got those cakes in that display case?” Thomas asked.

“Apple pie,” Haas said, “I’m gonna eat a whole apple pie.”

“Let’s just buy the restaurant-“ Thomas said.

“- and eat whatever we want!” Haas finished Thomas’ thought.

“Let’s make Darryl the manager,” Thomas said.

“Fuck man, he got a cell? I wanna see if he’s working when we get there.”

“Oh man! No, he doesn’t,” Thomas said with genuine disappointment.

“Fuck it, if he’s there, he’s there,” Haas said.

“Right,” Thomas agreed. He reached into the bag of cheddar-and-pretzel combos as he settled into the driver’s seat, and as he popped one of the snacks into his mouth, his

back windshield exploded into red, white and blue strobes. A barking siren whoop-whooped over the booming bass of the stereo.

Chapter 12.

Neither Thomas nor Haas said a word. They drove another quarter mile while things crystallized. Haas looked over at Thomas, who was absently wiping crumbs off his hands and onto his jeans. Haas raised the bottle of Dr Pepper, wet his lips, but forgot to take a real sip. He capped the bottle and put it down on the floor.

“Oh fuck” Thomas said, making it all one word with a soft, breathless consonant at the end, sounding more like “Ofah”

Haas turned off the stereo. “Be cool” he said, his own voice wavering.

Thomas pulled the car over. Haas mashed his cigarette out in the ashtray. Thomas put the car in park, and they waited. Haas sat stone still. Thomas took ten deep, calming breaths, and still they waited. There was no sound but the idling engine and the purr of the police cruiser behind them. High-beam headlights shone through the back windshield, and the cop car’s spotlight was trained on the driver’s side-view mirror. They wouldn’t know when the cop approached except for his shadow breaking across the light, and if they looked back for that they would be half blind.

They fought a panic, but the panic was not easily put down. For what they were carrying, they were looking at fifteen to twenty minimum. Six to ten if they behaved and could argue for their fitness to return to society, and beg convincingly for their freedom in between gang beatings and shower rapes. Six to ten years while the whole world passes them by and forgot their name. Six years becoming institutionalized, learning to think, act, and live like hardened criminals, and forgetting how to live like civilized

human beings while trying to convince a bored and overworked parole board with over-sensitive bullshit detectors otherwise.

The light broke.

“Let me talk,” Haas said.

“Yeah,” Thomas whispered through his desiccated throat, unsure of what he was agreeing to.

The officer tap-tap-tapped on the window glass with his flashlight, and Thomas fumbled for the automatic window button. The window went halfway down and stopped.

“All the way” the officer said.

“It’s frozen” Thomas croaked.

“What did you say?”

“I said it’s frozen sir.”

The officer was in his thirties, just shy of forty. He had a thin face, perfectly clean-shaven, with high cheeks and a square jaw. His lips were thin and pale, his eyes were blue. He wore a patrolman’s cap over his sandy blonde hair.

The officer pointed his flashlight directly into Haas’ eyes, and then put the spot back on Thomas. Both blinked away at green-and-red spots.

There was a burst of fuzz from the officer’s radio before a nasally voice asked “32, what’s your 20?”

The officer ignored it.

“Where you boys coming from?” He asked.

Thomas froze – he blanked on the name of the town. Haas blurted out “Four Pines. We was just in Four Pines.”

“I asked him,” The officer drawled, then asked Thomas: “Well?”

“We were in Four Pines” Thomas said.

“What were you doing in Four Pines?”

“Visiting a friend,” Haas volunteered.

“Shut up” The officer said. “What were you doing in Four Pines?”

“Visiting a friend” Thomas repeated.

“Who’s your friend?” he asked, and then shined his light in Haas’ eyes and said

“Shut up. Let him talk.”

“Gwen,” Thomas said and he could feel Haas clench up beside him in the shotgun seat the same way he did when he saw the Lion’s blow a game-winning pass, or heard some new DJ spinning out for the first time trainwreck two favorite tracks together and then over-correct for two excruciating minutes.

“Gwen who?” The officer asked.

“I don’t know” Thomas admitted.

“Gwen I-don’t-know, huh?”

“I haven’t known her long,” Thomas said.

“What about you, sport? You come along to help?” The officer asked Haas.

“No, there was supposed to be this other girl, but I don’t know, something crazy came up like...there was a problem with her house...or something” Haas said, trailing off before he could blow the lie worse than he already had.

The officer’s radio squawked again. “Eddie, where are you?” the nasally voice asked.

“Hold on,” The officer said into his lapel microphone.

“What were you doing with Gwen I-don’t-know?” He asked Thomas.

“Hanging out. Nothing.” Thomas said.

“Nothing huh? Drove a long way for nothing.”

“I guess so.” Thomas said.

“I guess so. Pop your trunk.” The officer said.

Thomas sensed Haas go positively rigid beside him. Thomas himself was shaking from his knees to his fingertips. He saw, felt, and heard everything through a thousand miles of fog. He might as well pop the trunk, he thought, because this wasn’t really happening to him. It would be more immediate, more real if it were. He was probably in bed with Maria right now, or driving out to some party at the Chop Shop or Mack-and-Bellevue. Why would he, Thomas Kowalski, be out here in the middle of nowhere on a black ribbon of two-lane highway surrounded by ink-black woods, getting pulled over for no discernable reason with over 10,000 dollars of assorted opiates, narcotics, a few bags of weed, and two crushed up pills behind the driver’s seat? It was all too ridiculous, but Thomas did a marvelous job of keeping up appearances in this make-believe scenario. He pulled the trunk release as if all the officer would only see a spare tire and a snow brush.

That’s where it is! Thomas thought. My snowbrush is in the trunk, all the way in the back. Duh!

Nothing happened.

“It’s frozen too” Thomas said.

“Eddie, what’s your 20?” The radio squawked again.

The officer stood up straight to answer his radio and Thomas, his face free of the flashlight’s gleam, blinked his eyes clear. He was eye level with the officer’s belly.

Thomas eyed the gun on the officers right hip, the radio receiver on the left, the shiny silver buckle in the middle. He let his eyes drift up to the proud silver badge of the Four Pines police department, #106, and to the nameplate on the breast pocket: E. McAffrey.

“Son of a bitch,” Thomas said. He threw the car in drive and mashed the gas to the floor.

The car lurched forward a good two feet before the wheels hit black ice and began to spin. Officer Edward McAffrey jumped back, startled by the sudden jerk, but then advanced on the car and reached into the driver’s side window, grabbing Thomas by the collar.

“Stop the car! Stop the car!” The officer screamed on Thomas’ left.

“Go, go, go motherfucker!” Haas screamed on Thomas’ right.

Thomas was sitting on ice and compacted snow. - his tires were getting no purchase. Years of Michigan driving had developed in him an instinct for dealing with winter roads, and so he started the process of rocking his car free. He threw the car in reverse.

The car had no problem going backwards. It went backwards too easily, in fact, and it slammed into the police cruiser. In front of him, Thomas saw the police officer clutching his arm and he was dimly aware that his own shirt was ripped.

“Stop the car! Stop the car!” The officer kept screaming it, like some sort of raging mantra. Thomas threw the car into drive before it had stopped moving, and he heard the engine rev down before the transmission complied with its controls. When the gears engaged, the car leapt forward and kept going. Inertia was on Thomas’ side as he

crossed over the black ice and packed snow that stopped him before, and he raced off down the highway.

Officer McAffrey ran to his car and pursued, but he didn't have his emergency lights on, just his high-beams and searchlight. The police cruiser had a more powerful engine than Thomas' Grand Prix, so he gained in a matter of minutes. Thomas kept the accelerator floored, but there was nowhere to go. He didn't know the roads in that part of the state, and even if he did, they were miles apart from one another – it would be impossible to take a sharp turn down a dark alley and hope to lose his pursuer.

“What the fuck? What the fuck?” Haas panted.

“Not helping!” Thomas yelled at him, and he glanced in his rear-view mirror. The cop car was nearly on them.

Haas breathed deeply, trying to slow his hyperventilated breath, but Thomas was steely cool. He knew he was in a dead race for the freeway, and the odds were stacked against him, but he was optimistic. He understood that he was not in real trouble.

Yes, he was in danger – he acknowledged that - but not the danger he thought he was in. The cop was Eddie McAffrey – Justin McAffrey's brother. This was some crooked shit scam they had, and Haas had fallen into it. Eddie McAffrey had a gun, but he hadn't used it – Thomas felt confident he wouldn't or he would have already. He had his lights off. He wasn't a cop that night – that night he was just some punk that Thomas had to flee, and now that Thomas understood this, the years and years of social discipline that keep citizens cowed before policemen just washed away. There would be no backup – just two cars in a drag race, a drag race like any other tire-burner on Gratiot Avenue,

where Thomas would try his Grand Prix against the other automatic transmission would-be sportsters out cruising and wishing they could drive stick.

McAffrey's car nudged Thomas' back bumper with a jolt.

"What was that?" Haas shrieked.

"He wants to take us off the road" Thomas said.

McAffrey backed off, and Thomas heard a whistling sound from the rear of his car. Something was cracked, or had come loose. He winced at the thought of his pretty car bent and broken, and he promised to deal with it later. McAffrey switched over to the other lane and began to pull up alongside.

"He wants to push me in the ditch," Thomas said, and in a burst of quick thinking he gently pushed his break peddle down. They still moving very fast, but it was enough to send McAffrey blowing right past their car.

Eddie McAffrey panicked. He slammed on his breaks and sent his car into a shuddering lurch. The anti-lock breaks did their job and prevented a ballistic skid across the semi-slick pavement, but he was still driving far too fast for the conditions, and rather than a tight fishtail or a well-controlled slow-down, he took a slow-motion plunge into the ditch on the oncoming side of the road. The ditches were deep and wide to keep the torrential rains and irrigation run-off away from the road, and they were full of snow. Eddie McAffrey's car was stuck in a three-foot-deep drift, and Thomas and Haas zipped right on past.

Eddie McAffrey unfastened his safety belt and tried to open his door, but it was sealed shut with packed snow. He tried the passenger side door, but it was the same thing. He rolled down the window and crawled out, gingerly avoiding the use of his sore right

arm. The pain was bad – not *broken* bad, but bad enough, but he could barely pay attention because his number one worry now was to explain to his superiors just how he managed to plunge his car into a ditch five miles outside the boundaries of his patrol.

“Eddie, what’s your 20?” his radio asked.

“Fucking *Legend!*” Haas crowed as Thomas raced along the highway towards I-94.

Thomas grinned, but he didn’t feel so good himself. He knew the damage to his car was conspicuous, but they hadn’t dared to stop and look. A bogus stop was still a stop, and assaulting even a crooked cop was a shoot-on-sight offense as far as the police were concerned. Thomas could still hear the whistling sound from the back of his car, and it was joined by a conspicuous rattling sound too, something flapping loose in the breeze. He took good care of his car, but he was no mechanic - he wouldn’t know what to do with any broken parts, and distance was everything. Distance was safety. Detroit was the goal.

They sat there wordlessly, listening to the blow of the heater and the rattle from the back. They had not turned the stereo back on.

“Stay off 94,” Haas said with dreadful seriousness.

Thomas didn’t need to ask why. I-94 is a heavily trafficked east-west corridor, the only sensible route from Detroit to Chicago, and the playground of the Michigan State Police. If their car had been called in, it would mean a dragnet, calling all cars, be on the look out, the works. They were acting predictably now out of necessity, fleeing the scene of the crime. It was time to break the pattern.

“Where to?” Thomas asked.

“Go up 69 – we’re going to Lansing.”

Thomas agreed. Lansing was an hour out of their way, but if the cops were looking for a blue Grand Prix registered to Thomas Kowalski of Warren, Michigan, they won’t be looking very hard on the road to Lansing, or so they hoped.

M-60 was unbearably empty. When other headlights appeared ahead, they showed up from miles away and just slowly, slowly approached. Thomas and Haas speculated nervously to themselves that each approaching car was a cop just looking for them, and that as they passed the other car will drop into a fishtail 180 and start a hot pursuit. Worse by far was a car coming up from behind, appearing at first as a vague glow, like sunrise, and then forming into two distinct pin-pricks of light before growing larger and larger in the rear-view mirror to fill the car with blinding light.

As a teenager, Thomas would drive around with his friends, cruising Gratiot and smoking weed, drinking beer if they could get it from a friend’s cool parents or older brother. They chased after girls, had lame drag-races, and constantly fretted cops. They would all brag, to varying degrees, about being able to recognize a cop car by the size, shape, and spacing of the headlights. It was bullshit, and well over half the time the person yelling out “there’s a cop behind us!” was wrong, and was told to shut up for the rest of the night, but if the person was right they got an immediate sense of authority to savor.

In Burlington, Thomas looked at his gas gauge.

“Fuck,” he said.

“What is it?” Haas asked.

“Gas – I think it’s leaking.”

There was nothing to do but fill up. They both got out and surveyed the damage.

The patrol cruiser’s push bars left two matching creases in the bumper, which was in turn splayed out to the sides like bat wings. This was the source of the rattle - the slap of bent plastic and rusted metal banging against each other in the wind. There was a strong smell of gasoline, and sure enough, a steady trickle spilled out of the tank underneath the trunk. They tried the lights, and although the casings were cracked, they all worked except for the left brake light.

“We can get this fixed in Lansing,” Haas said.

“I’m broke!”

“Don’t worry about it – I got a guy who owes me a favor. Try the trunk.” Haas said.

That was a bigger problem. The trunk, previously just frozen shut, was now totally jammed in place.

They filled up the gas tank, paid cash, and cautiously left the lot. They made terrible time, but they arrived in Lansing before dawn.

Chapter 13.

Buckethead's Fine Country Barbeque was a popular lunch spot for the white-tie set in and around Rochester Hills. The décor was a thematic mish-mash between a tin-roof shack and a hunting lodge. Polished timber beams stretched up 20 feet to the ceiling above, and the walls were decorated with the heads of deer, elk, and bear, and also old broken banjos, fiddles, and washboards. There were peanut shells strewn all over the carpet. Baxter was there, sitting at a small table with Megan Isom.

Baxter knew a thousand and one justifications for cheating. His favorite had always been the area code excuse – that is, if you cheated in a different area code, it didn't count. Since Michigan had six area codes, it gave him a lot of room to play. However, he hadn't cheated on Rachel in three months, and he still didn't consider what he was about to do as cheating. He considered it an upgrade.

She was a good looking woman, though based solely on looks Baxter knew he could do better. She was older, no two ways about it - not quite a cougar, but she was heading that way. She was a hair's breadth over thirty. She had dark blonde hair in poodle curls and she wore too much eye makeup. She was slowly succumbing to age and refusing to do it gracefully. The hairstyle and makeup, the clothes, were those of someone who never quite learned to dress like a grown-up.

She had a presence. She was focused, driven, and direct, and she was very obviously directing herself at Baxter. Baxter got the impression that he had no say in the matter, and he was fine with it.

“I’m there for you if you need me” she said, and lingered slightly too long before continuing: “You’re part of DBC, so whatever we can do to promote you and protect you, it’s yours. We’ve got promotion contacts and lawyers in Detroit, New York, Chicago, and Berlin.”

“Lawyers?” Baxter said incredulously.

“I’m a DJ, you’re a DJ, we’re surrounded by DJ’s. The...lifestyle...can get you in trouble” she said.

Baxter nodded along dumbly. He didn’t know if she was playing him or genuinely interested, and he didn’t care. They’d had a few cocktails, and Megan had dolled herself up nicely. Everything she said went in one of Baxter’s ears and out the other. Cassandra had had this effect on him too, and when he’d gone along with that, things had worked out just fine, so he went along with this too.

Megan was in some regards out of Baxter’s league. Baxter was a player, no doubt, but Megan’s game was sharp. She was sharp herself – smart, professional, and still very well put together. She had not fallen into the trap that took so many of her classmates and friends, what she called the get-fat-quick-scheme: marriage, kids, and a career in the HR department of some industrial supply company, going out for Mexican with the girls on Fridays, drinking margaritas, swooning over Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise, chatting mindlessly about Survivor or American Idol. It made her sick to think of that lifestyle. She considered it giving up.

She loved the life she had. She made money, she partied, and every so often she booked someone as young and fine as Baxter. She had a proclivity for younger men, and she got them. She knew she had a reputation as a queen bee, giving out honeyed favors to

her stable of DJ's in exchange for their hard work and loyalty, but she thought her detractors were giving her undue credit. Business was business and pleasure was pleasure. They may share a table at dinner, but they did not bother each other at work.

Baxter was blessedly predictable. She could feel the movement of his left leg under the table as he tried to “accidentally” make contact with her foot to test the waters. *Bless his heart* she thought with something between a mother's pride and a leonine hunger.

The timing of Tony Gino's approach could not have been worse for them.

“What's up Megan!” he said as he approached their table from behind Baxter.

Baxter turned around and saw Tony, and an angry heat rose up in him. He didn't even know that Tony and Megan knew each other, but it was clear to him that they had history. Of course they would, he thought, same age, same scene, They were both paper-chasing professionals. They had a lot in common. Baxter let it bother him for just a moment, but then swallowed it down. He was a player. The game went both ways, and if you couldn't handle seeing the face of some guy that used to fuck the girl you're fucking, you didn't play the game for long. He wasn't mad at Tony, or at Megan – he was mad because he was being cock-blocked. He knew Tony too well to think that he'd get on with his dinner and seduction rather than be drawn into an intolerable evening of fun. .

“Bax, didn't see you there – what are you guys doing here?” Tony asked.

“Celebrating – Baxter is now a part of DBC” Megan said.

“Well that's just grand – we're celebrating too, me and Nate. Let's push our tables together?” Tony asked.

Megan and Baxter agreed with grudging hearts, but huge smiles on their faces. This was a game they knew how to play too, the let's-all-be-friends-because-you-might-be-useful-later game. After two minutes of clumsy and loud sliding of adjacent tables and chairs, the four of them sat together. Nate was on Baxter's right, and across from him sat Tony on Megan's left.

"So fuckin' congrats man" Nate said loudly to Baxter, holding his hand out to shake. There were eyes on them from the surrounding tables, and everyone drank to avoid the awkward stares.

"So what are you celebrating?" Megan asked Tony, and there was something very familiar in her voice that confirmed Baxter's suspicion.

"We got our first big contract. We're supplying learning management tools to St. Steven's Academy" Tony boasted.

"Where?" Baxter asked

"St. Steven's. It's a charter school out in...in..."

"Novi," Nate said.

"Right. They need software for tests and stuff" Tony explained.

"So you're going to write tests then?" Megan asked.

"No, we manage the tests."

"So you write a program that manages...wait, what?" Baxter said with mounting confusion.

"No, there's programs that do that for us" Nate said.

"So you don't write any programs or anything then?" Megan asked.

"Well, no" Tony said as if it were a stupid question.

“What are you doing then?” Baxter asked.

“We manage information systems” Tony answered with an unsuccessful attempt at finality.

“But, okay, why doesn’t the school just buy this software themselves and do it that way? Wouldn’t that be cheaper?” Megan asked.

“Not my problem!” Nate exclaimed.

Nate seemed to have a hard time keeping his voice down to a civilized level. Baxter wondered if he was losing his hearing from the constant clubbing. Nate was a newcomer to the scene (to the corpse of the scene, Baxter reminded himself) and he’d been overdoing it since their mutual friends “The J’s” brought him out four months ago, as if he could play catch-up if he danced enough, dressed the part, and met enough people.

“It wouldn’t be cheaper,” Tony explained, “Because this way they don’t need their own infrastructure.”

“So, I mean – what do you actually *do*?” Megan asked.

“We setup, configure, and manage” Tony said.

“And they pay how much for this?” Megan asked.

“Bling bling!” Nate exclaimed, and shared a fist-bump with Tony.

“So say I wanted a website – how much would that cost?” Baxter asked.

Tony was suddenly very serious. “I wouldn’t charge you man” he said with such sincerity that it made Baxter feel uncomfortable. They were not great friends, Baxter didn’t think so at least, but he thought that maybe he’d misread Tony. Maybe the older

man was more cognizant of a connection than Baxter. Or maybe he was just more needful of it.

It happens, of course – half of socializing is knowing who needs to be your friend more than you need to be theirs.

They're both totally shit-faced, Baxter thought, and said, “I mean hypothetically.”

“Oh, depends – if you want Flash, PHP, blah blah blah – I’d have to charge a lot because I’d have to outsource the code” Tony said with a shrug.

“But why couldn’t he just hire the programmers himself?” Megan asked.

“Because he, and you, and most people, don’t know how. Nobody knows what to ask for, they don’t know what they want” Tony said.

“So how much do you want to make me a site then?” Baxter asked.

“Nothing” Tony said, “I wouldn’t charge you. Maybe some token payment, or like I go to your gigs for free.”

“Done” Baxter said, and they shook hands on the deal.

“Let’s have another round” Nate slurred, and they all agreed to it because Nate and Tony were already drunk, and Baxter and Megan had resigned themselves to not getting laid.

They ordered drinks, they drank them and ordered more. After some comfortable hours, their waiter informed them that the restaurant was closing, and that they would have to leave. Megan and Tony split the bill, saying it would be a tax write-off. They got in their cars and drive away to sleep it off.

Chapter 14.

The house in Lansing was two stories tall, gray with blue trim and a broad front porch that creaked and groaned under Haas and Thomas feet. The clomp of their footsteps echoed under the boards, but only they heard it – from inside the house came a steady din of loud hip-hop and voices rising occasionally and speaking in Spanish, which neither Haas nor Thomas understood.

Haas rang the bell and the door opens. Inside stood a young Mexican man. Thomas guessed him to be about 19 or 20. He was lean and tan, his hair was shaggy and short. He wore loose blue jeans that showed off his red boxer shorts. He wore no shirt.

“Hey Juan, Que pasa?” Haas asked him.

The young man recognized Haas and his face brightened. “Hey Haas, come on in man,” he said.

The door led into a living room, dark, with bare walls and thin carpet. A muted TV showed an episode of Star Trek. The stereo in that room pumped out 2Pac at full volume. There was a dark hallway in front of them, and a bright archway to the right demarking the living room from the kitchen.

Juan led Haas and Thomas into the kitchen, where four men sat playing dominoes. Three of them paid no attention, the fourth looked up and acknowledged Haas.

“What’s up Haas?” The man asked. He was the oldest man there, in his mid-thirties, with short black hair and a well-groomed goatee. Like the others at the table, he was casually dressed in jeans and a T-Shirt. His read *Small Planet*, a local bar. The others were hunched too close to their beers for Thomas to make them out.

“Need a favor,” Haas said, getting right to the point. Thomas marveled at the way his friend said the words. It was friendly, even inviting, but it also conveyed that this favor was not to be refused, and that it was worth the man’s time to grant it. The man understood – he got up from the table with energy. Thomas wondered what favors Haas had done for this man previously, what power he had over him. Money? Social clout? Secrets? Maybe more, Thomas figured, not that there need be more – that was exactly what Haas had over Thomas.

The goateed man shook hands with Haas, then the two went through the living room and down the hallway, leaving Thomas, Juan, and the three domino players in the kitchen.

“You play?” One of the men asked Thomas.

“Don’t know how,” Thomas said, half expecting a lesson, but the three players ignored him. In the living room, Juan had switched on his Playstation. Thomas watched the intro screen come up and saw that Juan was playing Soulcalibur.

“Got another controller?” Thomas asked.

“I’m going to play single player for a bit” Juan said.

Thomas watched the domino players, but he didn’t understand the game and he didn’t speak Spanish, so it didn’t hold his interest for long. He walked back through the living room and into the black hallway, looking for a bathroom.

There was a stairway to his right, bare wood, boots and shoes on the steps. He walked past it. He tried the first door on his right, past the stairs, and turned on the light. He found himself in a baby’s bedroom – a crib stood in the middle of the room and it caught Thomas’ eye. He tip-toed to it and looked in, and there inside was a little brown

baby, asleep. Thomas stood over it and watched it. It was sleeping soundly, drooling on the pillow under its head. The music shook Thomas' bowels, the men in the kitchen whooped, cursed, and slapped their dominoes loudly on the table, and still the baby slept. Thomas envied the baby. He wanted to sleep, but he was chemically controlled. The crystal had worn off, but he'd been bumping coke off his keychain since they got on I-69, and so he was wide awake with nothing better to do than to stare at a sleeping baby.

There was a splotch on the baby's mattress, something on the vinyl cover that protected the inner stuffing from wetness. It was a dark spot of blood.

What the fuck is wrong with this kid? Thomas thought, then another spot appeared, and another. Thomas looked up at the ceiling, looking for the source of these drops, and he felt a warm, wet gush on his lip. He put his hand to his face and pulled it away sticky and red.

He pinched his nose shut and puts the rest of his hand over his mouth to stop any blood from running down his face or spattering on the floor. He pulled the cuff of his sleeve up over his other hand and wipes up the blood spots from the baby's mattress. The baby twitched, flailing its pudgy little limbs out and making a smacking, sucking noise with its mouth before settling back down. Thomas looked for more blood, and when he didn't see any, he shut off the light and backed out of the room.

The next door on the left was the bathroom. He rushed to the sink and took his hand away from his face, releasing four big dollops of blood into the basin. It was a bad one. He kept his fingers pinched over his nose and he started the tap, rinsing the blood away. Thomas held his nose for five minutes, and cautiously let go of his nose. When the

bleeding didn't continue, he rinsed his face and hands, then took two wads of toilet paper and put one up each nostril.

He unzipped his pants and started to piss, really putting it out, and it felt amazing. He'd had to go for a while, but he'd been so caught up in everything that had happened in the last few hours that it took a back seat. He let it go with heady abandon, rolling his head back and sighing deeply. He saw his reflection in a full-length mirror: his back arched, cock out, mouth open, and two wads of TP stuffed up his nose. He let out a guffaw and splashed piss on the back of the toilet. He composed himself and chuckled as he finished up. He cleaned up his mess and checked the two wads of tissue for blood. Only tiny spots on each. He threw them away.

He looked himself over in the mirror – no blood on his face, but there were black rings under his eyes and his cheeks were gaunt and pale. *I look like shit*, he thought, but he shrugged it away. *Just got laid*, he thought, *can't look all that bad*.

Thomas left the bathroom and walks back into the living room. He sat on the couch and lit a cigarette, watching Juan play through his match.

Juan looked up at Thomas and pointed to where the second controller lie tucked into the entertainment center under the TV. Thomas took it and sat down by Juan on the floor. Juan lit a joint. They passed it back and forth, and whiled away the time until Haas came back.

Outside the sun was breaking into a clear sky. A fast and early sunrise, orange-peach for only a few minutes before everything lit up in early morning yellow. It would be a warm day.

“Still awake?” Haas asked as he came into the living room. He himself looked tired and sore, like a traveler with a big suitcase stuck overnight at the airport.

Thomas got to his feet. His knees cracked audibly and he stretched his back. He put on his jacket, waved to Juan who in turn flashed a peace sign but did not look up from his game.

Thomas did not recognize his car immediately. For one thing, the worst of the damage had been hastily repaired. The two dents in the rear had been popped out, and the bumper had been crudely bent back into shape. The tail light casings were still cracked, but they’d been covered with colored cellophane repair tape.

Moreover, the car was a different color – an uneven candy-apple red, somewhere between matte and gloss, neither shining as a car should nor as dull as the coat on the outside of a house. Thomas didn’t have to ask to know it had been spray painted with Rustoleum.

“You like it?” Haas asked as he tried to grin, then let it slide off his face while Thomas stood dumb.

“We had to do somethin’ with it” Haas said.

Thomas opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. Then he tried again with the same result. He rubbed his face with his hand, and yawned widely.

“I’ll change it back when we get out of this, okay bro?” Haas asked.

“I’m tired,” Thomas sighed.

Thomas climbed into the driver’s seat. This, at least, was totally as it had been. He started the car and reached around in the back seat until he found one of the Red Bulls he’d bought earlier. It was ice cold. Thomas drank it as he waited for Haas, who was

nowhere to be seen. He flicked on the radio and listened to the Bob and Tom morning show with little interest, and after a few long minutes, Haas got into the car.

“That’s a good guy,” Haas said, “barely cost me nothing.”

Thomas wanted to say that they’d gotten what they paid for, but he kept his mouth shut. He merged onto I-96 and proceeded west at exactly two miles over the speed limit, what they called “drunk safe” after an old superstition that cops thought anyone driving at exactly the speed limit was drunk and would therefore be pulled over, but that sober people didn’t obsess over keeping the needle at exactly 70. So long as the Michigan State Police weren’t doing random stops, they’d be fine.

“Bro, I’m sorry about the car” Haas said, “We had to do something. Raul patched the tank and changed the plate too.”

Thomas nodded. Haas had done what needed to be done, but Thomas did not want this sore fact excused, rationalized, or explained away.

“You still hungry?” Haas asked, and that was all it took to bring some cheer back into the car.

“Hell yes!” Thomas said.

“To Antonios!” Haas cheered, and they blended in with the thick flood of morning commuters speeding on their way east along I-96.

Chapter 15.

Thomas parked his car two rows back from the door, almost perfectly in the middle of the parking lot. It was 8:45 AM and the place was busy. Thomas turned off the ignition and he sat with Haas in the warmth. Thomas closed his eyes, and half expected to open them to the blinding white lights of a Four Pines police cruiser, or to learn that he'd been having a wicked nightmare in a cold jail cell. He sucked in a breath and opened his eyes. It was still daylight, sunny, white snow on the ground fringed gray and black where it met the street.

Glee welled up in his chest and spilled over like gasoline, flooding the car and catching light on Haas. They broke into spontaneous cheers and whoops of joy, and they rushed out of the car. They cried out again to see the door, glass and steel, the restaurant warm, golden, and inviting beyond. The lights were on, and they shone through the windows like a campfire. IT was a warm winter day, but still too cold for comfort, and so the pair marched triumphantly, chests out, into the cozy diner.

The old woman with pursed and smoke-stained lips seated them.

“Morning sunshine!” Haas said.

“Morning yourself” she replied, but she could not grump and grouse when Thomas and Haas’ mood caught her up. She gave them menus and hustled off to bring them coffee. When they looked up from the numbered columns of greasy egg combos, they saw Darryl with a ticket book in his hand.

“Yo D!” Thomas whooped.

“What’ll y’all boys be havin’?” Darryl joked in a southern mammy drawl.

“Everything,” Haas said, “a number six, extra bacon, side of hashbrowns!”

“Number six comes with hashbrowns,” said Darryl.

“Yeah, I want double,” Haas said.

“Number four, scrambled, and a number seven,” Thomas said.

Darryl raised his eyebrows and wrote it down.

“I have *never* been this hungry” Thomas said.

Haas ordered orange juice. Thomas ordered a V8. Darryl went off to call the order into the kitchen.

They shared grins as they drank their coffee, still high on the early stages of their success.

“What are you going to do about the car?” Haas asked Thomas.

“You said you got it,” Thomas said, puzzled.

“I been thinking about that,” Haas said, “I been thinking it’s probably too hot to hold on to.”

A dark frustration came up out of Thomas’ belly and spread out to his chest, because the evidence was so obvious. Haas was right, and Thomas was too tired to consider his options with any enthusiasm. The car was totally unsellable – the damage was bad enough, the horrible paint made it ten times worse. If the plate had been called in, the VIN was hot. Thomas didn’t even think he could sell it for scrap.

“Yeah” Thomas said, “but what do I do with it?”

Haas mulled it over for a few seconds and then his face lit up with a new idea.

“Steal it!” he said.

“How am I gonna steal my own car?” Thomas asked.

“Just dump it somewhere and report it stolen,” Haas said with growing excitement, the idea developing impressive momentum. “I got people that’ll say we were in Detroit last night. We eat, we dump this car, you make a phone call, and we smash one window – that’s it!”

Thomas’ face lit up to match Haas’, “Holy shit – holy shit! That’s perfect!” he said, but he darkened for a moment and asked, “but what do I drive then? For work and shit?”

“No problem – the police are gonna get an anonymous tip about an illegally parked car. It’ll be safe in the impound lot. Shit, I bet you can get insurance to pay for the damage,” Haas said.

“Haas,” Thomas said, “you are the man!”

Jenna didn’t see Thomas or Haas when she came into Antonio’s because the boys were in their usual booth in the back, a booth that was out of sight to two thirds of the restaurant, perfect for sketched-out, cracked-out ravers looking for coffee and privacy.

The hostess seated Jenna and Roy by the door, poured them coffee, and brought them menus. They read through them wordlessly.

“What are you having?” Roy asked Jenna.

“Pancakes,” she said eagerly, “pancakes, sausage, and orange juice.”

Roy smiled at her. They didn’t get many mornings together, and he was enjoying himself. He didn’t feel tired, even though he’d worked all night, so when he came home and saw Jenna awake, he didn’t even complain when she suggested they eat (her breakfast, his dinner) at a place on the complete opposite side of town.

“So this place is supposed to have good breakfast?” Roy asked.

“Yeah, Rachel says it’s good. I guess she comes here all the time.”

“So you’re hanging out with her now?” Roy asked.

“Yeah, it’s all crazy – I don’t know,” Jenna said.

“Crazy how?”

“Well, like, I just saw this old note from her when I was cleaning my room and I called her, but I hadn’t talked to her in, like, I don’t know – three months? Anyway, I just called her and we hung out the other night and we’ve talked on the phone a lot.”

“Sure,” Roy said, “Sometimes you just...you know?”

“Yeah, weird right?” Jenna asked.

“Oh, hello there,” Roy said to Darryl, who was standing beside their table, just behind Jenna. An older couple at the next table was getting up from their seats, and Darryl couldn’t quite squeeze past.

“What can I get for you folks today?” he asked.

“Number six, scrambled eggs, rye toast,” Roy said.

The elderly couple left, and Darryl came around fully to the side of Jenna and Roy’s table.

“And for you – hey!” he said to Jenna.

“P-pancakes,” Jenna stuttered.

Jenna’s eyes went wide with terror. No other word would fit the shocked and panicked look on her face. She was *terrified*, not of Darryl, whom she quite liked, but of her father figuring out or even guessing at what happened between them that last Saturday.

“Did you want S-s-sausage too?” Roy teased, stuttering out the word. He grinned at Darryl, who smiled back.

“Yes,” Jenna said into her lap. She quickly composed herself, and looked up.

“Sausage and orange juice.”

“Links or patties?” Darryl asked with a cold smile.

“Patties,” Jenna said.

Darryl faced Roy and said, “I’ll get this in right now. Are you okay with coffee to drink sir?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” Roy said.

“And how about you ma’am?” Darryl asked with theatrical politeness.

“Just water,” she said, staring down at her placemat.

“I’m sorry, didn’t you say you wanted orange juice?” He asked her.

“Yes, I did. I do.”

“You’re sure now? Made your mind up?” he asked.

She nodded quickly.

“Alright then. Alright,” Darryl said. The smile never left his face. His eyes practically twinkled. Darryl walked slowly past Jenna and back into the kitchen.

“There’s a nice kid,” Roy said.

“Yeah,” Jenna agreed.

“So have you thought about school at all?” Roy asked in between blowing on his coffee to cool it.

“Huh?” Jenna asked.

“School - you were saying you might go back and I just wondered how it was coming.”

“Oh. Maybe - how’s work?” She asked.

“Oh look, a change of subject!” Roy kidded. Jenna smiled, but she hid her eyes.

“You know I just want you to do your best,” Roy said.

Jenna nodded absently. She listened to the fast exchange of voices from the back as they called out orders, asked for more eggs, toast with no butter, bacon, coffee. All the voices sounded the same in their clipped back-and-forth.

“And I know maybe college wasn’t right for you,” Roy said.

“It’s not that it was *bad*,” Jenna explained, “but I just don’t...I don’t know. I need to go to school, right? If I want a job? But I don’t think I’m smart enough.”

Roy objected of course, because it was expected of him, but that was exactly what he’d thought for a long time, and part of why he pushed the conversation. His daughter was not college material. She was not stupid, but she was no scholar.

“Well,” he said, “I’ve been meaning to bring this up, but do you remember Melinda?”

“Aunt Melinda?” Jenna asked.

“Yeah, my cousin, your aunt...anyway, she mentioned to me that they’re looking for nurse’s aids at the hospital and I thought you might give her a call.”

“Yeah,” Jenna said.

There was a silence at their table. Roy tinkered with his fork and knife, steeling himself for what he had to say.

“Sweetie, princess – you’ve got to do something.”

“I know,” she said.

“You’re twenty one, and as much as I love you, you can’t live with me forever.”

Jenna only had one ear in this conversation, and the other was listening for Darryl’s voice in the back. She felt cruel, stupid, shallow, cheap, and cowardly. Still, she had presence of mind enough to understand that her father was lecturing her, and that she ought to pay attention if for no other reason than that Roy’s moods could escalate quickly, and if he felt like she should be moving out then he would be unbearable until he cooled off.

“You’re right,” she said, “I’ll call tomorrow.”

She pulled her cell phone out of her purse – a brand-new blue Nokia, and said, “I’ll put it in my phone – what’s her number?”

“I don’t have it up here,” Roy said, tapping his temple.

“Okay, at home then,” Jenna said.

Satisfied, Roy beamed at Jenna and sipped his coffee.

“I have to pee,” Jenna said as she got up from the table.

The restrooms were close to the kitchen, and she saw Darryl at the order window.

“Hey,” she said to him.

His smile was gone. “I’m working,” he said.

“Look, I don’t...it’s complicated!” she insisted.

“Don’t look complicated to me.”

“You’re not making this easy,” she said to him.

Darryl took several plates from the order window and put them on a brown serving tray. “We done here?” he asked.

She turned her back on him and went to the restroom. He shook his head, and took the plates to Haas and Thomas.

“Hey, what’s up?” Thomas asked him.

“Nothing,” Darryl said. He was handing them their plates, and they were all but snatching them from his hands.

“Don’t look like nothing,” Thomas said around a mouthful of hash browns.

“Some girl I met at your party” Darryl says, nodding towards Haas.

Darryl had called Jenna’s house the day before, against his better judgment.

First of all, he wasn’t sure that last Saturday night wasn’t just a rave hook-up. If it was, better to just drop it and not be some desperate hanger-on. He didn’t *need* Jenna, he had other girls, but he would certainly have *liked* Jenna, and not just in some player fashion, not like a kid who has enough toys but still wants more, but because she was pretty and nice, and she felt good, and she reminded him so much of the old days, the rave days when she laughed and danced and spun around in her too-big clothes, and because this feeling had grown stronger over the last few days. He thought that if a girl made you feel that good for that long, it was worth checking out.

Then there was Rachel, and the way she talked about Jenna’s dad. He was *so cool*, she’d said, but cool how? Cool like one of those aged old hippy types that think it’s *progressive* if their white little girl runs around with a black guy? The type who liked long boring conversations with their white friends about equality and gave money to the ACLU? Maybe she meant cool like he was really colorblind, that it really wouldn’t be a problem, but that was unlikely. He’d met that sort of *cool dad* before and what it usually

meant wasn't that daddy didn't mind, but more like daddy didn't care, and more than once Darryl had gone out with a girl that had a *cool dad* like that, and when the girl brought him inside, she'd say, "Daddy, this is Darryl, we're going on a date," and he'd felt the crackling excitement of a real dare around his ears and head, and known that he was a pawn in some sort of daddy-daughter game with attention as the prize, and had it confirmed when the *cool dad* barely looked up from his television and grunted out, "be careful," or, "have fun," and then the date was complete shit because *cool dad* was really ice cold.

But Darryl guessed that Jenna's *cool dad* would meet him at the door, shake his hand, and then stare at him sideways as he invited him in to the house (which would be a treat – he'd had doors slammed in his face before) and then he'd give his baby girl a big hug and try to do some tough-guy shtick at the door and stare him own. That was probably the best he could hope for.

Maybe Jenna's *cool dad* would ask him where he was from, as in *Where are you from? And wouldn't you be happier there with your own kind?* And Darryl could say Dearborn, which was in fact the best possible place for a black guy dating a white girl to be from, because *cool dad* would say, "a lot of Arabs there," and they could connect on that level, hating and fearing Arabs, so that at least *cool dad* could rest easy that his baby girl wasn't out with some jihadist camel jockey because a white girl has a lot to lose running around with a black guy, even now in the *progressive* turn of the second millennium. She'd be called, to her face or behind her back, a nigger-lover, a mudshark, and in some extreme communities, a race-traitor. She was for all intents and purposes turning her back on her own community, her own friends and family. She would become

black by injection, a cruel bit of slang that illustrated perfectly what everyone she knows would think.

For the people that knew her and talked about her, it had nothing to do with attraction, with individuality, with love, even – it had to be that she wanted to go slumming, wanted to piss off daddy, or was just perverse and backwards.

They said that about him too, of course. They'd ask him why sisters weren't good enough, why he thought he was too good to be black, said he couldn't handle a big ass, that he had a small dick. He'd heard it all. He'd been with enough white girls to get a reputation, and no one even took notice when he was with a black girl. He'd had a lot of girls – he's charming, handsome, and has a good head on his shoulders. He studied hard. Everyone knew he was going places.

And he wanted Jenna, so he picked up the phone and dialed. The phone rang three times, and a man answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello,” Darryl said, trying to sound *white*, “Is Jenna available?”

“She's not here right now,” The man said – a tired man with a tired voice, distracted, groggy, and terse.

A beat.

“Can I leave a message for her,” Darryl asked.

“Yeah, I don't know when she'll be back,” said the voice on the other end.

“That's fine - just tell her Darryl called,” Darryl said.

“Sure thing.”

Another beat.

“Okay, thank you,” Darryl says.

No invitation to leave a message, no prompts for additional conversation, not even a proper goodbye.

“I don’t ever sweat one girl” Haas said.

“Don’t get him started on that shit,” Thomas chimed in.

Darryl, who had heard *that shit* before, smiled and put one hand up as if to stop Haas. “Nah, see, this ain’t nothing,” he said.

“Player for life,” Thomas said as he made a sausage and egg sandwich in a folded piece of white bread.

“Bet,” Darryl said, and returned to the order window in time to pick up Jenna and Roy’s food. He carried it to their table and set it down with a flourish.

“For M’sieur...and for Madame,” he said as he placed the plates. “Will there be anything else this morning?” he asked.

Roy grinned and said, “This will do just fine.”

“Well if there is anything else, my name is Darryl, and don’t hesitate to ask,” Darryl said as he sauntered back to the kitchen.

Roy wasn’t really listening, just returning a polite smile as he dug into his eggs.

Jenna picked at her pancakes and ate one patty of sausage.

“Eat!” Roy said mirthfully.

“I think my eyes were bigger than my stomach” Jenna said, and sat at the table idly picking and prodding her food while Roy ate with gusto.

When he finished he signaled Darryl for the check. Darryl brought it and wished them a nice day.

Together, Jenna and Roy walked to Roy's car. Jenna wanted to go back, wanted to see if she couldn't salvage something, at the very least maybe get rid of the bad feeling she carried around. She didn't know if she wanted Darryl, but she wasn't going to have the matter settled so awkwardly and angrily, and as grist for Rachel and Maria's gossip mill. She'd heard the pair go to work on people behind their back before – their friends, their boyfriends, some girl they knew that their boyfriends had fucked – and she didn't want to be the target of that sort of scorn.

"I forgot my phone" she lied, and abruptly headed back into the restaurant.

"I told you," Roy said as he sat down in his car and started it. He listened to the Dave and Devan morning show. Dave and Devan talked about the Pistons, and Roy nodded enthusiastically as they lauded the team's up-and-coming roster, and speculated on who the team would pick up over the summer, and Roy half-remembered being woken up by a phone call yesterday afternoon, but he thought then that maybe he dreamt it. *Boring dream*, he thought.

Jenna found Darryl right away. He was serving a table, and making a show of ignoring her. He finished placing the dishes for the elderly couple sitting at the table, asked if there would be anything else, and then reluctantly turned to Jenna.

"What?" he asked.

"I want another dance lesson," she said.

Darryl shook his head. "I don't think so," he said.

“Look, I’m sorry!” Jenna said. Her voice was sincere. He understood the problem. He didn’t have to make this so difficult, but he certainly wasn’t going to just roll over and play nice.

“You get my number from Rachel. We’ll see,” he said.

Jenna smiled. “We’ll see,” she said, and then hustled out the door to rejoin her father.

Darryl brought Haas and Thomas their check.

“Now you all grinning,” Haas said, leaning back on the bench of the booth with his hands on his distended stomach.

“Yeah, some girl I met at your party,” Darryl said, repeating himself. Haas and Thomas both caught it, and they laughed together.

Thomas grimaced as he stood up. “I’m *stuffed*,” he said to Haas.

“I got this,” Haas says as he snatched the bill off the table. They paid at the counter and walked to the parking lot.

They walked down the second row back from the door to the near dead center of the lot.

The car wasn’t there.

Thomas stood with his hands on his hips.

Haas looked around warily - “Where’d we...er...where’d you...” he stammered.

Thomas tried to speak, but nothing came out of his mouth. He walked to the parking spot, and there on the ground was a small, wet pool of gasoline, but otherwise nothing. There was no broken glass, no skid marks, no car. He breathed in deep and

exhaled sharply, crouched down in the empty spot exactly where the driver's seat should be.

“Did you lock it?” Thomas asked casually.

“Bro, I'm sure I did,” Haas said.

“Because I'm just wondering, you know, what...had...had happened. In fact.”

“I know I locked it because I always lock it,” Haas explained.

“You didn't lock it once without me saying,” Thomas said, trying very hard to work up a good boiling rage, but all he got for his effort is a cold greasy ball of panic in his guts.

“I know I did,” Haas whispered, “I know I did this time.”

“Locking a car door will not make the automobile theft-proof, but it will make your automobile...it will make your car less...less attractive...,” Thomas said.

“I know I locked it bro – *Wullah* I locked it!”

“Let me think for a second,” Thomas said as he battled a teetering vertigo in his head, “just let me think for a second.”

He stood up and walked away from the parking spot, out into the driveway of the lot. He turned around once, twice, and vomited violently on the concrete.

Chapter 16.

In Four Pines, Eddie McAffrey in his duty blues stood over Justin McAffrey, who lay on the carpet of his mother's house dressed only in a pair of tattered boxer shorts. His nose was running blood.

“You dumb son of a *bitch!*” Eddie hissed at him.

“What did I do? Huh?” Justin asked. His voice was congested and thick.

“After I get my shit towed, what do you think happens huh? What the fuck do you think happens?”

“I don't know!” Justin said, crawling away from his brother.

“I get god-damned *investigated!*” Eddie said. “They look over my tapes, and my reports, and my evidence tags, and then they *fuck me in the ass!*”

“I didn't do anything!” Justin pleaded. He had no idea what Eddie was trying to get across. He had the story well enough, but not the point. Eddie told him about the stop, about how he skidded off the road well outside of his patrol area, about the clean getaway of their marks. Justin took the story whole, knowing better than to ask questions.

“Now I get to sit down this week with detective Mike mother-fucking Cronander and tell him everything I've done, everywhere I've gone, and everyone I know, and do you know what happens next?”

“What can I do?” Justin begged pitifully. “I swear to god, I'm sorry – what can I do?”

“Do you *know* what happens next you high-on piece of *shit?*” Eddie hissed.

“After he's done poking around up my ass, he's going to come around for *you*, you dumb

son-of-a-bitch! And if I get so much as a *suspension*, I'm going to send you straight to Jackson!"

"You wouldn't!" Justin gasped in wide-eyed horror.

"What, 'cause you're my *brother*?" Eddie chucked the word out like a cigarette into a storm drain.

"What can I do?" Justin continued to beg.

Eddie backed off, playing his own good-cop / bad-cop. He looked at the stacks of mail on the dining room table and shook his head.

"Names. I want their names, I want to know everything about them. Then I want you to get your dumb fuck pothead friends together and figure out which of them is worth a shit, and we're going to go up to Detroit and get back what's ours."

"Eddie, why would-" Justin began to ask.

"Because I'm *fucked*! Get that through your goddamned head, stupid!"

Eddie ripped the badge off his shirt and threw it at Justin, catching him on the back of the hand and nicking the knuckle. Justin sucked at the scrape and Eddie paced around the room with his head in his hands.

"Tomorrow the investigation starts and they're gonna pull me off the road immediately. They've already decided, I can tell. They just gotta make it official. And when it's official, they'll start going through everything I've ever done, every trip to the evidence locker, every video taped stop – all of it. Then, those bright-boy detectives put two and two together, and that's it."

Eddie sat down in his mother's chair and lit a cigarette. He unbuttoned his shirt, but he got no comfort – he was still wearing his bulletproof vest and he was too tired to take it off.

“That’s it” he continued, “and if I’m done with that, if I’m out for good and I’m marked...I ain’t going to prison. So I’m gonna get what’s mine, and I’m gonna have our piece done with those Detroit sons-of-bitches, and I’m gonna get the hell out of Dodge.”

Justin nodded slowly and picks himself up. He tucked the flap of his boxer shorts closed as best he could and slunk off upstairs to his bedroom. He thought that if he could smoke a bowl, he could calm down and think this whole mess out, and he took out the works, but he couldn’t bring himself to smoke. He fetched his blue jeans up from the floor and put them on, and took his cell phone out of his pocket. He wrote Haas’ number down on an old receipt from the Stop-In convenience mart and took it down to Eddie.

“This is the Hajji’s number,” Justin said, “I don’t know if you guys got something to track it with or, or something.”

Eddie took it and looked it over wordlessly. He nodded slightly, approvingly, to Justin and he reclined back in the chair to finish his cigarette and then dozed off to sleep.

Thomas and Haas were near the point of collapse, and the reporting officer’s questions were like sacks of wet sand on their backs.

Haas had made his calls. They had an alibi. What they didn’t have was a trunkful of drugs or the thousands of dollars they’d paid out to get them. Haas was scowling, his jaw jutting out like a bull terrier. He was trying to be friendly. He smiled, calls the officers *buddy* and *bro*, but the words sounded like a dull shovel scooping wet dirt.

Thomas' eyes are fluttering and whenever he wasn't answering a question his head started to sag. He faded in and out of the conversation.

"Like us, you know?" one of the cops joked to him.

"Hmm?" Thomas asked back.

"I'm just saying, one white guy, one Arab – you guys are like us," the white officer grinned, and he was correct. His partner was a dark-skinned Chaldean named Yousif Haddad, and he was all business. Detective Haddad wore an exquisitely tailored navy suit and a three-button single breasted blazer with matching trousers. His shoes shone like motor oil. His shirt was snow white, his tie was violet. He transcribed the conversation in shorthand in a little black leather notepad and only occasionally raised his eyes up to give Thomas and Haas a look that said *cut the crap*.

Meanwhile, Officer Roger Ruscecki was all smiles and consolation. He had a plump, animated mouth that was always in motion. His mustache grew and shrank like a coffee-colored kick-line as he talked. He wore cheap brown slacks and a tweed hound's-tooth blazer. His shirt was tobacco-stain yellow and his tie was paisley maroon, and too nice for the rest of the outfit.

They were plainclothes officers with gold Detective shields. This was not a normal assignment for them, taking a stolen vehicle description. This was the sort of thing that blue-shirt beat cops do. They just happened to be stopping into Antonio's for coffee to go when the call came in.

"Like looking in the mirror, right buddy?" Ruscecki said to Haddad.

"Not quite," Haddad said.

“Just bad luck,” Ruscecki said to Thomas. “We don’t see a lot of cars stolen, relatively speaking. Not around here.”

“For real bro, in Dearborn – you know,” Haas said, but he trailed off in his fatigued stupor.

“Of course, here in Dearborn,” Ruscecki said.

“You alright?” Haddad asked. He projected his voice well, like an actor, and it shocked Thomas awake.

“Just tired and...just really tired,” Thomas said.

“Go easy on him da-da,” Ruscecki said to his partner. To Thomas he said, “we’ll keep our eyes open buddy. If it can be found, we’ll find it.”

“Thank you,” Thomas said, his nerves still tingling from the sudden jolt of Haddad’s voice.

“I just have another question or two,” Haddad said, as if he has to ask these questions as a matter of routine, and was terribly unhappy about it. “You say this was a...a blue Pontiac Grand Prix...a ’96?”

Thomas nodded sleepily, and Haddad panned the parking lot with a slow twist of his head.

“Must have been real bad luck,” Haddad said, “to get *that* car stolen out of *this* lot.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said.

“Because there’s nicer cars here,” Haddad said. “Much nicer cars. I just wonder why someone would bother with yours.”

“It had a good system – it was a good car,” Thomas said.

“It was a ’96,” Haddad said incredulously.

“Maybe they wanted the airbags?” Haas suggested.

“Hmm,” Haddad grunted.

“’cause they steal those, I heard,” Haas added, but Haddad ignored him.

“That’s true!” Ruscecki agreed, “usually they just jimmy the thing out of the steering wheel after smashing out the window, but who knows? Maybe they just wanted the airbags and so they took the whole car!”

Ruscecki grinned, but Haddad stared at Haas, who tried to return the gaze, but couldn’t. He tried to cover it up by yawning, but when he was done with his ruse he was looking at Haddad’s chest and not his eyes.

“And you were in Detroit all night?” Haddad asked.

“Yeah, you can call my friend if you want,” Haas said.

“Why would we want to do that?” Ruscecki asked, his broad face now frowning, his mouth and mustache making a little question mark.

“Just, you know. If you wanted to. I don’t know,” Haas stammered.

“So, you were in Detroit all night, but you came here. Which is the opposite direction of your homes,” Haddad said.

“We like this place,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, good food,” Haas agreed.

“Mm-hmm,” Haddad said, and flipped his notebook shut.

“We’ll be in touch,” Ruscecki said as the two cops turn to leave, and then he approached Thomas, who was staring sulkily at his shoes, and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I gotta level with you, we usually don’t recover the vehicle,” he said.

“I understand,” Thomas said back to him, looking up at Ruscecki’s face.

There’s something there that Thomas didn’t recognize, something that didn’t fit with the commiserative words coming out of the officer’s mouth.

Ruscecki laughed and said, “that’s good. You guys will be alright. You have a ride north? Yes, you said that, I remember.”

The cops drove away.

“What the *fuck* am I supposed to do now” Thomas groaned. He walked back towards the restaurant and sat down on one of the benches outside.

“I got us a ride home, so don’t worry about it,” Haas said.

“A ride home? Who gives a fuck, Haas?” Thomas whined, “how the fuck am I going to get to work? How the fuck am I going to go anywhere? I’m fucking *broke* Haas!”

“Bro, chill, one thing at a time” Haas said.

“And you – Jesus fucking Christ! Have you ever talked to a cop before?”

“Bro, seriously, chill out,” Haas said, his hands up in defense.

“Two cops in one day and you...you...what the *fuck*?”

“Bro – you know what? I know you’re pissed about your car, but I lost my car too,” Haas said.

“A *fully insured* car that is being replaced,” Thomas sneered.

“Bro, you know what I’m out right now?” Haas asked.

“I can’t think about that. I have to work in six hours and I don’t know how I’m getting there,” Thomas said.

“Ten thousand dollars bro. That’s what I gave to that fucking hillbilly” Haas said.

“Eighty five hundred! Fifteen of it was mine!” Thomas shrieked.

“Eight thousand five hundred dollars and I’m not going to see a fucking *penny* of it!”

“I told you to lock it!” Thomas said, and his voice catches in his throat. Tears welled up in his eyes but he angrily blinked them away. He squeezed the hard wood of the bench under him, his knuckles turned snow-white. He gritted his teeth until he was sure they would crack, and he started a low and anguished groan deep in his chest, but as it left his mouth he yawned and suddenly it was all he could do to stay awake. The rage went out of him faster than it came in.

“What the fuck is ten grand to you anyway, Haas?” Thomas asked.

“What?”

“You don’t need the money, everyone fucking knows it. What the fuck is eight grand to you?”

“Fuck you, it’s eight grand.” Haas said.

“You can get eight *million* wired to you tomorrow, can’t you?” Thomas asked.
“If you called your family today, you’d be set for life tomorrow, wouldn’t you?”

“Fuck all that,” Haas mumbled.

“The Mexicans,” Thomas gasped, “it was the fucking Mexicans – they followed us here and took my shit!”

“Hey – hey! Don’t even *say* that shit bro, you hear me?” Haas asked. “If Raul wanted that shit, he had about a hundred chances to take it. He didn’t even fucking pinch it.”

“How the fuck would you know?” Thomas asked.

“Bro, you don’t know those dudes – if they wanted that shit, they would fucking have it. You, and me, and half the motherfuckers in Detroit don’t mean *shit* to them. Raul is a fucking *friend*, and I don’t want to hear you talking that shit.”

“Whatever,” Thomas said.

Haas turned around shaking his head, “I’m tired, you’re tired, and here she is,” he said.

A tan minivan pulled into the parking lot and circled around to the restaurant entrance. Haas opened up the front passenger-side door.

“You coming bro?” he asked over his shoulder.

Thomas slowly, wearily struggled up to his feet and threw open the sliding rear door. He climbed up into the cabin and slumped down into one of the seats.

“Hey habibi,” Haas said to the driver, a pretty blonde girl that Thomas had never seen before, “this is Thomas, he’s cool as fuck. We’re going to drop him in Warren.” He said.

“That’s, like, twenty miles out of the way!” she complained.

“You want gas money?” he asked, pulling out a wad of cash from inside his jacket.

“No, just – it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. I missed you!” she said.

“Oh, I missed you too habibi,” Haas said to her, and pushed out his right cheek towards her to kiss, and when she did, Haas wined and grinned at Thomas. Thomas smiled back feebly and then looked away from Haas towards the window, rolling his eyes. He was asleep before they merged onto the freeway.

Chapter 17.

The papers on the table surprised Baxter – they were real honest-to-god legalese in a business which, for him, had always been conducted on handshakes and promises at most, and more often suggestion and innuendo: *Yeah, I'm having a party* meant *I'm having a party and I'd like you to spin from 1:00 AM to 2:30 AM*. The papers that Megan presented for him to read were clean, stapled, and marked with little post-it flags in the places where he was to sign and initial. He tried to read the document, and made a good show of it, but to him it was all so much Latinate gibberish.

They sat across from each other in a four-person booth at the National Coney Island in Royal Oak. It was a regular post-party stop for everyone in that part of town, but slightly after noon on a Thursday, it was almost totally empty. The staff were busy cleaning the lounge, wiping off the green Formica tables and mopping the faux tile floor, and prepping in the kitchen, chopping onions, heating chili, and boiling hot dogs. Their waitress had lost interest in them, having come around twice already and asked to take their order, and been sent away twice with only a request for two diet cokes.

“It’s nothing, really” Megan explained. “It just establishes that if you make any records to sell, we get money for it – but since we’re making the records, hello, you know? And if you need a lawyer, it identifies you as one of us, so there’s no confusion.”

Baxter smiled, but his eyes were wide open and glazing over. He went through and signed where he was told to sign, and initialed where he was told to initial. It took three minutes, and he handed the document back.

“Now I own your soul!” Megan joked.

“Ah, I knew it!” Baxter said, playing along.

The joke petered out between them, and Baxter asked, “so that’s it?”

“Well I’m getting a chicken hani but that’s it for business,” Megan said and then mischievously added, “unless you have a passport?”

Baxter did have a passport, and told her so.

“Well, I guess you’re going to have to go to Berlin then,” she says.

“What’s in Berlin?” He asked her, and she pulled a flier from her purse. She slid it across the table and he picked it up. It was a rough – a prototype or galley copy awaiting final clean-up before production.

The venue was a club called *KraftKunst*, that much Baxter could pick up though he could not read German. He saw the names of some DJ’s he knew – Mike Armstrong, DJ Triple-Beam, Finesse – and a few others he’d only heard of by name. There was a large black rectangle in the list, a blank space where evidently his name would go.

“We’ll pay for half your ticket. You’ll stay with some friends in Kreuzberg, and make about five hundred dollars for two nights work,” she explained.

“Ja, das ist gut!” he said with a grin.

“I thought you’d like that – we have to do something about your wardrobe though,” she said.

“What’s wrong with this?” Baxter asked, pointing towards his loose T-shirt and baggy jeans.

“It’s a little ‘clubbier’ out there – we’ll go shopping,” she said.

“Oh god, you’re gonna make me into a ‘Chachi’,” he said.

“You make it sound like you’re a ken doll or something – we’ll just get you some nice shirts is all,” Megan said.

Their waitress came around a few minutes later and was pleasantly surprised when they ordered food. She ran the order back to the kitchen – Megan’s chicken hani and an order of cheese sticks with ranch dressing for Baxter.

“How was your drive home last night?” she asked him.

Baxter laughed nervously and said, “man, shoot me if I ever try to drive that drunk again!”

“You have a hangover today?”

“It’s mostly gone,” he said.

“That’s good” she said, and they made small talk until their food arrived.

“I don’t know why I ordered a full one,” Megan said, “I usually get a half and it’s plenty. I’m not going to finish this.”

“You want one of my cheese sticks?” Baxter asked. She took one and put half of her hani on Baxter’s plate.

“Oh, I don’t want it,” he said.

“Well, it’ll go to waste either way,” she said.

“Why don’t you box it up?”

Megan gave him a funny cock-headed look and shrugged. “Eat your cheese sticks,” she said, and he did.

“So do you have something going on today?” Megan asked him.

“Nah, I called in sick,” Baxter said.

“Walk me to my car,” she told him.

He told her they still had to pay. Megan pulled out a crumpled wad of fives and tens and left a good number of them on the table, about twice the bill.

“Come on,” she said.

They walked to her car, a blue Jeep Grand Cherokee.

“Get in,” she commanded Baxter, and he did.

The car was immaculately clean and cool, but not cold. Baxter entered on the driver’s side and Megan entered from the opposite, and she came over to Baxter, her hot breath on his neck and her hand on his thigh.

“Take your pants off,” she said, and he did. The contents of his loose pockets spilled out on the floor and he cursed. Megan shushed him. They kissed like fighting dogs and Megan pumped Baxter’s cock with her fist.

She deftly removed her own slacks and panties, and started to give Baxter head. He reached over her back and rubbed her pussy up and down.

“I want them in!” she gasped before putting her mouth back on Baxter’s cock.

Baxter gently slipped one, then two fingers inside Megan.

“Harder!” she ordered him, and he complied.

She began to moan, and Baxter’s eyes rolled back in his head as she sucked him. He pushed his hips forward, but she stopped.

“No, not yet!” she said, and she climbed up on top of him. She guided his cock up into her and came down gently at first, and then rode him cowgirl style. She alternated between fast bouncing and hard grinding. She grabbed Baxter’s hair and pulled his head back. She began to touch his face like a blind woman reading Braille. She didn’t speak, but she cooed and moaned loudly.

“I’m gonna cum,” he said.

“Do it,” she said, “do it inside me.”

With a few final upward pushes, he was done and spent, and they stayed there tangled up in one another for a few minutes as the *petit mort* passed through them, top to bottom, and finally out.

With a soft and relaxed sigh, Megan got off of Baxter and started to dress. “I should get going,” she said.

“Okay,” Baxter said, and shimmies into his own pants. He collected his keys, wallet, cigarettes, and cell phone from the floor. He saw that he has two missed calls and rolled his eyes, knowing it was Rachel – she had had this new number for all of two hours and was already blowing up the phone.

“So I’ll catch you later this week then?” Baxter asked Megan as he opened the door and put one foot on the ground.

“Right, yeah – Mike and Finesse are spinning out at One-X tomorrow. You want a spot, it’s yours,” she said.

“Yeah, that sounds cool – later,” Baxter said and closed the door behind him. He walked towards his own car and heard the doors of the Jeep open and close as Megan got into the driver’s seat. The big car started and drove away with thick beads of condensation still clinging to the windows.

Baxter chuckled, smiled and shook his head. He put a cigarette in his mouth, and discovered that his lighter was among the flotsam that dumped out of his pockets that he did not recover. He lightly walked back into the restaurant to get a book of matches.

Thomas was at work, and had thrown himself so hard into every duty that he was idle after only two hours. His insides were quaking from the flood of stimulants in his bloodstream and his muscles were weak from fatigue. His eyes were dry one minute, wet the next.

His sister had driven him.

“Where’s your car?” she asked him.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Dad’s gonna shit,” she said.

“It’s none of his business,” he said, his mouth stretching out over a yawn. He slapped himself twice in the face.

“You look sick,” his sister said.

He shrugged and turned her radio up. It was Brittany Spears. He hated it, but it was better than talking.

He began tediously lining up boxes in the back stock room, doing nothing more important than aligning the edges, but doing it urgently. He had run his numbers again. He had eight hundred left. He had not yet decided whether or not to keep dealing with Haas. He had not yet decided whether or not he would ever talk to Haas again.

Thomas thought about Haas’ complaint that he is out eight grand. A bad deal, but why the hell did Thomas have to lose his car for it? So Haas lost his car too – big deal. Haas lost his completely insured car and in three days he’d have a brand new replacement. Haas, who with one phone call could be up to his eyeballs in oil money and never have to do a damn thing but stop ordering bacon at breakfast.

Fuck Haas and his ten grand, Thomas thought. Fuck Haas and his car and bag full of nasty crystal from butt-fuck nowhere. And fuck Baxter too. Fuck DJ B-X-T and fuck Megan Isom, he thought. Fuck Maria – double fuck her. Fuck them all.

He was muttering to himself when his manager came in. Better known as DJ Shell Tops, he was just Neil at work.

“You finished up the invoices already?” Neil asked Thomas warily.

“Yeah, just felt like getting them done,” Thomas answered.

“If you want to take off you can,” Neil said, assuming that was what Thomas wanted.

“Oh, no – I’m cool. In fact I wanted to talk to you about maybe picking up some more hours” Thomas says.

Neil looked at him cock-eyed. “Well, I mean – we don’t really have them to give,” he said, “and when we did have them, you didn’t want them.”

“Well yeah, but – you know, just – if the schedule opens up or something,” Thomas mumbled.

“Sure, yeah – I mean, Robin does the schedule and I’ll pass that on to her. But we’re slow, so why don’t you take off.”

“I don’t have a car and my ride isn’t coming until seven,” Thomas explained.

Neil frowned at the news. “Well, if you’re going to stay I need you doing something.”

“Well there’s nothing to do,” Thomas complained.

“Then go home,” Neil countered, and there was a harsh spike in his voice, like a jagged ice cube in a cold cocktail. He softened by a degree and said, “you look a little

green around the gills anyway. Do you want to just take a nap in the back until your ride comes in?"

"On the clock?" Thomas asked.

Neil considered and said, "I'll keep you on until five, and if we pick up and I need you out here, I'll wake you up and keep you on until seven, deal?"

Thomas agreed and slunk off to the back room, where a cot stood by the back wall underneath a collage of tattered and sweat-streaked rave fliers and posters advertising new DJ equipment – Technics turn tables, Sony headphones, and a half dozen others. Thomas lay down and after a half hour wound himself down into an uneasy sleep, one he woke from every twenty to forty minutes with a trembling disorientation and no recollection of where he was or what he was doing. His stomach cramped up, and he lay on his side curled into a ball to ease the pain.

Neil didn't come for him, and so Thomas was out two hours – a net total of twelve dollars cash. When his sister picked him up, Thomas scribbled his bank balance and income on a spare piece of graph paper by the light of the overhead lamp. He scribbled numbers into *in* and *out* columns, but beyond that it was a blur of digits. He confused himself, writing what he had in the bank as incoming money, and counting what he'd already spent as outgoing. He tried to run his budget both with and without his roll, but it was all nonsense. He did the math and wound up a thousand dollars ahead, then ran it again and found himself six hundred in the hole. He crumpled the paper and threw it down into the pile of pop bottles and fast-food wrappers by his feet.

They didn't talk all the way home, and when his sister parked the car, she dashed into the house with nervous speed. Thomas slowly made his way in on wobbly knees. He

followed his sister in through the side garage door, tiptoed past the things stored there, the old furniture, the lawnmower, the rusting bikes, and opened the door to the kitchen.

His father sat at the kitchen table with his gray portfolio binder in front of him.

Thomas intended to walk past, but his father was staring at him – staring hard.

“Hi,” Thomas said in a raspy little cough.

“Have a seat,” his father said.

Thomas sat across from his father at the kitchen table. The table was bare hard wood, no cloth. A white porcelain sugar bowl sat in the center, flanked by glass salt-and-pepper shakers.

“Heard you got your car stolen?” Greg said.

“Yeah,” Thomas said.

“What are you going to do?” Greg asked. There was no concern in his voice – he was asking for Thomas’ game plan. He wanted detailed instructions on how Thomas would replace the car, and how he would get to work in the meantime.

“I don’t know ye,t” Thomas said, “this just happened this morning.”

Greg shook his head, his nostrils flared. He sucked his cheeks in slightly when he was angry, and he was very, very angry.

“Well, now you know why you’re not on my insurance,” Greg said.

“I know,” Thomas said while giving a ghostly and vacant nod.

“So how are you going to get to work?”

“I don’t know. I’ll figure something out.”

“Well, you better,” Greg said.

“I just fucking said I’d figure something out! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Thomas screamed, standing up out of his chair, knocking it over.

“What the fuck is wrong with me? Wrong with *me*,” Greg yelled back, rising to his feet, “There is *nothing* wrong with me!”

Thomas’ hands shook. His eyes were glassy and wet, but he was not crying. His whole body felt bloodshot and raw. He turned around and went out back the way he came, out through the garage, leaving the doors open. He heard them slam behind him. He gave his father’s car a solid kick on the driver’s side door. There was no effect, no scratch or dent, but he felt better.

He was two blocks down the street when the cold hit him. A wild wind whistled up his baggy shirt. Their neighbors, the Adamczyk’s, hadn’t shoveled their sidewalk, and when Thomas walked past he sunk ankle-deep in the snow. His socks were wet. He wrapped his arms around his shoulders and shivered deeply.

He fetched his phone from his pocket and calls Baxter. There was no answer at his house, so he called Baxter’s parent’s house, and Baxter’s father told Thomas that Baxter was out at Tonic, and went down early to help a friend set up – he didn’t know who; DJ Houseboat or something, he said. Thomas cycled through his phone list, and within ten minutes pared down the list of people who could help him. Tony Gino was too far away, as were Sally and Lissa. The J’s were out at Tonic with Baxter. He didn’t know Nate Dog near well enough to impose on him, and likewise for about half the people he sold to for whom he had numbers. He waited another five minutes, fingers growing progressively more numb, wind chapping his lips and cheeks and whipping the hot salt water from his eyes, and at length he called Maria.

She was home, and she promised to help. She met him at the corner and hurried him into her car.

“What happened?” she asked him as he shivered and shook in the passenger’s seat.

He told her the events of the last two days – the run, the car, the theft, the fight – leaving out the girl. She listened until he was quiet.

“Do you need a place to stay?” she asked.

“I can’t ask you,” he said.

“I’m offering,” she said.

They drove in silence to Maria’s mother’s house. The lights were out except for a blue TV flicker in the main room.

“Brittany’s home, but that’s it,” Maria said.

They skulked through the living room unnoticed. Brittany was watching *Sealab 2021* next to a pile of textbooks and notebooks that had been pushed lazily to the side.

Thomas and Maria tiptoed upstairs to Maria’s room and closed the door behind them. There was a thick stillness – they held their tongues, waiting for the other to speak so that they would then have an excuse to speak themselves. Maria was waiting for Thomas to apologize so that she could deny him and play hard to get, and so take him down a peg. Thomas was ready to offer to sleep on the floor, and thus force Maria to concede half her bed rather than call the whole thing over and done with, and thus could he keep her with him and keep her in check if he decided to do so.

Neither one was ready for Thomas’ nerve and will to give out, for him to drop to his knees, rest his head on Maria’s belly and say, “I’m sorry baby, I’m so, so sorry,” but

that is what he did. Maria had her apology, but it was too much, it was too sincere, too honest. It was not quite pitiful, but damned close. If they had been dating for a month instead of a year, she would laugh him out of her house. Instead, she took his hat off and stroked his head. “It’s okay, you’re alright,” she cooed over and over.

“It’s okay, you’re alright,” she said, and she closed her eyes and let him feel good against her, forgetting their ugly fight, and it didn’t matter that Thomas was apologizing for something else, because she didn’t know. When she forgave him, he let the forgiveness cover the fight and his fling, and they climbed into bed and slept the evening, night, and morning away.

Chapter 18.

Maria had to work at 9:00, so she dropped Thomas off at 8:30. His father's car was idling in the driveway, and so Thomas had Maria drive a few laps around the block, stalling for time until the old man left. He was gone five minutes later, and Maria pulled up into Thomas' driveway.

"So," she said.

"Thank you," Thomas said with thick sincerity.

"It's cool," Maria said.

"Well--"

"Hey, Bax is spinning at One X tonight," Maria said.

"That sounds cool," Thomas said, "I'm there."

"Alright," Maria said with a smile.

They trade a quick kiss, just slightly more than friendly.

"Hey, just real quick – are you holding anything?" Maria asked.

"I got nothing, why?" Thomas answered, though he did have just enough for himself, a few bumps left to get him through a couple days.

"Oh, just for tonight," Maria said. She sounded disappointed.

They said goodbye again, and Thomas bounded out of the car. Maria was out the driveway and at the corner before he even had his key in the lock. Thomas held his breath, expecting some sort of confrontation, and went inside.

His mother was washing dishes in her bathrobe and pyjamas. Nearby, she had a little white cup with little red, full of black coffee. If she had slept all night, it didn't

show, and the silvery wires of her graying hair were barely pulled back against her head with a rubber band. Strays straggled out to the sides by her ears. When she saw Thomas she toweled off her hands, smoothed her hair back, and blocked his way through the kitchen.

Thomas said, “Hey ma – I’m really tired, so I’m just gonna go to bed, okay?”

“Thomas,” his mother said.

“Ma, really, let’s talk about everything later. I just really, really want to go back to bed for a while.”

His mother took a step back, letting him pass. Thomas shuffled off back to his bedroom, which was a messy explosion of dirty clothes, shoes, and fliers, beads, and spent glow sticks. He kicked off his shoes, and began to cross the treacherous and wobbly hillscape of his floor, then turned around and left his room.

“It’s no big deal,” Thomas said loudly as he came around the hall to the kitchen, “he’ll get mad and stomp his feet, but that’s it. That’s it, ma.”

His mother looked at him with wide, tired, and vacant eyes.

“I don’t think so,” she said, “I don’t think so because he’s acting different. You don’t know him. You haven’t known him for a long time, and he hasn’t known you for a long time. But I still know him. I still lay with him in that bed every night, and he is acting different.”

“Ma, come on – drama,” Thomas says dismissively.

“I’ll tell you how,” she said, “I-will-tell-you-how-I-know: Last night, when you left, he came straight to bed and went to sleep. For twenty-two years, when you or Nicole would pull some, some *stunt* like you did last night, your father would stomp and slam

doors and say things under his breath – it doesn't matter what kind of things. I didn't think he meant them, but last night you pushed a button. Last night, you crossed a line."

Finished, Thomas' mother looked up at her son who stood half-a-head taller than she.

"You're so skinny now," she said, "There's nothing left of you."

"Ma, it'll be fine," Thomas said, "I'll talk to him when he gets home."

"He won't be home this weekend. He's going hunting," his mother said.

"Well, Monday, Tuesday – whatever. I'll talk to him."

His mother held her little coffee cup with both hands.

"You'll always have a place to stay here, Thomas," she said to him.

"Yeah, I know", Thomas said, cocking his head and squinting his eyes warily.

"I won't let him throw you out. I want you to know that," she said.

"Thanks ma," he said, and he returned to his room.

Behind his closed door, he wobbled and leaned over the heaps of denim, cotton, and suede until he fell down into his bed. Underneath him were the clothes he wore two days ago, exactly where he'd left them after taking them off before his fitful few hours of sleep Wednesday morning.

They repulsed him. The melted snow, still damp around the cuffs of the pant legs was Four Pines snow, dirty and poor. His shirt smelled like nervous flop sweat and nicotine with a hint of Gwen's cheap perfume. He threw them all to the floor, curled under his blankets, and turned his face to the wall.

He slept uneasily for the rest of the day. He tossed, he turned, he sweated. He woke up for long and incoherent stretches of time wherein he stared at the ceiling or at

the falling sun through the window, and then drifted off slightly into fitful repose. Day turned into evening, evening turned into night. He was dimly aware of his phone ringing, but he ignored it – there was no one he wanted to talk to.

By 8:00 he had had enough of trying to sleep. He had lain in bed for nearly twelve hours, and he felt more exhausted than when he laid down. He went to the kitchen for coffee, found half a pot cold on the hot plate, microwaved it and started to drink. It was stale, but he loaded it up with so much cream and sugar that it was hard to tell. It helped to pick him up enough that he thought to do a bump of coke and swallow a yellow jacket, and minutes later he was wide awake.

He thought that maybe he would go to One-X. It was a fun little club down by the old Tiger Stadium near Michigan and Trumbull in a fairly vacant part of Detroit, the Corktown district. There was a small cluster of restaurants, gas stations, and bars, but since the old stadium closed, these struggled to stay in business. Some had scaled back and adapted, like the Corktown tavern, which began to host weekly dance parties. Others, like One-X, had a niche appeal – One-X was a straight-friendly gay bar with excellent dance music. It was a wide-open space, and everyone tended to pack into the dark back room by the DJ booth. Like its neighborhood, it was usually empty. It had always been a good meeting place for Thomas and his clique because they often had it to themselves – they were free to dance and have fun so long as someone bought a beer every once in a while.

Thomas dressed slowly, and as he slid on his jeans he fished his cell phone out of his pocket. There were six missed calls – one from Haas, three from Maria, one from Rachel, and one unknown number, but no one left a message. The phone jumped to life,

vibrating in his hand, lighting up, and chirping out a synthetic version of Beethoven's *Fur Elise*.

It was an unknown number. Curious, Thomas pushed the "talk" button and said hello.

"Is this Thomas Kowalski?" the voice asked from the other end.

"Yeah, who's this?" Thomas asked.

"Thomas, this is Roger Ruscecki, Dearborn PD – how are you this evening?"

Thomas swallowed hard and managed to say, "I'm fine, thanks."

There was a silence as both waited for the other to pick up the conversation.

"What's, er...what can I do for you officer?" Thomas asked.

"So formal! Just call me Roger," the voice on the other end said. The sound of it was cheerful, friendly, avuncular.

Thomas was speechless at first, but managed to stammer out, "Okay. What can I do for you?"

The voice on the other end kept chugging along. "Thomas, you say your car was stolen right here in Dearborn, right?"

"Yeah," Thomas said. His hands turned cold and he reminded himself that yes that was what happened, that he was telling the truth. It wasn't stolen in Detroit like he and Haas had planned to say, but swiped in Dearborn. Remembering the truth brought back the cold dread in his bowels, like his insides were sinking in slushy snow.

"We don't normally see a lot of car thefts around here, so this one is really interesting. We especially don't see broad daylight thefts from crowded parking lots."

“Yeah,” Thomas said again, and realized that that’s all he said last time, so he added, “that’s gotta be pretty weird, right?”

“Definitely weird, which makes me wonder – is there anyone who would have *wanted* to steal your car? Anyone who was mad at you – an ex-girlfriend, someone you were fighting with?”

Haas had been so insistent about the Mexicans. Haas swore up and down that they wouldn’t do something like that, that they wouldn’t even dream of crossing him, that they were good people.

How good could they be? They smoke dope and drink and pump their music loud in front of a baby! Thomas thought.

They’re in on it together – it makes perfect sense! Haas tipped them off, they stole the car, he played dumb...oh god, what do I do now? Thomas thought.

“No” Thomas said, “I don’t think so.”

“Hmm,” Ruscecki said.

“Yeah,” Thomas said.

They hang on the line in silence for a while.

Why the fuck would he do it? Thomas wondered, *it was fifteen hundred bucks – why the fuck would Haas steal fifteen hundred bucks from me?*

“That doesn’t help me very much,” Ruscecki said, “but I guess that’s why I’m a detective!”

“Yeah,” Thomas said and hung on the line, counting the loose change in his pocket.

“Well, we found the license plate.”

“What?” Thomas asked.

“Lansing PD last night raids this crack house full of Mexicans or, you know, Hispanic Americans. Anyway, they were using the garage as a chop-shop and in with all the other crap was the license plate from your car,” Ruscecki explained.

Thomas sat down on his bed. “Oh my god,” he said.

“Yeah, real scumbags,” Ruscecki said, “would you believe they had a goddamned baby in the house? In a fucking chop-shop.”

“Oh my god,” Thomas said again.

“You don’t have to tell me buddy – Lansing! They took your car all the way to Lansing to part it out or move it. Unbelievable, right?”

“Unbelievable,” Thomas murmured.

“That’s what I thought – unbelievable. Well, these guys said they didn’t know anything about your car, but we figured they’ll tell us something eventually. Don’t worry – we’re still looking for it.”

Thomas counted his breaths, one, two, three.

“I appreciate it,” he stammered.

“Well, that’s why I’m the detective!” Ruscecki said, and Thomas could just picture that thick brown hedgerow of a mustache stretching itself out straight around Ruscecki’s big Pollock grin.

“Well, just let me know if you need any more help, officer.”

“Roger,” Ruscecki said.

“Roger,” Thomas said.

“No, well, I was saying ‘roger’ like ‘roger-wilco,’ but since you mention it, do call me Roger. Calling me ‘officer’ is demeaning to the good flat foots out there who do the real work,” Ruscecki said with a deep and happy chuckle.

“Yeah,” Thomas said.

“Have a good night, kid,” Ruscecki said.

The line went dead.

Thomas sat still in his room, lit only by the little bit of streetlight coming through the window that wasn't blocked by the Venetian blind. He lay down in his bed. He pulled the blankets up to his neck and began to shake. He stood up and paced as best as he could in the dirty and crowded room. He called Haas, and Haas answered.

“Bro, hold tight okay? I got someone on the other line,” Haas said.

Thomas stared at the thin crack of light in the window until Haas came back.

“My boys are in jail – I'm trying to put shit together to get them out. The Mexicans, you remember them, right?” Haas asked.

“How'd you know?” Thomas asked with dark suspicion.

“They called me, but I can't do nothing, so I'm trying to make some calls,” Haas explained.

He had nothing to hide - Thomas knew it almost immediately.

“And hey,” Haas continued, “they didn't say nothing about us, but Raul said he couldn't get rid of your license plate before they got hit, but he doesn't think it's a problem.”

Thomas hung up the phone and lay back down in his bed.

I'm fucked, he thought. I'm fucked. I've got eight hundred dollars in my shoebox and I can't get to work. When I do go to work, they cut my hours because there isn't enough work to do. It's dark in here. I don't want the light on. Eight hundred and if I buy a car that's the whole thing, and I can't make moves because Haas has got nothing – or maybe he can get something...

But if I don't buy a car I can't sell and if I can't sell I don't have money, and if I don't have money I don't have a home, no job, no money, no car, no home.

If I buy a five hundred dollar car I can push three hundred back to Haas. I can quit smoking, quit going out, at least for a few weeks.

But if I don't go out, who will I sell to? Nobody comes by here. Nobody will come by here. I need to sell to more people. I need to call the people I do know. I need to call everyone and tell them to come here so I can sell to them. Make a flier – a big letter "P" printed up to look like snow, call it the "powder party." They'll come. They'll pick me up, someone will, and give me a ride, and I'll be okay.

That's stupid. Nobody is coming. Nobody likes me that much, to drive me around and buy my stuff and cover me at parties, buy me food, bum me smokes. Nobody likes anybody that much.

But if I buy a three hundred dollar car, just for a little while, that's three hundred plus one hundred to insure it for three months – no, closer to two hundred. Then I have to register it. It will need work – okay, what can I do with two hundred dollars worth of shit?

No going out. That's rule number one. No going out. No going out or buying anything I don't absolutely need.

I absolutely need a car. I can probably find a used car for two hundred dollars, then another two hundred to insure it, another hundred for registration, and maybe two hundred in repairs. That leaves one hundred. That's ten pills. That's half an eight ball. I can move that. I can move that and turn one hundred into five hundred.

Five hundred dollars. I only have five hundred dollars to last me forever.

It was a poor showing at One-X, but it was a Friday, and Friday's could always go either way. You never could tell. Some Fridays were hot, and every club was packed to the gills. Other nights, not so.

Rachel was in the dark back room with Tony Gino, talking about nothing. Baxter spun out house music from behind the decks, and having fun with it. Maria danced front and center on the floor in her own little world, paying attention to nothing but her own feet. There were only a few other stragglers here, maybe a dozen or so, so Baxter played all kinds of fun tracks that he didn't play much very more, mixing up the hot house jams with older Detroit techno: A Number of Names and Kajmere, hits from the holy trinity of Detroit techno: Kevin Saunderson, Carl Craig and Derrick May. He was reckless with the vinyl, throwing down whatever he wanted, whenever, and matching it up seamlessly.

Megan Isom was there too, with Mike Armstrong and Finesse. They were keeping to themselves just off to the side of the turntables, and only occasionally saying a word of encouragement to Baxter or trading an approving nod or handshake when he spun out a track they really dug.

Sharevari was the track spinning as Darryl and Jenna talked over red bull and vodka in the main bar room. It was immensely empty compared to the rest of the club,

recessed lower into the ground and not so neatly finished. The central room of the club, between the recessed bar room and the dark back room, had a nice wooden bar and comfortable furniture. The back room was thoughtfully decorated to look like a Hollywood set of a Detroit back alley, accentuated with cold, dim, blue-white light and oil barrels. The main room in which Darryl and Jenna spoke was busted down and neglected by comparison. It was a tall, circular room that at capacity could host fifty people or more. With only Jenna, Darryl, and the bartender, the loud music from the back echoed floppily around the walls. The décor was in okay shape – it was just terribly dated. It looked like props from a nightclub scene from an episode of Miami Vice that had been locked here in storage for fifteen years. There was also a snack cart in the middle of the dance floor, advertising popcorn and hotdogs. It was unmanned. No one had ever seen it at work.

“So what did you want to talk to me about?” Darryl asked Jenna.

“Just stuff. I just wanted to talk,” she said.

“Mm hmm,” he said.

“Don’t be mad, please,” she pleaded.

“I ain’t mad,” he said, “I ain’t happy, but I ain’t mad.”

“Why aren’t you happy?” she asked.

“You want it spelled out?” he said.

“Okay, I’m just going to put it out there,” she said, “I like you. You’re different and fun and I just...you know?”

“Okay, well I’m going to put this out there: you met me a week ago, rolling your ass off, and next time you see me you don’t say a word because you’re with your old man,” he said with all the inflection of a DMV clerk.

Jenna’s drink was empty, nothing but ice. She swirled the cubes around with her finger and dried that finger off on her cocktail napkin.

“It’s complicated,” Jenna said.

“You’re *making* it complicated.”

“How?” Jenna asked defensively.

“If you want to play, we can play. I know how to do that. If you want Rachel to try and fix us up, I can do that to. You don’t know how to handle either one, because I don’t think you know what you want.”

“Okay, first of all, you just met me, so don’t act like you know me, and second of all, I didn’t ask Rachel to try to hook us up. You’re here and I’m here,” Jenna said.

“So I’m wrong?” Darryl said.

“I didn’t say...I don’t know.”

“Well, I guess that’s it then,” Darryl said as he stood up from his seat.

“Well, wait,” Jenna said.

Darryl stopped and cocked his eyebrow.

“Hi, I’m Jenna,” Jenna said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“That’s very cute,” Darryl said.

“I thought you were going to give me a dancing lesson,” she said.

“Did I? I didn’t think we’d met.”

“Maybe I’m confused – do you dance?”

“Don’t you know all black guys can dance?” he asked

“I’m trying,” Jenna whined.

Darryl crossed his arms and leaned against the bar. “Alright,” he said, “I’ll give you a dance lesson.”

They crossed the center bar and entered the back room. They faced off in the center of the dance floor and Darryl put his thumb over Jenna’s ear.

“You remember that Chicago hop, right?” he asked and said, “Now we’re gonna put a little spin on it.”

They quickly fell into a steady kick step, and Darryl deftly spun on his left toe, setting his right foot down just on the up beat. He kicked through one more measure, and then spun back the other way.

“You try,” he said.

She tried. She failed. She got halfway around and lost her balance, taking a crazy bunny hop to the left, just narrowly missing Maria who paid her no mind. She covered her face and laughed in embarrassment.

“It’s alright, go slow,” he said.

Rachel smirked and shook her head on the other side of the room. Watching Jenna stumble her way through a dance lesson was a fun distraction from sulking moodily in the back room of a dead bar on an off night. Baxter was getting too big for his britches, getting carried away with this whole DBC thing. She thought the usual jibes would work – simply calling him *superstar DJ B-X-T* usually shrunk his head and made him bearable, though he hadn’t quite swallowed the pill when they talked to Darryl at Antonio’s.

The new clothes bothered her most. She thought he looked like a Chachi, a Tony Gino, a Guido – he wore a silk shirt and tight jeans. He wore his hair slicked back and nearly rigid with product, and he was nearly flammable with cologne. He looked awkward – the shirt was untailored and loose, and he didn't have the muscles to fill it out, so it sort of hung and flapped around him. He kept brushing phantom hairs out of his eyes, and when he touched the hair on his head he pulled his hand back as if he'd had a shock.

Rachel was thankful that he hadn't started wearing sunglasses indoors.

She sidled her way up to the DJ booth, smiling at her cousin then narrowly dodging a tumbling Jenna, and leaned in over the turntables.

“Want a drink?” she asked Baxter.

“Yeah, here,” Baxter said, pulling out a little orange drink ticket.

“Where's mine?” she asked him.

“That's the last of them – split it,” he said.

She hurried away to the bar and put the ticket down. The bartender, a thin high-yellow forty-something man with a Kangol hat and a silk shirt, drug himself over to her.

“What do you want?” he asked.

She ordered a vodka and redbull for herself, a Newcastle beer for Baxter, and she slid the orange ticket across the bar. The bartender poured the drink and opened a bottle.

“Seven bucks,” he said.

“What? That beer should be four!”

“The beer's free for the ticket. Drink's seven bucks.”

“Why would I use the ticket for the cheap drink?” she asked.

“You don’t want it?” the bartender asked, his tan fingers clawing the glass and the bottle to pull them back and dump them out.

Rachel rolled her eyes and paid with a ten. The bartender put the ten in the register and leaned back against the inside of the counter, turning his attention to the television he kept next to the register which showed an old episode of *Martin*.

“Where’s my change?” Rachel snapped.

The bartender, without looking at her, made a big production of going back to the register, opening it, pulling out three dollars, and slapping the bills onto the bar. He would not take his eyes off the television. There was a commercial on for Gardner White furniture.

“Yeah, I wonder why nobody tips you,” she said to the back of his hat.

In the dark back room, Jenna had mastered simple spins, left and right, and Darryl was showing her a drop spin – he squatted down to a crouch on the downbeat, and on the upbeat he stood back up, spinning around on his toes.

“Not yet!” Jenna laughed, throwing her hands up in front of her but keeping her feet moving to the beat.

Rachel, drinks in hand, approached the DJ booth. Megan Isom was behind the tables with Baxter. Rachel held the beer out for Baxter, but he indicated with a nod of his head that his hands were busy, and that she should put the beer on the table next to the mixer. She did, and leaned in for a kiss.

Baxter ducked it. “Oop,” he said, as if he just noticed something important that had escaped his attention. He reached down and fiddled with the EQ. But Rachel had leaned in just an inch or two over the table, and got a unique vantage point that gave her a

clear view of Megan Isom's hand on Baxter's hip. There was a sound in her mind of smashing glass.

"Hi Rhonda!" Megan said to Rachel as she slyly slipped her hand off of Baxter.

"It's *Rachel*, you fucking *whore*," Rachel spat.

Megan dropped the pretense. "Ooops!" she said, like she'd forgotten to bring her suntan lotion to the beach, or had left her hat at home on a warm spring day.

Baxter, sensing the tension around him, looked up from the turntables.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You *fucked* her!" Rachel squeaked, but her voice was drowned out by the music.

"Huh?"

Rachel jammed her thumb over Baxter's ear and repeated herself.

"What? What are you talking about?" Baxter yelled over the booming bass.

"I can't believe this shit!" she screamed at him.

Baxter signaled Finesse, who took over the turntables. He came around the other side and took Rachel by the arm, leading her to the middle room by the wooden bar. There was no bartender here. It was quieter.

"Now - what?" Baxter asked.

"You fucked her, didn't you?" Rachel asked, here eyes bulging out and her face up close to Baxter's.

"What are you talking about?"

"Are you done stalling? Have you thought of something to say for yourself? Because that's the second time you've asked me what I'm talking about," she said, and held up two fingers not half an inch from Baxter's nose.

“Why would I cheat on you?” Baxter asked.

“Well, you did,” Rachel said.

“Well, I didn’t.”

They went back and forth like that for three tracks, neither confirming nor denying, accusing but not believing, and Baxter was very nearly on the cusp of having his cake and eating it too, of quieting Rachel down to a point where maybe he could keep his steady fuck and also play with his boss, when Megan Isom strolled into the room.

“Bax, Finesse wants to know if you’re coming back to the table,” she said.

Rachel turned her Medusa gaze from Baxter to Megan, and then back to Baxter. Baxter in turn shrugged and said, “Yeah, I’ll be right there,” and walked past Rachel to the bar. He held up his hand, and the pale-skinned bartender pulled out a Newcastle from the cooler.

Rachel stomped past Megan, who stood smirking in the doorway with her arms crossed. She did not move out of Rachel’s way, nor did she impede her. Rachel brushed Megan with her shoulder, something that could have started a fight but didn’t, because the younger girl knew she’d been beat. She knew what Megan was thinking because Rachel had done the same thing herself.

A guy that does it for you will do it to you, she thought as her cheeks turned strawberry red. That was Baxter’s pick-up: talking about how his girlfriend then, Monica, didn’t get him. She was too hardcore, too amped up, too into the scene. There was hardcore and then there was *hardcore*. There was partying after work, and then there was working after the party. Rachel understood. She just liked to party after work, a few

drinks, a little blow, some dancing – nothing showy, not like those bouncy crackhead junglists, not like Monica – just a little bop and swing to a sexy beat. A very sexy beat.

The first time they'd fucked was outside of *Boogie Fever*, a retro disco club in Ferndale. It was ironically cool before irony was cool, at least back then, but now it was over-cute and cheesy. Monica wouldn't go to a place like that. Rachel would. So would Baxter. Three weeks later, they were together.

Back in the dark room, she grabbed Jenna by the sleeve.

"I'm going," she said.

"What?" Jenna asked, a big happy grin on her face.

Rachel put her thumb over Jenna's ear and simply said "Now!"

"Okay, hold on," Jenna said, holding up a finger and turning back to Darryl to say goodbye.

"Now!" Rachel screamed at the top of her little lungs, but the music drowned her out totally, and not even Jenna, standing three feet away, could hear her. Darryl saw her mouth open wide and her eyes closed tight and mistook it all for a yawn. Maria was looking at her cell phone as she bobbed in the middle of the floor.

Rachel snatched Jenna's arm and led her roughly off the dance floor. When Maria didn't follow, she grabbed her too and took her in tow, pushing Jenna and pulling Maria along.

"Isn't he awesome?" Jenna giggled.

"Yeah, he's fucking wonderful – can we go now? Please?" Rachel moaned.

"What's the matter?" Jenna asked sweetly.

Rachel explained: “Baxter is fucking that god-damned old whore in there, and lying to my fucking face about it because he’s a fucking *asshole*.”

Rachel reached her shaking hands into her purse, pulled out a pack of parliament lights, dropped one into the salty melted snow at her feet, and put another one in her mouth backwards. She turned it around and lit it, sucking smoke deep into her lungs and letting it out with a nervous shudder.

“Gimme one!” Maria said.

They were standing in the middle of the avenue, the wet pavement sparkling under their feet. There were no cars to be seen. The vacant stores around the club had steel shutters over the windows and thick iron grates on the doors. This strip of Michigan Avenue used to be lined with small grocery shops – a store downstairs and an apartment for the owner and his family up above. There was a produce shop, a butcher, a bakery, all abandoned, all with raggedy sheets of paint hanging off their weathered wood sides. It was a damp night, and every light had a misty halo around it. Snow was melting and evaporating, the air was thick and damp.

“I’m so sorry, Rachel,” Jenna said, too drunk and too high on her own crush to care much about her friend.

Rachel pulled out her car keys and crossed the southbound lane towards her blue Dodge.

“Rach’,” Jenna said, “I think I’m gonna stay. I’ll try to get a ride form Darryl.”

“Fine,” Rachel said, and without looking back got into her car and drove away.

Jenna returned to the club and ordered another drink from the tan man behind the bar, who served her cheerlessly.

“Can you drive?” Rachel asked Maria, holding the keys out in front of her.

Maria was unsteady on her feet, her head wobbled to the left, then upright, to the left again, and repeat.

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Get in,” she said.

Maria slumped like a sack of potatoes in the passenger seat, and Rachel threw the car in drive. A more powerful car would have squealed its tires – this one just revved hard and dutifully turned around on Michigan avenue. She drove past the abandoned shops, the burned-out shells, the vacant lots, over eight lanes of potholes, bumps, and humps until she turned on to Hubbard for more of the same. Hubbard became West Grand and cleaned itself up. The blocks were still half vacant, missing every third or fourth house, but those that remained were sturdy and there were lights on in the windows. She always drove very carefully during this part of the drive, or any other residential stretch of road in Detroit for that matter.

When she was sixteen, the summer after her sophomore year of high school, she’d dated Steve Basso - a young man from Wayne State University. He’d been a Senior while she was a Freshmen at Edsel Ford High School. He lived down by the campus, claiming he wanted the whole *Detroit experience*. Rachel admired it at the time, thought it was really urban of him. She went down to see him in his rented flat on Avery, which was a narrow side street with parallel parking on both sides. The area left to drive on was just wide enough for one car, and while she was searching for his apartment, she came head-to-head with a big green Ford Bronco coming the other way. The driver was black. He wore a Detroit Lions jersey and a white doo-rag. She was in her tiny Ford Escort. He laid on the horn and Rachel froze up, so he inched his truck forward and waved her back with

his right hand. Mechanically, Rachel put her car in reverse and backed out the entire length of the block and back out onto Forest. She turned the wrong way on the one way street and the big green truck growled past her. She advanced back up Avery, flanked on both sides by tall, lush trees – read oak, maple, sycamore, and one or two Elm trees, all of which towered over the homes behind them. These were without exception Victorian flats and houses built sometime in the 1860's and 1870's. They were made of aged and stained red brick, had broad, deep porches, gabled attics, half-sunk basements, iron security doors, and bars on the first-story windows.

She had begun to think she was making a mistake, but that she had come too far to turn back. She wasn't positive that she could find the way out of the neighborhood in any case. She had come up Warren, past the University, the strip malls, over Woodward and Cass – but could she go back that way? She wasn't sure. She'd only been driving for a few months and Detroit is criss-crossed with one-way streets, and streets that suddenly, inexplicably become one-way streets without any sign saying so.

She had to parallel park. She had done it once before when her road test called for it, but it was unnecessary in the suburbs, where the homes had big driveways and the businesses were set near giant parking lots. There was a fine spot two doors down from Steve's apartment, and she tried to pull in. She tried and aborted four times, and on the fifth her frazzled nerves gave in and she became impatient. She backed in too hard, smashed the headlight and crumpled the bumper of the Buick LeSabre behind her.

In seconds, she was surrounded by blacks – old, young, male, female and every combination thereof, ten, twelve, twenty – she couldn't count. Her breathing was fast and panicked, shallow and trembling.

One of the mob around her car took some control of the situation and rapped on her window. She rolled it down.

“You hit my car,” he said.

“I didn’t m-mean it,” she blurted out, hot tears welling up in her eyes.

“Don’t matter you didn’t mean it, you gonna pay for it,” he said, and as soon as he said it realized that however she took it, it wasn’t how he meant. He meant to lean on her a little bit – a white girl with a nice car probably had a little money, and he could take some of that money, fix the headlight, and have a little fun with the rest. Or for that matter, he could leave the headlight broken and have a *lot* of fun with the rest. He didn’t know what she thought he meant, but her wide, wet eyes and blanching skin told him that she didn’t think he just wanted a few bucks. But there was a mob around him, and to apologize would have been a terrible loss of face in front of his family and neighbors.

Terrified, Rachel buried her face in her hands and her shoulders sank. She shook her head, as if to clear away the whole miserable event, but it wouldn’t go away and so she kept her face buried. She slumped forward and she bumped the car horn with her elbows. Everyone gave a start – the man at the window, Rachel, the crowd – but Rachel put her head right back down like a frightened ostrich.

The crump of the collision had brought Steve, who was already waiting and watching for Rachel, and shortly after the horn beeped he approached the man at Rachel’s window. Steve ignored Rachel at first, talking to the man instead.

“Hey Carl, what’s going on?” he asked, using the man’s nickname.

“Oh hey there Steve – this a friend of yours?” Carl asked.

“Yeah, I know her,” Steve said, putting himself between Carl and Rachel.

“Oh I was just telling her she hit my car,” Carl said.

Steve looked behind Rachel’s Escort at Carl’s Lesabre. The bumper was bent and the left headlight was smashed, and that was Rachel’s fault. Coolant and motor oil dripped out of the engine block onto the stained pavement below – *that* was.

“I’ll give you Fifty bucks to fix it,” Steve said.

“Well alright, that’s fair,” Carl said, and the mob dribbled out and away with a slowness to match the swiftness with which it had formed. Steve pulled his wallet from his back pocket and counted out fifty dollars in tens and fives. He handed it over to Carl, who nodded and said, “this about ought to cover it,” and then went back to his own house.

Rachel had pulled her face out of her hands, and was sitting in her car staring a thousand miles ahead until Steve opened the door.

“You okay?” he asked her.

“I feel terrible,” she said, “they scared me.”

They didn’t date for long after that.

Rachel drove in silence while Maria watched the white lines go by on I-94. The freeway was busy, and Rachel was stymied from her usual weaving in and out of traffic. Their slow pace made her more and more irritable. Maria’s good high buzz was slipping and sliding down into the cesspool dregs of drunken fatigue.

“I don’t know why Thomas didn’t come out. I just can’t understand why, what, you know, had happened,” she slurred.

“I don’t know why you’re bothering with him now,” Rachel said. “Him and Baxter fucking deserve each other. We don’t need them.”

Maria, with the liquid acuity of the uninhibited, said, “it’s not just about you, Rachel – it’s not just about who’s convenient.”

“I didn’t say it was!” Rachel whined.

“Yeah but, it’s just not. I’m not you and I like Thomas,” Maria said.

“Whatever, you’re drunk,” Rachel said.

Maria pulled her cell phone out and saw that she hadn’t missed any calls.

At home, Maria was well on her way to unwelcome sobriety. She had the metabolism of a mouse, and she’d gone from wobbly, staggering, happy-headed drunk to stumbling, mushy, grog-and-fog in the span of forty-five minutes. She fumbled her keys in the lock of her front door and made her way into the house. It was pitch dark inside, no lights on.

“Brittney,” she yelled, but there’s no answer.

She turned the kitchen light on. *Same old kitchen*, she thought. There was a liquor bottle sitting on the kitchen table, and two glasses half-full. Crème de Cacao. Maria thought about her head, her heart, her impending hangover, and then took a swig from the bottle. It wasn’t half bad –sticky sweet and the alcohol burned a little, but she didn’t care. She fetched a rocks glass from the cupboard above the sink, dropped three ice cubs in it, and headed back to the bottle.

This is dumb, she thought, and put the bottle back in the liquor cabinet. Next to the empty spot was a bottle of Christian Brother’s brandy, and she poured that into her glass. She drank it down before the ice cooled it, and poured herself another.

That's better, she thought, and tottered back out to the living room. She sat on the couch and clicked on the television. It was still early, much too early for her to be home on a Friday night. It had been a long time since she sat alone on the couch just watching television instead of going out. There was a rerun of Seinfeld on, and she watched it while and nursed her Brandy. She had seen it before, but it was good for a chuckle. The episode ended, and Maria refilled her glass during the commercial break.

This place is trashed, Maria thought as she returned to the living room. Now by the light of the television she could see that it was a mess. There were two baskets of laundry here that Brittney should have folded and put away, and there were a few pieces of clothing just strewn about on the floor and the couch, as if the younger sister had started to take an interest in actually doing her chores, but abandoned it halfway through and tossed her completed work about in disdain. Maria shrugged and sat back down. She flipped through the channels – MTV, VH1, CMT, Sci-fi, Comedy Central, History, Discovery, TNT, CNN, on down the list until she saw that *big* was playing on WDIV. She watched with little interest.

Maybe he couldn't get a ride, Maria thought, *but he could have called me. Oh, I rode with Rachel. Could have gone with us I guess but it would have been weird driving back. I wonder if Thomas knew about Baxter? I doubt it, if everything he said is true. Why wouldn't it be? Why was he so late getting back? How long was he at that girls party?*

Well whatever. He got high, and Haas probably sidetracked himself talking to whoever they went to see. Haas – that guys crazy! He's awesome though. I wonder if

he'll hook up with Rachel now. That would be fine, since he and Baxter don't know each other very well.

That's another thing – the party. I wonder if Rachel's going to go since Baxter is spinning. She's got a whole week to figure it out. I'm going, that's for sure. I wonder if Thomas will have anything by then. Haas might. He moves quick. Tony Gino is probably still holding, and so is Sally.

This place is fucking trashed.

She got up off the couch, tossed down the remote, and clicked the light on overhead. It took two tries because her hands didn't seem to be where she thought they should. She took the two laundry baskets and stacked one on top of the other in the corner, then threw all the loose clothes into a pile in the middle of the floor. She straightened the couch cushions and pushed her sister's Super Nintendo into the entertainment center where it belonged. She tried to wrap the cords around their respective controllers, but the spinning of her hands made her dizzy, so she stopped.

She picked the heap of discarded clothes up off the floor and started to fold them. Brittney's jeans, Brittney's shirt, Brittney's bra, Brittney's socks, and a boy's T-shirt. Brittney's shoes were by the door. So were another pair, larger – chunky white running shoes with black laces and red-and-gray trim. A loud thumping sound came from behind the wall.

Maria snuck up on Brittney's door. She heard the thumping sound again, and again, and again. She opened the door and a blonde wedge of light from the hallway behind her partitioned the room into uneven halves. In the light she saw a boy's back, smooth and hairless, with her little sister's hands on it.

Brittney shrieked, and the boy reluctantly rolled off of her, propping himself up on one elbow and taking the blankets with him. Brittney scrambled to cover herself, making due with her left arm across her chest and a tiny corner of sheet pulled across her waist.

“Close the fucking *door*,” Brittney whined to Maria, who stood in the doorway making a slack cavern with her mouth, here eyes bleary and unfocused, and as wide as the sky.

Maria understood that she was not in control of the situation, and so she shut the door and went into the kitchen to pour herself another brandy. She drank most of it, and stomped back to Brittney’s room. She met a boy coming out.

“Justin...Justin *Cicheki*?” she asked him.

“Yeah, hi – I’m gonna go,” he said as he breezed past her, his white socks blinking under his wrinkled pant legs.

“That was Justin Cicheki,” Maria gasped at Brittney, who had dressed herself in a pink sweatsuit.

“So?” Brittney asked.

“So he is in *high school*!”

“I’m in high school,” Brittney said. She had been sitting on the bed cross-legged, but now straightened out so that her feet dangled just over the floor. She was leaning forward, and when she talked her head bobbed left and right like a prizefighter.

“You’re a *freshmen* in high school and he is a senior – he was in high school when I was there – he’s got to be, what, eighteen?” Maria fumed.

“I guess” Brittney said. She tried to shrug, but it was lost under her fight face.

“You’re fourteen, he’s eighteen. That’s *rape!*” Maria said.

“Whatever, it is not” Brittney said, and lay down on her bed with her hands folded behind her head. She looked like a little pink kitten on a carpet of red calico sheets.

“I’m calling the police,” Maria said.

“No you’re not,” Brittney said with authority.

Maria shuffled into the room and sat down at the foot of Brittney’s bed.

“I told you not to have anyone over,” Maria slurred.

“I can take care of myself – you even said so!”

“I’m going to tell Mom.”

“No you’re not, because it’s none of your business.”

“It is too my business. It’s my business because you’re my sister. It is too my business,” Maria said, her voice cresting up to a yell as if to drown out her obvious repetitions.

“Okay, we’ll I’ll just tell mom that you’re a fucking druggie.”

“You don’t know anything about anything,” Maria said, quietly.

“Okay, like your room’s not right above mine and I don’t hear everything you do up there – ‘Oh Thomas, harder Thomas, harder, oh, are you holding anything? Me and Rachel are gonna go to Boogie Fever and I need to PLUR’,” Brittney sneered.

“Shut up, Brittney,” Maria said.

“*You* shut up, and stay out of my business!” Brittney shrieked.

Maria slowly got up from the bed, and with plodding and unsteady steps went upstairs to her room and fell into bed, where she was very, very quiet.

Chapter 19.

Jenna woke with a start, pants around ankles, a wad of toilet tissue in hand. Her head felt heavy and thick. Her vision wouldn't stay focused and she felt like throwing up. She swallowed hard and squeezed her eyes shut, then re-opened them.

Okay, she thought, okay, I just passed out for a second. I'm fine. I'm totally fine. She looked at the toilet paper in her hand and sighed. She put herself together and stood up. She examined herself in the mirror – Tight blue T-shirt with the words “Fresh Jive” in cursive across the front, a few beaded necklaces borrowed from Rachel, hair pulled back into a ponytail – no marks, no bumps. She tested out her voice.

“Hello, where am I?” she said, and she didn't know.

She tried to put the night back together. Beads and T-shirt from Rachel. Run-down bathroom. Detroit. Party. Not a party, a club night. The whole clique was so very particular about that – something like tonight was not a rave, it was a night at the club. This was legal and above ground.

So a club night in Detroit. Darryl. Darryl was good to remember. Darryl was showing her how to dance. Her calves and feet hurt, that made sense. She'd had something to drink.

Oh god, was I mickey'd? she thought. She paid attention to her body – no, no one had touched her, no one had taken any liberties. She was just very, very drunk and starting to come out of it. That was a pleasant surprise. She couldn't remember the name of the club. That wasn't so nice.

She'd danced and danced and danced. Darryl showed her moves that she tried in vain to copy, but she'd mostly kept doing that repetitive Chicago hop. The throbbing in her legs seemed to have the same skipping rhythm as the dance, and the impulse to move her legs was strong. She still couldn't remember the name of the club. She couldn't remember the street.

It was quiet in the bathroom. She looked herself over, made sure her zipper was up, and left. It was quiet in the main room too. All the lights were on, and the place looked dirty and poor in the brightness, but there was no one there. Darryl, Baxter, Maria, Rachel – everyone, gone.

She felt sick in the bottom of her chest, and felt sicker the more she remembered.

Rachel and Maria had left. She went back inside and had a drink, then had another, and another. Darryl was dancing, and she danced with him. People were nice to her. Baxter seemed evasive, but his friend Megan was sweet. They'd talked, but Jenna couldn't remember what she said. People had been nice to her – they bought her drinks, danced with her, talked to her, and the more she drank the friendlier she got. The friendlier she got, the more they drank.

She was going to get a ride with Darryl. Why hadn't she? Because the more she drank, the friendlier people were, and so on. She'd lost her mind before she could even ask for a ride. She'd said goodbye to Darryl by the door, lit under blue neon lights. What had she done that for? She needed him to give her a ride!

"I have to ask you for something," she'd said, but he didn't hear, and so she put her thumb over his ear, but instead of talking she kissed him, and he kissed her back and they started making out off to the side of the dance floor until she forgot to ask for a ride.

Darryl left. Baxter spun records with his friends. Jenna danced, and some of the stragglers and bored partiers around the side danced with her, and bought her drinks. They'd been too free with their hands, but nothing a girl at a club doesn't expect, nothing that couldn't be *oopsed* or *sorried* away.

“Hello?” she said, and there was no answer. She tried again – still nothing.

She stopped and listened. There were voices from the front room, on the other side of the club. She walked towards them, and heard the high-pitched ambient whine of a television above them. She began to hyperventilate, and cupped her hands over her mouth and nose to slow her breathing. The lights were bright and bluish white, like the overhead fluorescent bulbs at a public school.

Think, Jenna, think she thought, but not much else. She crossed the room, her hands shaking and knees wobbly, and tried the door. It didn't give when she pushed against it, padlocked shut from the inside.

“Hello!” she screamed at the top of her lungs, and this time she heard a muffled cry of surprise from behind the bar.

The high yellow bartender straightened himself up and looked at Jenna.

“What you doin' here?” he asked her.

“I fell asleep in the bathroom,” she explained.

“I'll let you out,” he said.

“I don't have a car!” Jenna exclaimed out loud to herself, and said “sir, can you give me a ride to Auburn Hills?”

The bartender squinted at her and said “I ain't got a car – you can use the phone if you like.”

She didn't hear the second half of what he said because she burst out of the door and onto the bare street. There were no cars, but the pavement twinkled under the streetlights just like it did before. She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket, dropped it, stooped over to pick it up, kicked it as she tried, took a few hasty steps forward and managed to retrieve it, wet and slushy, from the ground.

It was a warm night for Detroit in January, which is to say it was above freezing, but not by much. The weather had been softening, becoming unseasonably warm at times, but Michigan has a vicious, wet climate that can change from hot to cold, wet to dry, and light to dark in the span of minutes. That night, the wind blew in short and powerful gusts down Michigan Avenue, each puff strong enough to whip through warm clothes and chill a person down to the bone before ceasing as suddenly as it came on. There was no sense to it.

Jenna, wiped the water off the LCD of her phone and thought of a number to call. She was in Detroit, afraid, alone, and lost. It seemed like an emergency. She dialed 9-1-1.

"9-1-1 emergency," said the operator.

"Hello?" Jenna moaned, her voice beginning to break, fearful sobs welling up in her chest.

"Please state the nature of your emergency ma'am," the operator said with a strong voice that held the patience of a penitent.

"I'm lost," Jenna said, sounding young and weak.

"Ma'am, what's the emergency?" the operator asked.

The operator was a forty-five year old black woman named Caroline Simpson. She was five foot four and had an unexciting build that she only ever described as normal

– neither thick nor thin, fit nor fat, flat nor curvaceous. She kept her hair short and natural. She wore small, silver-wire framed glasses that she pushed up her nose as she talked to Jenna.

“I’m in Detroit, and I’m lost,” Jenna said, slurring the words together thickly.

“Ma’am, where are you?” Caroline asked.

“I’m fucking *lost!*” Jenna shrieked.

Caroline sighed and rolled her eyes heavenward. She talked Jenna through finding a street sign, finding out she had no car, and figuring out where she lived. Jenna insisted on telling her whole story, piecemeal, and in no particular order – Darryl, breakfast at Antonio’s, the difference between a rave and a night at the club, and so on. All the while Caroline held on the line, listened patiently, and dispatched a patrol cruiser.

“I want my daddy!” Jenna bawled.

“Jenna, help is coming,” Caroline said in her martyr’s voice, which was sure and steady but offered little succor.

“Tell my daddy to come and get me.”

“Stay on the line with me, Jenna, a police cruiser will be right with you,” Caroline said.

Jenna cried and sobbed, and spoke in incoherent little spurts for another ten minutes, all the while Caroline stayed on the line and murmured reassuringly and cooed sympathetically, and when the police cruiser turned up to escort Jenna home, she listened well-pleased with herself as Jenna thanked and thanked and thanked her.

That's my good deed for the day, Caroline thought, and it was the end of the matter for her. She went about her business, fielding calls from the recently mugged, burned, assaulted, robbed, and raped.

Baxter had gone home alone – just the way the rides worked out at the end of the night. Megan had driven Finesse back to Novi, and Rachel was gone, gone for good as far as he knew or cared. He was above her. For a while, she was the hottest girl in his price range. She was still fine, but it was tiring to love to her. Same old thing, no variety and very little reward – a half step above the old missionary-with-the-lights-out.

Baxter could not love someone like that - someone who despite their confessions and late-night heart-to-hearts didn't seem interested. She could baby talk and sweetie-this and baby-that all day, but it all sounded chirpy and lame to him. She could switch the topic of conversation from how much she loved him to how much she loved her new shoes in the span of a sentence.

He'd never thought that much about it. Just like Megan was to Rachel, Rachel was an upgrade to the girl before her, a jungle raver from Redford named Monica, whose face he couldn't even remember now when he tried. She had been a rebound from Cassandra.

Cassandra – *there was a girl*, he thought. Red hair in ringlet curls, round hips, tits a little on the small side, but shapely and firm. She wasn't one for conversation, which was fine with Baxter. She talked, but didn't expect anyone to listen, and when Baxter talked, her hazel eyes sparkled and responded to every word. Baxter liked that about her very much, as opposed to Rachel and her pop-quizzes. *Let's take Ryan*, she might say,

and Baxter would ask *Ryan who*, and get an earful of *Ryan from Walled Lake! I was just talking about him ten minutes ago and...*

He used to think Cassandra was perfect. Too perfect. The sex was too hot, too fraught with dirty talk and exotic positions. She was too uninvolved in his life – this she had in common with Rachel. He would have always been a supplement or accessory to her life, and not the essence. She broke it off with him after only three weeks. He was hurt, but not surprised.

She disappeared, and then reappeared later on Thomas' arm. Baxter wasn't jealous – he was too busy thinking about how to get with her again. He figured that she was just fooling around with his friend, and he was right, but he couldn't understand why she didn't just want to fool around with him too. Thomas didn't have anything that Baxter didn't. Less, even – he was gangly and thin, awkward, moody, and his family was poor.

“You have a girlfriend now,” Cassandra explained, as chastely as a mother getting her child ready for his first day at school.

Baxter didn't see how it mattered, but it mattered to her, and she wouldn't sleep with him over it. He told Cassandra that Monica meant nothing, and she told him that that only made it worse. He saw her a few more times with Thomas, at parties, and that was it. She left them all.

He avenged himself. He cheated on Monica with Rachel, then dropped Monica altogether. He'd heard Monica was pretty broken up over it. He didn't see her anymore, but people came and went all the time. They found people they liked and avoided people they didn't, went to certain venues over others, and sometimes just quit.

You could break the scene down statistically. The bottom 10 percent stepped one foot into the door of a club or rave, turned around and never thought about it again. The twenty percent above them gave it a fair try, stayed for a night, maybe did it twice, and backed out scratching their heads, missing the big deal, or screaming and ranting that their car had been stolen, or that they'd been mugged, and fuck Detroit forever. The broadest swathe of the bell curve were the part-timers, college kids home for the summer or high school kids on vacation and trying on a new identity, or those just graduated and only starting to step into the real world, not yet ready to settle down into adulthood. They'd stay in for three months, six, a year, and then quit. "I don't party anymore," they'd say, and they'd jealously horde their stories of that one fantastic summer or that one crazy year, and spend them when they needed to prove something, that they could have fun, that they had soul, that they could survive Detroit.

It got more hardcore after that. There were kids who stayed in for years and years, who made it a real lifestyle, who had been there from the beginning, or who came in and adapted so fast that they left their old lives and friends behind. These people would usually bring in a handful of old friends or acquaintances every few months, people that fell out in the bottom ten or twenty percent. Baxter never knew why they bothered – you got it or you didn't, and there was no point trying to prove it to anyone. This group had good dancers, some real partiers, a few DJ's, but they all held day jobs and the scene was nothing more for them than recreation – consumptive and dangerous recreation, but recreation nonetheless.

Then you had your top ten percent, the people that lived and breathed it. To Baxter they were the most diverse group, but he conceded that it may only have seemed

that way to him because it was to this group that he belonged. Every weekend they came out. They snorted coke or meth to stay awake. They were beyond the kiddy fun drugs like Ecstasy or Ketamine. *Raver shit*, they called it, even if they still popped or snorted it on occasion. It was ironic when they did it, even if they broke out the candy and glow sticks. It could get bad – you could burn out, become a cokehead, fry your brain. It happened, but not much anymore. If you were going to develop a drug problem, it usually happened early. None of them had problems – they all had it well in hand.

They would age, he knew. That *forever young* shit was for ravers eight years ago. This was hardcore. Rave was dead and rotting, no matter how many parties Haas threw, there was no bringing it back. Fuck the Dr. Seuss hats, the phat pants, the UFO's, Fresh Jive, Candy, Smart Drinks, Glowsticks, E-tards, Trance – that shit was all garbage. You couldn't *give* it away now. It was back underground, so far underground that soon nobody else would know, and the bottom seventy percent would go off to rock shows or reality TV, whatever the hell they wanted to get themselves into, and they could leave the scene to the best of them.

He could spin records for people that appreciated the music beyond its capacity to vibrate an E-tard. Megan could produce him. Tony Gino could finance him, even if he wasn't hardcore himself. Rachel, Monica – they were passing fancies. Megan Isom was showing him the future. She would produce him, and he would spin, and Thomas would dance. It would be better than the old days – more pure.

It was 3:00. Baxter thought Thomas might be up, and he hadn't talked to him in days, not since Thomas' car was stolen and they'd blown the run. He picked up his phone.

“How you doing?” Baxter asked.

“Been better,” Thomas said.

“Feel like hanging out?”

“No car,” Thomas said, and Baxter thought he heard a small break in Thomas’ voice.

“Oh, yeah...I couldn’t get up there until late.”

“Right,” Thomas said.

“Well hey, let’s go out this week, hang out, or whatever.”

“Sounds good,” Thomas murmured in a way that told Baxter it didn’t.

“You sleeping?” Baxter asked with a little surprise.

“No just laying around. I gotta go,” Thomas said.

They traded goodbyes, and hung up their phones.

Baxter shrugged his shoulders. If Thomas was having a rough week, that was bad, but there was no need for Thomas to take it out on him. He turned on his computer and checked his email, and the message boards.

Rachel posted to her LiveJournal:

Fukking ASSHOLE Baxter has ben cheating on me for I dont no however long. Im upset and angry and really really PISSED OFF! I dont know if any of you knew about this but U R NOT my friends. Starting today, I’m going threw my friens list and cleaning house because I M SICK of being LIED TOO!

Mood: ANGGGGRRRYYYY!!!

She copy / pasted the post over to the forums on D-Luv, 313 Kids, and anywhere else she thought it would be read. The replies came back:

- *OMG I M SOOOoooo sorreee! [{{{MEGA HUGZ}}}] I hOPE YOU R O K
CALL ME If U need mE!*
- *LOL dongs 8==D*
- *STFU KTHX nobody cares raver*
- *Hey, if you need to talk just call me okay? Because we are friends and you can talk to me.*

She surfed through news sites, shopping sites, a few other odds and ends. It was too late to try to salvage this night, and she had no intention of doing so. Maria, she thought, would be asleep. Jenna had stayed behind, and as far as she knew her other friends were lying, superficial bitches and assholes unworthy of her time and consideration.

She returned to the message boards and read another batch of replies. A choppy stream of condolence, ridicule, offers to talk, and massive signature files filled the forum thread, but one in particular caught her eye. It was Tony Gino posting under his “ThatOneGinoYouKnow” alias.

I saw it coming and I didn't say anything, and I'm sorry – I'll understand if you don't want to talk to me, and I don't have a good reason for what I did, but I'm sorry.

To which Rachel replied:

Its SOO not yr fault T – Id like 2 know what you saw but its not your fault and Im not mad at you.

Tony's reply came back within minutes.

We were all out at Bucketheads and I saw them kind of flirting so me and ND pulled up chairs and I thought maybe that was it, like maybe nothing was going to happen, like we'd killed the mood, but I know better now.

Rachel wrote back:

T U R so sweet and I rilly appreciate it. That wasnt your fault at all, and thanks for trying. Its not your fault that Baxter is a asshole.

And Tony wrote:

NP Rachel, just let me know if you need me. I'm working all week but I'm free nights and lunch. Let's meet up this weekend. Are you going to Haas' party? Know where it is?

To which Rachel answered:

Prolly not, but Ill let u know sweetieeee. Ill call U tomorrow. IDK where its at but call around or itl be on here <3 <3 <3.

Which was followed by a post from "SoopahJugalOH" which read:

Damn hoe gets a room slut!

SoopahJugalOH was Baxter's antagonistic and anonymous ID, the one he used for trolling and flamewars, and he posted because it was fun and thoughtless to tease. From his computer across town, he saw Tony's comments for what they were, and he laughed the whole game off as none of his business, as something he was above and beyond. Tony Gino – always sniffing around behind what the younger, cooler kids were doing, letting them go first with drugs, clubs, and girls, playing it safe and walking on well-trod ground.

Baxter read the gushing back-and-forth between Tony and Rachel and rolled his eyes, but he wasn't the only one reading the message boards.

Chapter 20.

Twelve hours later and just over two hundred and fifty miles away, Eddie McAffrey burned his lips on a cigarette butt, cursed, and threw it onto the carpet of Jenny Tarmik's trailer. She sat on her couch with Justin McAffrey, watching Eddie carefully. He'd gone nuts, she was sure.

He wore half a week's worth of beard and had big sweat stains under the arms of his duty blues, salty white rings up to mid-shoulder that attested to a prodigious amount of perspiration for the dead of winter. He stank of stale cigarette smoke, body odor, and secreted booze. Other than lighting cigarettes and drinking slugs of liquor, he didn't move much. He just sat as wide-eyed and tense as a long-tailed cat underneath a rocking-chair.

Eddie stamped the cigarette out into the carpet with his toe. It smoldered for a while, and there was a burnt plastic stink.

"So no one is fit to help us out?" Eddie asked brother

"I can't think of no one," Justin said.

Eddie snorted loudly. "There's a goddamn surprise – you can't think," he growled.

"Ronny and Crystal skipped out to Chicago," Jenny said, "Brad's gone away somewhere, Sam's out to -"

"I don't give a god-damn!" Eddie said, raising his voice up in a practiced projection of command, the same tone of voice he used to bully and question the people

he'd arrested when he was a cop, the same tone of voice Detective Cronander had used on him in the office last week.

“There are some significant discrepancies,” Cronander had said, bracing a manila file folder against his rounding paunch and leaning back in his green padded chair, his knees banging slowly against the steel desk. Cronander was getting fat and old, but Eddie knew there were some people that you did not run your mouth to no matter how old and out of shape they got. Cronander was one of them. He had a permanent five o'clock shadow and a bristly mustache. His hair was a grown-out crew cut, dark brown and turning gray. His name was Swedish, but any Nordic paleness had been bred completely out of his family over the last hundred years.

The Cronanders had deep roots in four pines. A Cronander had helped found the place. There had been two Cronander mayors - by comparison, the detective was an under-achiever. He gave a speech once at White Pigeon Police Academy when Eddie was a cadet – a speech he gave annually. He talked about civic pride, about the etymology of Policeman as a *polis*-man, a man of the city. He loved Four Pines. He'd grown up here. He served diligently and faithfully.

He'd also killed at least six men that Eddie knew of. Six men on the record – how many off? A man like Cronander, Eddie thought, took himself too seriously. Took his job too seriously, believed too much in civic pride and the merits of the small town. Mike Cronander had been to Detroit, Chicago, New York – he'd seen a fair portion of the Northeast. He'd been invited to work in much bigger departments like South Bend and Grand Rapids, and he'd been invited to work in safer departments in sleepy clean suburbs

near Detroit where he'd never have to do anything grittier than tell some sweat-suited yoga-mom to pick her dog shit up off the sidewalk.

He stayed in Four Pines. Force of habit? Maybe. Duty? Maybe. He didn't have any children, but he had one adopted son – Brad Bauer. Cronander had killed his father. The police reports said the boy's father had gone off the deep end, killed his wife and her lover, and then charged the cops with a shotgun. They pulled twenty-eight slugs out of the guy; one of them belonged to Mike Cronander.

They'd been friends for thirty five years. That was the punchline. Mike Cronander knew a man for his entire life, shot him dead, then raised up the man's son as his own.

Well the joke was on Mike Cronander there – Brad Bauer was a drop-out burn-out penny-ante thug. Jenny said he'd gone away somewhere. Who knew? He was distant, troubled, unreliable and twitchy. He wasn't a friend to Eddie, but Eddie knew what Brad was all about, and it hovered there like ammunition to throw into Cronander's face.

Fuck you, super-cop, your kids a dirtbag.

But what would that mean to Cronander? Nothing. Less than nothing. Brad Bauer was a grown man, and Eddie wondered if the detective could shoot his own son if the time came.

Eddie swallowed hard.

“Well, I admit I'm not the best with reports,” he said.

Mike Cronander managed to give Eddie a condescending smile while completely avoiding the smile part.

“This is a little more significant than writing 2001 in 2002,” he said.

“Well, I mean, you’ve got my records so, you know,” Eddie said, trailing off as Mike Cronander stared through him.

“Yeah, we’re reviewing those now. Tapes too,” Cronander said, putting the file folder down and leaning across his desk.

“It happens now and then,” Cronander said in a gruff and confidential half-whisper, “you have a malfunction or an electrical problem right before you pull over a car with Detroit plates, right? Or a car full of *vatos* with the fancy neon lights under their cars, or maybe some ex-girlfriend who’s doing three over, right?”

Eddie nodded sympathetically. Cronander frowned.

“Sure, everyone does it,” Cronander said, projecting his voice into a commanding range that sounded loud without actually increasing more than a decibel or two, “or so they say. Then whatever happens is between you and them, and they’re not cops now are they? Your word against theirs, and you’re a trusted pillar of the community. A guy shows up to the courthouse with swollen eyes and busted lips, a couple of wiggly teeth – he just fell down the stairs, right? Ran away through the woods and ran into a tree.”

Cronander lowered his voice back to a normal speaking range, and looked up into the ceiling tiles as he spoke. He said, “It happens. We can’t do much about it, and sometimes – sometimes, it does the community good. There’s folks you just don’t want coming around your neighborhood. Folks that are there for trouble, folks that don’t belong.”

“I remember going on over to Detroit back in –ninety three? Ninety four? I drove up I-75 and there on the Detroit border was a billboard of a bunch of police beating a man outside his car and it said *In Sterling Heights you have no rights*. Do you know

Sterling Heights? Ever been there? It's pretty dull. Some shopping centers, a Chrysler plant, that's about it. That and one of the lowest crime rates in the state because their police will not hesitate to pull you over and beat you senseless if they get a bad feeling about you."

"I was just a little proud of that sign. I didn't make it, of course, but I knew just what they meant. It was the ins and outs – the outs protesting the ins for keeping them out, do you see what I mean?"

Eddie nodded weakly. "I think so," he said.

"I'm pretty sure you don't," Cronander said, "because that would mean you understood something about ins and outs, and the impossibility of sitting in between. Take your shithead brother for example – he's an outsider. A real loser. We've looked the other way on him for a while now. No, no, don't get all excited. You can't tell me anything that's going to contradict his file. Breaking and entering, petty larceny, CSC 2 – twice, but that was before the registry act, of course. He really cleaned up when you came on the force, huh?"

Eddie sat silent.

"And isn't that the bitch? You weren't even covering for him, were you? You just thought he was lucky, but he's an idiot. An idiot who runs his mouth, deals dope in public, and does a lot of nickel and dime shit. We just watch him, you know – we just watch who he talks to, who he buys from, who he sells to. He's an asset to this city, in his own way. He leads us right to a lot of people that would make trouble for us – people we don't want coming around."

"You're free to go," Cronander said.

Eddie sat up like his seat was hot, turned around and made for the door.

“You should leave your hardware with Michelle up front,” Cronander said, and when Eddie turned around he saw that the detective wasn’t even looking at him, but was already poring over the contents of the manila file folder.

In the trailer, Eddie reached for the ashtray at his feet. Full to overflowing and made of heavy glass. He threw it at Justin and sent ash and butts flying everywhere. The ashtray hit Justin squarely, but he had raised his arms to defend himself and so the thing just dropped to the floor after making a little bruise.

“He had a lot to say about *you*,” Eddie said to Justin. When no one spoke, he went on. “He said they’ve been watching you like hawks, but you wouldn’t have noticed that, would you?”

“I’m sorry,” Justin said.

“Fuck your sorry.”

Eddie lit up another cigarette and coughed wetly.

“You find where they live?”

Justin shook his head and said, “I know Haas lives in Troy. The other guy lives in Warren.”

“That’s all you got? The cities?”

“I gave you that number – you get anything?” Justin asked hopefully.

Eddie shook his head and said, “trap phone – paid for in cash by the month, so that’s worthless.”

“Well, the knowing the cities is a start,” Justin said.

“Well fuck, maybe we’ll just go door to door looking for them,” Eddie sneered.

“But I know where they’re gonna be this Saturday,” Justin said.

“Where?”

“Well, I don’t know for sure yet. Haas is having a big party – it’s all up on the internet. We call the info line and we get ‘em both. We get the stuff back, and with the money we already have, we’ll do okay.”

Eddie thought for a moment and said, “You know, that’s not the dumbest thing that ever came out of your mouth.”

Chapter 21.

On Monday, Roy struggled to focus as he sat at his desk. There were no orders to fill, no production quotas to be met. He was well into his fourth week of not doing anything. He was getting very good at Minesweeper.

Before he came in, he'd asked Jenna if she'd called her aunt Melinda. Jenna said she had, but when Roy asked her what Melinda said, Jenna lied about it.

“Oh, nothing really, just, she was busy, so she said to call her back tomorrow,” she'd said, which Roy knew meant that Jenna hadn't called.

He decided he would give her another day before he bothered her about it again, and that was fine.

What wasn't fine was the vacant, confused look in her eyes. He'd seen it only a few times before – when Roy and his wife divorced, and then when Jenna dropped out of college. It was her natural response to trouble.

When something bad happened to her, she was always reluctant to face it but at the same time she wished to master it, to give it meaning and context in her life. Roy had asked her what was wrong, and she replied that she was just tired. That was another of her tells – if something was really wrong she would say she was just tired. She would come around and tell him what was wrong eventually. She always did. She'd figure it out, rationalize it or get some perspective on it, and she'd come around.

But in the meantime, he worried. She would come around, but she would fret and worry and suffer in the meantime, and it never pleased him to see his little girl so upset. It wouldn't do any good to push the issue – she would just look up at her with that remote

and vacuous stare and repeat that she was tired, and then excuse herself and go to her room, or go for a drive.

Then there was the inactivity at work. There was a memo waiting for him when he arrived, announcing that Allied was going to a just-in-time delivery model. As inventory went out, it would not be immediately replaced, but rather would be allowed to approach near-zero levels, the rationale being that it was expensive to keep unused inventory on hand. Better to liquidate it and replace it as needed.

But no one was taking the old inventory. In terms of liquidity, Allied's material assets were like cold tar, and if the cost of just keeping excess material on hand was exorbitantly high, Roy could only imagine the cost of paying people to stand around doing nothing with that material. There would be layoffs, and soon. He knew GM was already scaling back operations. Ford and Chrysler would follow, and in their wake all of Detroit risked drowning. It was a terrible thought – but he'd been around in '81. They'd weathered that. They would weather this.

Bill Heller, stomping loudly, entered the office and approached Roy's cubicle.

"Heard anything from upstairs yet?" Bill asked, like he did every night, sometimes twice.

Roy could not control the hard setting of his jaw, the crossness that comes across his face as he said, "No, I'll let you know."

Bill didn't consciously notice Roy's irritation. He was much too focused on his own predicament – he was living hand to mouth, and he could not afford to lose his only worthwhile asset: his home. He did not want to hear that Roy was still sitting down in the office, playing minesweeper and completely ignorant of Bills' fate. On the other hand, he

could not risk losing his temper and yelling at Roy, or alienating him in any way. They were friends, and a friend like Roy could be very helpful. At least he had convinced himself that they were friends. Roy had been to his house and drunken scotch in his safe room – that was official enough for him.

“You catch Dave and Devan this morning?” Bill asked.

“I was sleeping,” Roy said.

“Sure, well, you missed a good one,” Bill said, and he clumsily reached for Roy’s mouse, never minding that Roy’s hand was still on it.

“Here, you gotta hear this,” he said as he opened Internet Explorer and waited for the corporate intranet site to finish loading – the same site that warned employees in bold letters under a picture of the corporate logo that the use of Allied Fabrication internet resources was for professional purposes only.

“Hold on, hold on – just a second – you’re gonna love this,” Bill said, leaning over Roy’s shoulder, making Roy cringe back and screw up his face.

“Bill, what...?” he begins to ask, but trails off. He wants to say *what are you doing, I’m trying to work here*, but that’s just too tall of a tale to tell, even to Bill. Bill wouldn’t even get that he was being brushed off.

Bill reached across Roy and began to type in a URL on the keyboard. If he was any closer to Roy he would have been sitting in his lap, but he didn’t seem to notice.

A new website appeared in the browser window. 95.7 – WRMN – The ROCKMAN it read, and there were pictures of DJ’s in front of studio microphones, local Detroit sports celebrities with those same DJ’s, and animated gifs of American flags with a JavaScript scroll underneath saying “WRMN SUPPORTS OUR TROOPS!!!”

Roy thought that it was strange the way radio DJ's never look the same as they sound. Then again, who did? A disembodied voice is such a strange thing, just vibrations in the air.

"You gotta hear this," Bill said, and with a few more clicks he left Roy's personal space and leaned back against the cubicle wall.

"So, Saturday night," came the voice of Devan of the Dave and Devan morning show, "Detroit 9-1-1 operators get a call...they get a call from a girl who is stranded in Detroit. This thing has been all over the internet today, and we've got it here."

"There was this girl who got stranded in Detroit," Bill said, repeating out-of-order everything that Devan said, ensuring that between the two speakers, Roy had almost no idea of what this audio sample contained.

"9-1-1 emergency," said the voice of Caroline Simpson.

"Wait, what is this?" Roy asked.

"Here, pause it," Bill said, reaching close across Roy to push the pause button on the media player.

Bill explained again the contents of the recording.

"That sounds awful," Roy said. He'd never been the type to go in for the humor of cruelty. He didn't like mean comedians. He didn't like shows or movies where a joke hinged on physical injury or humiliation. Even *America's Funniest Home Videos* with its endlessly repetitive man-gets-hit-in-the-crotch punch lines offended some sensibility in him. He didn't like the cruel mockery of morning show DJ's, the smarmy self-righteousness, the ignorant Joe-Blowmanship, the vulgarity. He was no prude, but he'd heard too many morning drive-time shows that crossed so far beyond any standard of

decency that they might well be considered rapacious. He was sure that this recording would be no different, and he wasn't surprised at all to learn that Bill was an AM Drive-time radio fan, Howard Stern, Opie and Anthony, all that sort of trash seemed right up Bill's trashy alley.

"I'm in Detroit, and I'm lost," Jenna's recorded voice said through the PC speakers.

"Ma'am, where are you?"

"I'm fucking *lost!*"

"So this poor girl is stranded in Detroit," Bill said, "and then they...then..."

He trailed off – Roy wasn't laughing.

Roy jacked himself slowly out of his chair and then breezed past Bill.

"What's wrong?" Bill asked with a maudlin and sycophantic look of apology across his face, but the words only reached the back of Roy's head.

Deejay Deelight was a small store, and Thomas was having a hard time hiding out from Neil. His work was done, and he paced himself so that everything else he had to do would take the rest of the day. Unfortunately, he had a stomach full of diet pills and coffee which told him to do just the opposite – to work fast and finish early, to hurry up and to go nowhere.

He had hidden out in the bathroom twice, pretending to need a long break to relieve himself. Three times that day he ducked low behind the wobbly steel shelves of the back room to hide behind the boxes of waiting inventory when Neil came looking for him.

It was a slow day. The store opened at eleven A.M. and by four, only six lookers and three customers had come in. The lookers came in, pawed through the boxes of records and asked ignorant questions or made lame conversation about the equipment – *Are these Sondeks as good as Technics? Do you think these needles would be good to carry around – like just in case? You know, like if I'm out and someone asks me to spin, that way I can just pull my needles out and break it down? Because I think a DJ's needles are his real instrument and you should only play with needles you like.* The only worse people were the quiz masters. *So do you think the impedance rating on these Sony's is better than these RCA's?* a quizmaster might ask while holding up two nearly identical headphones, and Thomas would shrug and say *whatever works for you* or something equally dismissive. In turn, the quizmaster would frown and say *I thought you guys knew this sort of stuff* or God forbid if Thomas actually said *Yes* or *I think so* and get an earful of *Yeah, see – the manual says it isn't, but I wanted your opinion* heedless of the fact that an impedance rating isn't an opinion, but an electrical fact.

“What the fuck you ask me for?” Thomas said aloud in spite of himself as he dusted the *M-N* section of the record bins. He looked over his shoulder, but Neil wasn't there.

He hadn't recognized two of the three customers today. Some kid came in, looked at every single item in the store, and then bought a pair of plain black felt turntable covers. The other spent two hours reading the backs of LP covers before buying a copy of Mark Farina's *San Francisco Sessions*. The only person to come in with an idea of what he wanted was Finesse. Thomas knew him as one of the DBC kids, but hadn't spent any time with him. They recognized each other and said hello. Finesse bought a new CD

burner, explaining he was working on a new track and his old one had cooked itself. That was two hours ago.

Thomas went behind the register and started tallying up the two credit card receipts for the day.

“Hey, kind of slow – why don’t you take off?” Neil asked from behind him.

“Yeah, just staying on top of the credit cards,” Thomas said.

“Right, yeah, well, I can handle this.”

Thomas knew there was no point in arguing, so he grabbed his jacket from the office, dragged his feet to the time clock, and punched out.

“Hey T, listen up for a second,” Neil said, “this place isn’t doing so hot.”

Thomas, who had been halfway to the door, turned around wordlessly. He swallowed hard and waited for Neil to continue.

“Just a heads-up, you might want to see what else is out there,” Neil said, and then averted his eyes and busied his hands in the cash register drawer.

“Are you saying...?”

“No, I mean – not now. But corporate told me what’s up so I’m letting you know,” Neil said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Thomas croaked, then spun on his heels to leave.

Outside the air was dry and the weather had turned cold. The snow had stopped melting and re-solidified into a cold white crust. The sun and clouds fought to show from behind thick and pregnant clouds, but it was like the vain struggle of a drowning swimmer at sea. Thomas had his sister’s car for the day under the condition that he drive her to school and then pick her up. She had basketball practice, and so he wasn’t needed

until after seven. He started the car and waited for it to warm up. As he waited, he pulled a wad of bills out of his jacket pocket.

The money totaled just over eight hundred dollars, and it was all he had after emptying his checking account. Payday wasn't for another week, and it would be a slender check. With a sigh, he drove his car out of the DeeJay Deelight parking lot, drove north on Dequindre to 14 mile, turned left, merged onto I-75, and drove to Troy.

When he'd picked up Haas before, Haas had met him outside. He'd also pitched in for gas. Then again, Thomas had been expected those times. Today, he was just dropping in out of the blue because Haas hadn't answered his phone for two days.

He missed the house again, then pulled into the driveway and stood at the front door. There was a black rubber welcome mat, and the plastic doorknob button was set into a brass fleur-de-lis.

The door opened and Haas stood in the foyer, dressed in a traditional Thobe - what looked to Thomas like a woman's nightgown with bulky hook-and-loop closures.

"Thomas, how's it going?" Haas said as he held the screen door open.

"Same old," Thomas said inside the door. They stood close together just outside what Thomas guessed was the living room, although Haas was making a convincingly solid door of himself.

"You're wearing a...uh..."

"Thobe. We dress traditional in the house," Haas said crossly.

Thomas nodded.

"Is that your new car?" Haas asked.

"It's my sisters."

“How is she?”

“You ever meet her?”

“Have I? I don’t know – she the one with dark hair?”

“Can I come in?” Thomas asked.

Haas sucked in his breath, but stood aside.

“Shoes off on the carpet,” Haas said.

Thomas took his shoes off in the foyer and followed Haas into the living room.

The carpet was thick and very clean, a dark cream color tinted dark by the overcast winter light coming in through the windows. The furniture looked as if it had never been sat on – a couch wide enough for four but with only three seat cushions, two huge recliners, a mahogany coffee table, ceramic urns with potted ficus plants that stretched up to the ceiling. There were no pictures on the walls, but three ornate works of window-sized calligraphy had been framed and hung along with a hand of Fatima decoration. The hand of Fatima hung next to the doorway to the foyer. Two of the framed calligrams hung behind the couch, and another hung off to Thomas’ left. Thomas could not read them. Haas knew what they said only because he’d been told. From left to right the first proclaimed *My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and whose shall be the issue of the abode*, the second read, *When you are greeted with a greeting of peace, answer with an even better greeting, or at least with the like thereof*, and the last was simply Haas’ father’s signature stylized to resemble a date palm tree.

There were many round cushions spread around the room, and Haas took one of them and sat on it near the coffee table.

“You can sit on the couch if you want,” Haas said.

Thomas sat on the couch on the opposite side of the coffee table from Haas.

“How are you doing?” Thomas asked.

Haas shook his head. “I been better, you know?” He said.

“You replace your car yet?” Thomas asked.

“Insurance hasn’t settled – should be this week,” Haas said.

“What’s up with your boys?” Thomas asked.

A shadow crossed Haas’ face and he said, “I can’t do nothin’ for them – they’re sitting there in jail and they’re gonna stay there. Even if I had what I lost – bail is set at fifty grand a head.”

“Damn,” Thomas said.

“You know what you’re doing yet?” Haas asked.

Thomas shook his head. “That’s what I came over for – I been trying to call you. I dunno if something’s wrong with your phone but whatever. I’ve got 800 to work with, and I was thinking if you were still talking to anyone-“

“Bro,” Haas interrupted, “don’t be talking about that shit in my parent’s house!”

“I’m sorry, I know - but I could really use, I mean, this is *it*,” Thomas pleaded.

“I got nothing,” Haas said, leaning back casually on his cushion and propping himself up on his arms.

“Nothing? At all?”

“That ten grand was what I had to work with. I don’t get paid again for a while.”

“Well, I’ve got 8 bills here. Can’t we get started with that?”

“What are we gonna do with 800? That’s barely worth bothering with, bro,” Haas said.

“To you maybe – it’s all I’ve got.”

“What do you mean *to you maybe*?” Haas asked. He didn’t sound angry or offended – there was an edge of opportunity in his voice.

“Well I’m just saying, I mean, look at this place. I bet that couch cost 800 bucks alone.”

“That was a lot more than 800 bucks,” Haas sneered.

“Right, see? That’s all I’m saying,” Thomas said.

Haas frowned. “Alright, give it here. I got one or two guys I can call. It’s a maybe though.”

Thomas brightened immediately. “Haas, you won’t regret this man. Money in the bank,” he said.

Haas took the money when Thomas offered it.

“This is it, though,” Haas said, “I can’t be doing this shit no more.”

“That’s fine, I understand,” Thomas said, even though he hadn’t really listened to what Haas had just said, and didn’t understand at all. He only knew that his luck had flipped around in a snap.

“So, this weekend right?” Thomas said.

A shadow passed over Haas’ face. “Yeah, Saturday – all bought and paid for,” he said.

“Should be a good time.”

“I hope so,” Haas said with a shrug.

“Plus, you know, you’ll probably make some money off it, right?” Thomas asked.

“Not much though,” Haas said defensively.

“Sure, no, I mean – but you’re probably not going to *lose* money.”

Haas studied Thomas for a long time and shook his head. “Probably not, but who cares, right? It’s all about the party, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying, who cares about the money? What are you so worked up for? You’re not losing any. You didn’t pay up front for all this shit and then...nevermind. Fuck it. It’s just money, right?”

“You alright?” Thomas asked.

“Fine. Fuck it. I’m fine,” Haas said, and rose to his feet.

“So I’ll make some calls for you, and you’ll get some shit and you’ll be all set,” Haas said.

Thomas, taking the hint, stood up and put his shoes on at the door.

“Haas, man, I don’t want to be any trouble – I just thought-“

“It’s nothing, really, don’t even worry about it,” Haas said. He was crowding Thomas by the door, uncomfortably close.

“Look, this is a big deal. Don’t worry about it. Gimme the 800 back.”

“What, you think I’m going to take it? You said call some guys, so I’m calling some guys. That’s what you wanted. You called up Haas because you need something and now you’re gonna get it,” Haas said, closing up the last of the distance between him and Thomas.

“I’m the go-to guy,” Haas said, “I’m the guy you call when you need something so don’t come around saying you need something and then act like you don’t. Now get the fuck out of here. I’m gonna do this for you, and that’s fucking it.”

Thomas staggered back two steps and said, “Haas, come on – are we cool?”

Haas stood in the doorway again between the foyer and the living room. He held Thomas money in his right fist, which trembled as it squeezed the bills.

“Sure we cool bro,” Haas said, and suddenly smiled and relaxed, and said, “I’m just fucking with you, that’s it - I’ll see you at the party.”

“Okay,” Thomas said, and left without shaking hands. He walked quickly to his sister’s car, and looked over his shoulder twice.

Chapter 22.

On Wednesday, Roy caught up with Jenna. She ate an early breakfast of frosted flakes and buttered white toast as her father came home from work. She had looked up her Aunt Melinda's phone number and had every intention of calling her. Like Thomas, she was susceptible to certain kinds of shock, and the shock of being abandoned in Detroit had affected her comparably to Thomas' own circumstance - she wanted to work hard and be *good*.

She was dressed smartly – no baggy pants or oversized sweatshirt. She wore a burgundy cardigan over a gray turtleneck, and plain blue jeans. Her hair was pulled back into a plain ponytail, and she wore small stud earrings with amber stones. She leaned over her cereal intently and held one slice of toast in her free hand. A cup of coffee steamed on the table, and Roy thought to go to the pot and have a cup. It would help him stay sharp, he thought, and he was stalling.

“Hi,” he said- no sweetie, no pumpkin, just hi.

“Hi,” she replied just as simply.

“I haven't seen you in a few days,” Roy said.

“Yeah, just, you know, busy,” Jenna said.

“Well that's good – better that than bored.”

“Yeah,” she said, and when her father didn't say anything right away added, “I'm calling Aunt Melinda today.”

“I thought you were going to do that yesterday,” he said.

“Yeah, I just was busy,” she said.

Roy sat down at the kitchen table.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

“Well, I mean, I’ll just call her and see if she has an application,” Jenna said between mouthfuls of toast. She was beginning to eat hurriedly, barely pausing between bites, and only looking at Roy in little quick glances that she couldn’t maintain.

Roy put his cup on the table, followed by his elbows. He crossed his hands and leaned forward. “I’m not talking about that,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Why didn’t you just call me?” he asked.

“When?”

“Jenna,” he said, and she knew to come to the point.

“I thought you were at work and, I guess I wasn’t really thinking or anything. I just got scared – and I panicked,” she said, looking up across the table and searching her father’s face.

“Jenna, how old are you?” Roy asked.

“Daddy, you know how old I am.”

“I want you to say it,” Roy said gravely. “How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-one,” she said.

Roy nodded and said, “but you’re acting up at a tenth-grade level.”

Jenna clenched her teeth, but said nothing.

“You are twenty-one, princess, and it’s time for you to make some decisions about the kind of person you want to be. Now you can run around with your friends in Detroit and go to bars and have fun, but you need to be working if you’re going to do it.

And you can go back to school and stay here, but you need to make some progress,” Roy said.

They were silent. Jenna finished her breakfast and pushed the dishes away. Roy slurped loudly at his coffee.

“I don’t know what I want,” she said.

“Who does?” Roy asked.

“Are you kicking me out?” Jenna asked.

“No, not now. Not for this.”

“But you might for something else.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Roy said, “let’s just figure out what you’re doing.”

“I’m calling Aunt Melinda,” Jenna replied as if by rote.

“Is that what you want?”

“You’re the one that told me to!” Jenna complained.

Roy finished his coffee and took the cup to the sink, rinsed it, and put it in the dish rack. He didn’t return to his seat, but instead stood halfway between the sink and the table with his hands on his hips.

“I don’t want to tell you what to do. I don’t want to *have* to tell you what to do,” Roy said.

Jenna picked up her dishes and set them in the sink. She rinsed them off, but left them in the basin. She stood between the Kitchen and Roy.

“Tell me what to do,” Jenna said.

“Princess, what do you want to be? Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know,” Jenna said, and she plodded past her father and out of the kitchen. Roy stood in the kitchen tapping his foot, and followed her out after a moment’s pause.

He entered her room, where she was sitting on the bed. He stood at the footboard. There was a chair in the room, a cheap task chair from Wal-mart that he’d bought for her when she started college. It was covered in dirty clothes, as was most of the room.

“Who’s Darryl?” he asked Jenna.

She rolled her eyes and rested her chin on her hands.

“It’s complicated,” she said, but something didn’t add up. A feeling began to nibble at her consciousness, something small and insistent.

“I don’t want to come off as...anything bad,” he said, “but I don’t approve.”

“Well, that’s how you sound,” she said.

“Princess, listen to me – it’s a mean world out there and you’re not making it any easier if you are...doing, you know – that.”

“Doing what?” she asked, an edge of antagonism in her voice.

“You’re within your rights,” he said, “I mean, just – be careful.”

“Be careful of *what*?” she asked, “Careful of having fun? Careful of meeting people?”

The conversation seemed wrong to her somehow, not bad, not wrong, but *incorrect* – more like the feeling of coming out of your bedroom the day after you’ve moved the furniture to change the layout of the living room but had forgotten about it overnight.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said.

“Well, you can’t stop me from seeing him,” she said.

“I didn’t say I could.”

“Well, good,” she said, and then she put her finger no what was missing.

“Daddy, how do you even know about Friday?” she asked.

The phone rang.

Thomas was driving his sister’s car to Rochester when he chanced upon the interview. He was meeting Tony Gino for an early lunch, and as he ejected one CD in favor of another, he decided to listen to the Dave & Devan program just for a moment, for a taste of high-school nostalgia. He’d listened to the show when his father drove him to school when he was very young, and he listened out of habit until he was sixteen or so, until his tastes switched over to techno, hip-hop, and house. That was six years ago. That day, it happened to be on.

“-sive interview...with the father of Jenna Burger, the new internet sensation, the Lost in Detroit girl...Roy, how are you handling this?” asked Devan.

“This is the second time you’ve called here – I am asking you to leave us alone!” Roy said.

Dave and Devan, in conducting the interview, had their telephone on a selective switch so that they could comment on the conversation as it unfolded. They also had a battery of sound effects that they could fire off whenever there was a lull, or if the effect would add something to the conversation. A *sproing* or an explosion, a funny movie quote – whatever their sound engineers rigged up for the day, plus a few stand-by favorites like John Belushi yelling “Food Fight!” in the movie *Animal House*, or Arnold

Schwarzenegger in *Kindergarten Cop* asking “Who is your daddy, and what does he do?”

Mostly, the soundboard that day was full of excerpts from Jenna’s panicked 9-1-1 call.

“Sir, we’re just trying to get to the bottom of what happened,” Dave said.

“What’s to get to the bottom of? What do you want?” Roy asked.

I want my daaaaaddyyyy came over the car speakers.

“Sir, just calm down sir – we’re just asking for a little of your time.”

“Well, you’ve taken more than a little and I’m asking you to respect me and my daughter’s privacy and to stop calling here!”

He’s a black guy, he’s really cute and he’s a good dancer.

“Sir, how do you feel about your daughter being picked up by the Detroit police after being abandoned in the city, drunk and alone?”

“You know what? This conversation is over. Goodbye,” Roy said, and there was an audible click from his phone hitting the receiver.

“Whoa!” said Dave.

“Did he just – did he just hang up on us?” asked Devan.

*I’m *beep*ing LOST!*

Dave and Devan chuckled for a while, joined by the few crew members in the studio with them.

“I think we just got disconnected,” said Devan.

“Yeah, that’s probably what happened,” agreed Dave, “let’s call him back.”

The phone rang six times before the answering machine picked up.

No one is available to take your call. If you would please leave...

“I hate that – boring answering machine,” said Dave.

“Right, notice how he doesn’t give his name, like some criminal is calling to steal his identity over the phone,” said Devan.

“God just once it would be – Hello, mister Burger?” Dave said, his tirade cut in half by the beep of Roy’s answering machine.

“Mister Burger, hello, it’s Dave and Devan from the Dave and Devan morning show again, it seems like we got cut off and I don’t think we were done talking. You’re probably trying to call us right now, so we’ll get off the line and try you back in a little bit,” Dave said.

Dave and Devan chuckled to themselves for another minute, discussing the minutia of the phone call and playing more Jenna Burger sound effects until they decided to call again.

Jenna answered.

“Is this Jenna Burger?” Dave asked, startled and incredulous.

“Leave us alone!” she screamed into the phone.

“Wait, wait, wait – Jenna, would you tell us about Darryl?” Devan asked.

“Leave us alone god *bleep* it!” Jenna yelled.

“Is your father okay with you seeing a black guy?” Devan continued.

He’s a black guy, he’s really cute and he’s a good dancer.

“Stop calling us!”

I’m in Detroit and I’m lost and then Madeline Kahn from Blazing Saddles:

Is it true what they say about the way you people are...gifted?

“Leave us alone, leave us alone, leave us alone!”

It’s not a rave, it’s a club...so it’s not a rave, you know?

“Jenna, you have a lot of people in the metro Detroit area, who are very concerned about you,” Dave said.

“What are you talking about?” Jenna asked angrily.

Excuse me while I whip this out

“I mean, what’s Darryl packing? Like, nine, ten inches?”

There was a loud crashing sound as Jenna slammed the handset home, and the Dave and Devan studio erupted into mischievous guffaws.

Where the white women at?

Thomas had heard enough. He pushed the scan button and scrolled through the channels twice before turning the radio off altogether.

He felt no sympathy for Jenna. A little empathy, maybe, but if she couldn’t handle hanging out with this crowd, in this scene, then she had no business trying. It was dumb of her to lose her cool in Detroit like that. Detroit is an angry dog – it sniffs out fear, and it attacks.

Thomas was not afraid of Detroit, hadn’t been for years. He was afraid of Tony Gino. He was afraid of the meeting he’d arranged. He hadn’t told Tony *why* he’d wanted to see him, just that he did.

Thomas was desperate. He’d skipped going into DeeJay Deelight in favor of meeting up with Tony because he didn’t see the point in bending over backwards to make twelve dollars at a job he was going to lose, not when he could call in a favor like what he felt Tony owed him.

He’d been selling to Tony for months. He’d helped show Tony around the scene, introduced him to people – girls in particular – for over a year. Good old Tony – money

coming out his ears and no one to spend it on. Tony, who could get a girl back to his apartment but never keep her because he had zero game, but who cared if they stayed once he got what he wanted?

Get in, get yours, get out, Thomas thought, *and don't wind up broke and chained down to some bouncy raver chick. Don't get so high that you can't see who you're crawling into bed with for what they are, and don't ever fucking apologize.*

He swallowed a hot gout of shame as he thought of weeping his eyes out to Maria.

Once I get through this, I'm going to live my life right, he thought. *I've got to quit the scene. I've got to get a job. I'll work for Tony. He owes me. He's got to have something I can do, and then I'm set. Then I can get back into the scene, take the shit that Haas will pick up for me, make some moves, then...hell yeah,* he thought.

Thomas pulled into the Buckethead's parking lot. It was all gravel – a rustic touch. It was also potholed all to hell, and he bottomed out as he pulled in off of Rochester road. Buckethead's was flanked by a golf course, and in the dead of winter the restaurant looked lonely and cold.

Thomas saw Tony Gino's Cadillac Escalade, and parked next to it. His sister's Ford Taurus looked tiny, blocky, and cheap in comparison, but Thomas didn't mind. After Tony paid him his first check, he could buy himself a new car.

What if they recover the Grand Prix? He thought for the first time, because officer Cichecki (*Roger*, he reminded himself) explicitly told him it was unlikely – *but what if they did? What if they find the car – maybe missing its hubcaps, or its airbags – hell, the whole steering wheel. Who cared? Tony would pay him enough to fix it up, and*

the shit would still be in the back. The cops just had to keep from opening the trunk, and he'd have his car back plus all of Haas' investment, which would in turn trickle down to him.

Oh god, what if the cops open the trunk? That would be fine. They wouldn't know what it was, would they? They might think it was just candy. Or beads. Nothing! Was it all in zip-lock bags, like he thought he remembered, or concealed in a black duffel bag, like the movies? Please let it be the duffel bag- please god let it be the duffel bag, and don't let the cops open it, and just return the whole thing, car and all, with no questions asked!

He had never been inside Bucketheads before, but he'd driven past. It looked cheaper inside than out. The wood of the rafters was blonde and he'd expected a redder sort of stain. The deer heads and what not were just right, but the framed pictures looked over-done, too clean and nicely framed. They should have been glued to a board and nailed to the wall like the washboards, fiddles, and cigar boxes around them. Thomas had expected an old lodge house, dark with bearskin rugs, fat moneyed men with cigars and cravats, and neo-classical luminist paintings, a stag sort of place, but it was what it was – a confused mishmash of a winter hunting cabin, a southern tarpaper shack, and a modern franchise eatery.

In the bright light, he found Tony easily and sat down at his table.

“Whatup Gino?” he asked.

“Hey Thomas, sorry to hear about your car,” Tony said as he extended his hand for Thomas to shake. He was dressed in casual clothes, but they were very neat – an electric blue Izod polo shirt, light Dockers, and brown loafers with a matching belt. His

hair was as neat as ever, but with less product than Thomas was used to seeing. It didn't glisten like it would under the club lights – it just had a dulled sheen to it.

“Yeah, I'll get it back,” Thomas said.

Tony looked at him from the corners of his eyes.

“Hungry?” Tony asked.

“A little, I guess – not really. I just-“

“I'm starving. This place is excellent. Try the ribs if you don't know what to get,”

Tony said, steamrolling Thomas and tossing his own menu down on the table.

Thomas picked it up, read the front page and then flipped to the back.

Buckethead's Fine Country B-B-Q, read the word balloon from the Sambo caricature on the back of the menu, *Is sho' 'nuff da best eatin' dis side o' the mazy-dixie! You'll be mm-mmm full fo' sho' and dat my ga-ran-tee sho's my name buckethead!*

The ribs were on the inside of the back cover. Seventeen ninety-nine for a half slab. Thomas' stomach turned at the thought of greasy pork swimming in a sugar sauce with fat-glued macaroni on the side, and when his stomach turned it tightened and cramped.

He looked at the appetizer side of the menu. They had toast tips with spinach dip, chicken fingers, alligator soup, and baked brie in tomato sauce. The sandwiches were very plain – roast beef, ham and cheese, turkey club, all for just under ten dollars.

“I'm not really hungry,” Thomas said.

“You don't eat much, huh?” Tony said as if noticing for the first time.

“I guess not.”

“This isn’t a great place to just get a snack. They’ve got a bread basket coming around, but it’s really a meal sort of place. The dinner menu is a lot bigger,” Tony said.

“Yeah, expensive I’ll bet.”

“I guess so,” Tony said with a shrug, and then changed the subject. “So that’s a bitch about your car,” he said.

“Yeah, everyone seems to know about it,” Thomas said.

“Was it supposed to be a secret?”

“Nah, just – I’m surprised how fast word travels, you know? Haas was there, I told Maria, and the next thing I know Baxter calls me and says he’s sorry to hear about it – you’re here saying the same thing, you know?”

“Blame it on the D-Luv – it was all over the forums for a while,” Tony said.

“What did they say?” Thomas asked.

“You haven’t been on since then?”

“Nah, I just didn’t think about it.”

The waitress took their order – Water for Thomas, a half slab of ribs and a Bell’s Two-Hearted Ale for Tony. The waitress was pretty, but not gorgeous. She was very thin and had limp blonde hair that she wore straight and long. She wore too much eye shadow and mascara, and talked with only the bottom half of her face. Thomas guessed her long-sleeved shirt and black slacks hid a lot of tattoos depicting Japanese characters for hope and love and all that other nonsense that girls around this part of town liked to mark themselves up with. Seashells, big dragons, voluptuous fairies – lots and lots of fairies with big butterfly wings, curvy hips, bulging breasts, come-hither stares. Stripper fairies.

“Anyway, it wasn’t really about you. Just about how your car got stolen and then everyone started chiming in with their stories about getting their cars stolen or their windows smashed or whatever. Someone said you had money in the trunk though.”

Thomas nodded dully as Tony spoke, but at that last bit he came to attention and said, “yeah, there was. I mean, basically – well, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“So you’re just driving your sister’s car for now? Doesn’t she need it?” Tony asked.

“Well, sure, but so long as I pick her up or drop her off it’s no big deal.”

The waitress returned with Tony’s beer and a bread basket filled with sliced white bread and sesame coated bread sticks.

“That was quick, you’re really hustling for that tip,” Tony said.

The waitress smiled lamely and left.

“Tony, I’m broke,” Thomas said, leaning forward and spreading his hands on the table.

“Well, you’re working though, right? You’ll get your money back, right?”

“Neil told me to start looking for another job, so that’s what I want to talk to you about. I’m looking for work.”

“Well, T, what we do is...I mean - do you have any experience?” Tony asked before hiding his eyes in his beer.

“What? No, but you trained Nate, didn’t you? If he can do it, I can do it.”

“Do you know what *it* is?” Tony asked.

“Well no, but that’s the point, you know? I mean, that’s what training is, right?”

“T, Nate had computer experience before – he was working for Macromp doing Y2K upgrades – do you even know what that is?” Tony asked.

“Well, sure, I mean, I’ve installed stuff,” Thomas replied, the fervor leaking out of his voice.

“But you don’t know about compliance testing? Or quality assurance?”

“No,” Thomas admitted.

“Thomas, I don’t think I need *anyone* right now, let alone someone unqualified,” Tony said softly.

“It’s not fair,” Thomas said.

“Pardon?” Tony asked.

“I said it’s not fair!” Thomas yelled.

“Lower your voice!” Tony said, and Thomas slumped in his seat and stared at his empty salad plate.

“I’m sorry I can’t just hand you a job for doing nothing, or doing something poorly, but I can’t. I’m running a business here, not a charity. You come to me when you’re out of luck, dressed like – I mean, come *on*, Thomas! I know it’s just us here, but couldn’t you have at least put on loafers and khakis? You’re wearing phat pants and a hoodie to a *job interview*?”

“Even if you were qualified, and even if you came here respectfully dressed and ready to act professional, I don’t know if I could take you. You’re flighty. You’re skittish. Frankly, you’re not very good with people, and you’re careless. You sell shit to anyone and never even ask twice.”

“Well,” Thomas said, trying to get a word in edgewise.

“Let me finish – you’re real fun at parties, and hey – you and Bax showed me around and introduced me to a lot of people, but that doesn’t get you a job with me. I run a tight ship. Goddamned tight,” Tony said, and washed his words down with beer.

“Bullshit,” Thomas said softly, and with the word out of his mouth he began to pick up steam.

“Bullshit – you fucking *owe* me!” Thomas growled too loudly, and he drew the angry eyes of nearby patrons and some of the staff. Tony glanced around the room, and when he made eye contact he shook his head to express his confusion.

“You fucking owe me for driving out here, hooking you up, showing you around – you’re fucking *nobody* without me! You come down to *our* parties in *our* city to do *our* drugs and you wouldn’t know about *any* of it without me! And now you’re too good to give me a fucking job, but you’ll pay that dumbshit Nate to do your laundry or whatever? Fuck you, Gino, Fuck you!”

Thomas felt a firm hand on his shoulder. It belonged to the host – a boy younger than Thomas but with a whole head and about seventy-five pounds over him.

“Come on buddy, time to go,” he said, and Thomas allowed himself to be led, but as the host took him past Tony, he leaned over into Tony’s face.

“You fucking *owe* me! You hear me?” he growled. He knocked the bread basket to the floor and then shrieked, “You owe me!”

“Come on, here we go,” the host said, and he squeezed Thomas shoulder with a bruising strength as he prodded him towards the door.

“I know the way out,” Thomas said as he shook the hand off. The host stood behind him, arms aggressively crossed over his chest. He was joined by two surly

waiters, and a few of the lunch crowd were halfway out of their seats, ties dangling, jackets open, and shoulder's squared. Thomas turned his back on them and hit the door with a loud *crack*.

Tony sat breathing deep. He gulped down his beer and the host asked if he was okay, then brought him another basket of bread. Tony stared straight ahead as he fetched out a sesame stick and, meaning to break it in half, crumbled the thing to dust in his hands. The waitress brought his food out to him, and the smell cheered him.

“Better bring me another beer too,” Tony said, “and have another one close behind it.”

Thomas didn't tell Maria about his breakdown at lunch, and Maria didn't mention catching Brittney in bed, but what they didn't say was in the car with them, invisible and heavy. He avoided questions, he talked too much about the least important things, or too little about the most. She was quiet, sober, polite, and quite dull. She'd picked him up and they kissed quickly, and they drove to Detroit making only the most trivial small talk.

Maria was unenthusiastic. They were to meet Baxter and Megan – Megan, the girl who'd stolen Baxter away from her cousin and best friend. She couldn't imagine what they would have to talk about. She couldn't imagine why Baxter thought it was still a good idea for them to all get together when this plan had been made three days ago with Rachel in mind. Sometimes plans just carry themselves along, she guessed.

They arrived downtown ten minutes late, and when they pulled up in front of the East House sake bar they parked the car on Woodward. There were plenty of spaces on this stretch of the street, and no one was walking on the sidewalk. . The normal stragglers

and bums wandering the night, hoods and stocking caps pulled down over their eyes looking for something to steal or just for a halfway warm place to sleep were staying out of sight. The cold was fit for nothing.

Inside the light was very dim, and came from recessed floods in the ceiling twenty-five feet above the floor, and from the tea light candles that burned on every table and floated in little bowls of water. There was a bar made of dark brown wood and perfectly squared like an Ikea coffee table. The restaurant was very long, like most of the establishments along this stretch of Woodward Avenue – it was only thirty feet wide, but stretched back away from the street five times as far. There was an upstairs smoking section and a downstairs lounge. Thomas and Maria bought themselves one drink each – a bottle of Newcastle and a vodka and cranberry juice - paid, and headed for the lounge.

The tables they passed were as square and dark as the bar. There were twenty tables, and all but four were empty. Those four occupied tables were spread out far and wide, and no one raised their voices above a murmur, keeping their secrets. Ambient trip-hop played over the house speakers, sounding like electronic whale song with a ponderous four-fourths beat.

The stairs at the back of the house were narrow, and the passageway was grimy. The walls were white, speckled black with old fly spots, and lit with flickering fluorescent lights that gave everything beneath them an unhealthy blue-white pallor. Thomas heard them humming over the music. The stairs doubled back on themselves so that by the time Thomas and Maria were in the basement, they were facing back towards Woodward Avenue again. The stairs emptied out into a hallway that was wider than the stairwell, but no cleaner. At the end of the passageway, some thirty feet, was the lounge.

It was a black room – matte black from floor to ceiling. After Thomas and Maria passed through a heavy black velvet curtain, they saw exposed pipes, cinderblock walls, and a floor that sucked in color and light and never let it go. In the back of the room a DJ spun the music that Thomas and Maria had heard up above. They didn't recognize him – he was nobody.

The DJ wore a jacket and fingerless gloves, and a ski cap under his headphones. Thomas and Maria both pulled their coats tighter. Like the upstairs, the basement lounge was mostly candle lit, and as their eyes adjusted, they heard Baxter call out to them. Thomas and Maria blinked their eyes clear and joined Baxter and Megan.

Baxter got up from the table and hugged Thomas.

“You alright?” Baxter asked.

“Yeah, you know – car shit, but whatever,” Thomas said.

“Right,” Baxter nodded before indicated that Thomas should sit across from where he was seated himself.

“Nice kicks,” Thomas said.

Under a blue pea coat, Baxter wore a skin-tight silk shirt that showed off every rib and muscle of his torso. The shirt was golden brown, shiny, and unbuttoned to mid-chest. A pair of giant sunglasses sat on the table in front of him – big enough to conceal half his face, amber-tinted, with bulky plastic frames that shone like platinum. He had a bulky silver ring on each pinky, one ovoid and smooth, one square and rough.

“Maria– what's up?” Baxter asked as he hugged Maria in her turn. The hug was just barely returned; Maria's arms went weak and then limp around Baxter.

“Hi Bax,” she said.

Megan stood up and hugged Thomas, but didn't say anything but hello. She had more to say to Maria, and they sat across from each other, like the boys.

"How are you?" Megan asked Maria, leaning in closer like she was interested in the answer. Maria wore a black cocktail dress and comfortable matching pumps. The dress was one size too tight – her breasts strained against the top, but so did her slight paunch. It wasn't flattering.

"I'm good," Maria said, turning a cheek to Megan and asking Baxter if he was ready for Saturday night.

"Yeah, I haven't heard from Haas, but everything is ready to go. Flyers went out last weekend, info line is set up – should be hot," Baxter said.

"It's all DBC DJ's this time out," Megan boasted.

"What about Dreemketcher?" Maria asked Baxter.

"Yeah, he's sitting this one out – she got him in touch with the boys from Ghostly and he was fine with it," Baxter indicated Megan with a nod of his head and added, "Finesse is opening up, Mike Armstrong is on after, and then we're just going to tag team it out."

"Good lineup," Thomas said.

"Finesse says he's got a new track to drop," Baxter said.

Megan, leaned still closer to Maria as if to talk under the boy's faces.

"So that girl on the radio – she's your friend, isn't she?" Megan asked.

"Jenna? No, she's more Rachel's friend," Maria said, and then because she couldn't resist added, "You've met Rachel, haven't you?"

Megan smiled a practiced and sad smile – a pleading sort of thing where she turned down the corners of her eyes and flattened her mouth, a smile designed to say that she was sorry, she really was, but that there was nothing she could do about the situation. Never mind that she controlled everything *about* the situation – the look told its story.

“I’m sorry,” Maria said, “that was mean.”

“No, no it wasn’t – let’s go get a drink, just us girls,” Megan said.

The girls left the table.

“You look rough,” Baxter said to Thomas.

Thomas shrugged.

“How come you didn’t come out on Friday?”

“I fell asleep,” Thomas said.

“I don’t think you ever missed a party to sleep,” Baxter said.

Thomas shrugged again.

“You haven’t been around much at all.”

“I been working, trying to figure shit out,” Thomas said.

“Well, we’re worried about you.”

“Who’s worried?”

“Everyone,” Baxter said with a sweep of his hand.

Thomas sneered. “Nobody’s called. Nobody’s offered to help me out,” he said.

“Well, I mean, that’s kind of a big deal,” Baxter offered.

“Picking up a phone and saying ‘hey, sorry your life is fucked’ is a big deal?”

Thomas asked, his voice cracking at the end.

“I’m just saying, like, what – you think the J’s would drive you around? Or Sally?”

“Or you? Because you’re too busy cougar hunting and getting chachi’d-up and paid to fucking give me a ride to work or wherever?”

“I didn’t say that,” Baxter said.

“Well say what you mean.”

“I don’t mean anything,” Baxter said, his eyes wide with confusion, but Thomas couldn’t tell if it was real, or just Baxter trying to defend himself.

“I’m everybody’s goddamn friend when they need something, and if I need a hand up, well ain’t I just fucked?” Thomas asked.

“Come on, let’s get a beer. Maybe we can all dance a little bit,” Baxter said, pushing away from the table.

“You, fucking Tony Gino, Haas – yeah, you’re all fucking true blue.”

“What are you having?” Baxter asked, his wallet out. “I can buy you a drink, alright? I owe you that much, right?”

Thomas waved one hand in front of his face, like he was shooing a fly.

“Newcastle, I guess,” he said.

Baxter went to the bar and Thomas watched him chat with Megan and Maria.

Thomas tapped his foot anxiously. He thought about Baxter paying for drinks, and suddenly regretted not going for broke and ordering something more expensive. Baxter held Thomas’ Newcastle in one hand, and his own martini in the other. He gave Thomas the beer and raised his glass.

“To the scene, right?” Baxter asked.

“Sure,” Thomas said. They knocked glasses and drank impatiently.

They lit cigarettes and watched the girls at the bar. They seemed to be getting on okay.

“Hey, man, I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but I’d rather if you didn’t talk to Maria anymore,” Thomas said.

Baxter shook his head to clear it. “What?” he asked.

“I just think – I don’t know, the way you look at her, you know? I know you like her, but she’s with me, alright?”

“Where is this coming from?” Baxter asked.

“I saw you at the bar, and I’d just appreciate it if you backed off,” Thomas said.

Baxter shook his head slowly from side to side. “You’re fucking losing it,” he said.

“No, I’m not. I know what you’re doing. You did it with Rachel, you did it with – you’ve done it before. I’m not going to let you do it to me,” Thomas said.

“Cassandra – is that what you were going to say? That I took Cassandra away from you?” Baxter asked.

“You know what you did,” Thomas said.

“The same Cassandra that *you* fucked after *I* did? I just want to be clear on that, on how I took Cassandra away from you by fucking her first, is that right?” Baxter asked.

The girls returned to the table. Thomas’ face burned, his eyes were beginning to well up and his breathing came in short, shuddery bursts. He excused himself and left the table.

Thomas entered the restroom between the stairway and the lounge. He urinated in the big trough urinal, washed his hands, and looked in the mirror – his skin was as taut as stretched canvas, his fingers were bones, his eyes were big and wet. He felt nothing but a dull ache in his jaw. He opened his mouth wide and gently shook his head.

What the fuck am I doing? Thomas asked himself. Baxter owes you – don't blow it! Let him look sideways at Maria, what do you care? What do you want her for anyway? Baxter's probably good for five bills, even a grand – his parents would be. I can talk to them! They're fucking loaded, and they like me better than Baxter anyway. They'll take care of me, no doubt.

Thomas took a few deep breaths and fished his phial from his pocket. He didn't have much left – it would last until Haas came through, but he knew he'd have to be stingy with it. Stinginess could wait – he had to sharpen himself up, get his head back in the game. He carefully dried a few square inches of counter space by the sink and knocked himself out a healthy line. He didn't have a razor blade – just one of Tony Gino's business cards that had been at the back of his wallet for years. It was a poor substitute, but it eventually did the job. He snorted the coke through a rolled-up dollar bill, rubbed the itch out of his nose, pocketed the whole works, and returned to the lounge.

Baxter had his arm around Megan, and he leaned towards her as he watched Thomas return and sit in his seat.

“You alright?” he asked Thomas warily.

“They should fix the heat, or put in space heaters. Something, don't you think?”

Thomas replied.

“For real,” Maria said, “I’m freezing my tits off.”

“Hey now,” Megan said with mock caution, throwing her hands up before her in a warding gesture. “I don’t think ‘T’ would like that, right?”

“Huh?” Thomas asked.

“If Maria froze her tits off – you wouldn’t like that, right?” Megan asked again.

“Right,” Thomas said. He clenched his jaw and rubbed his sweaty palms on the thigh of his pants, “that’s crazy to think about though. I mean, we have all this stuff like cars and houses and shit, but think about getting so cold that something would actually freeze off. For real though - think about like people that go up to Cheboygan or Oscoda or up hunting or whatever, and they get lost in the woods and wind up having to get a toe cut off. I know it’s gross, but it happens, and who says it couldn’t happen to us, right? Who says that we couldn’t be sitting here around this booth all huddled up and then get a little drunk, next thing you know someone passes out and everyone else decides to get up and dance and just leave that person there and the next day – chop! – off with the toes.”

“Thomas, really,” Maria said - but Thomas’ was going too strong to stop.

“Anything like that – one of us could get pneumonia and die, or cancer, and then what? Nothing, right? Because you’re just dead and that’s the end of it. No more party, no more work, no more phatty-rollz yo. Unless you believe in heaven, but that’s stupid.”

Megan ruffled at this. “What’s so stupid about it?”

“I’ll tell you what’s stupid - it’s all people saying things are one way or the other and not having any idea – just their own say-so. They just go on and on about stuff they have no way of knowing, you know? They say they are all about god but they don’t know shit except what they saw on Jerry Springer-“

“Thomas, you’re not making any sense,” Maria interrupted

“- don’t know shit. And they think they can tell us what to do, and talk shit about parties being dangerous, but fuck that shit. They just sit there in there little fucking suburban houses judging us and I’m sick of it. I’m just sick of it that’s all. And another thing – they should judge themselves sometime if they’re so goddamn critical. Let them think about themselves and see what they have to say about that. See what they say about being all whacked out on Prozac and Ritalin and Budweiser and Bayer aspirin. See what they have to say about Percoset and Vicodin, or Tylenol. Ask your mother, ask anyone over thirty and see what they say.”

A long silence followed, and was only broken when Baxter said, “well, I could use a drink.”

Thomas, weak from hunger and sustained only by days of diet pills, cocaine, and energy drinks blurted out, “I’ll get it,” and sprang to his feet but then immediately came crashing down, tumbling over his own numb feet and locked knees, producing two spectacular effects: the first, being to upset the table of the booth and send a cascade of ice, glass, vodka, cold beer, cranberry juice, water, plastic straws, and cigarette butts down onto his back and neck. The second effect was the rapid ejection of all four of them from the back of the club and into the frosty midnight of January in Detroit.

Thomas kept his feet better outside, but he didn’t lift up his face. He let Maria lead him to her car, and he sat down in the passenger’s side, hunched into himself. Outside, Baxter talked to Maria.

“You sure you don’t want to take him to a hospital?” Baxter asked.

Maria didn't say anything for a long time, and when she did speak she only said "I'll ask him if he wants to go. He'll be pissed if I just take him."

"Well let him be pissed!" Baxter exclaimed.

"Bax – thanks, okay? I'll handle it," Maria said.

Thomas heard Megan's jeep start up, but he didn't look at it. He sat and shivered, and waited.

Maria sat in the driver's seat and started the car. The fan had been on high to pump the heat, but now the air that came out was frosty cold. In just the half hour they'd been inside, the car was barely above freezing. Maria turned the fan down and sat on her hands as the engine warmed up and smoothed itself out.

She drove up Woodward, around the circle at Monroe and the tall columned statue commemorating Michigan's Civil War dead. Woodward went from a split boulevard to a two way street. She passed the Fox Theatre, the State Theatre, the art-deco skyscrapers, and also abandoned cars, rotting ruins, vacant lots.

She drove past St. John's Episcopal Church, which was a sort of landmark. It was incredibly solid – the kind of building that would terrify a wrecking ball. It was of gothic design, dark and gloomy despite being made out of giant slabs of white rock. She had never been inside. She didn't even know the name of the place until last year at the Detroit Electronic Music Festival when she'd been caught in gridlocked traffic and had studied the sign out of boredom. Before then, it had always just been the chunky church at Woodward and I-75.

So much of Detroit was like that though. Nobody knew the proper names of anything. There was *that one skyscraper* or *that park with the statue*. Somebody might

show off if they knew one or two – the Penobscot, Book Tower, Cadillac Place – but nobody knew them all, it seemed. But why should they? As soon as you really got to know the place, someone would build a freeway, and it would be as if the place never was. That was the story of the Black Bottom – they just leveled a whole neighborhood and put in I-75.

Nothing lasted. Nothing stayed. It was cursed –Detroit, built on top of an Indian burial ground. Burned to the ground in 1805, rebuilt, civil unrest in 1943, abandoned in 1967, crumbling and rotten in 2002. Build it up, burn it down, forget it was ever there.

Steam rose from the vents in thick white plumes that blocked headlights from cutting through. The old joke went that Detroit smoked and steamed because it was built on top of hell.

Maria kept driving.

She drove through the worst part, Cass Corridor. To her right, in the distance, the construction crews worked under brilliant sodium lights to complete Ford Field. The Lions would be moving downtown. She wondered if anyone else would. To her left were wide stretches of empty ground. In any other city this would be prime real estate – now it was worth nothing to anyone. Too wide open and exposed for drug dealers, too costly to develop for moneyed interests. Not even the trees wanted it. It was a prairie cut up by Henry, Sibley, and Kingsway streets, which in turn were devoid of cars.

She drove through the campus town area, the north end of Cass corridor, the south end of Wayne State University. Here, art galleries, University buildings, and gentrifying hipsters were pushing out the liquor stores, nail salons, and chicken joints. Maria

supposed that was nice. That was progress, at any rate. There were new condos going up. That was a sign of economic development

At Warren, she turned right and rode up to I-75. She bottomed out twice on potholes as she passed by the science center, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the African-American history museum, and a lot of closed shops. After she turned left and merged onto I-75, Thomas spoke.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I know,” she replied.

“I’m a mess,” he said.

They drove for a few more miles.

“What can I do?” she asked. “How can I help you?”

“You can’t,” he said, “Nobody can.”

“You’re scaring me,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Do you want to go to a hospital?” she asked.

“I’m not sick.”

“What do you call *that*?” she asked.

“I’m tired. I want to go to bed,” he said, and he slumped against the passenger side window.

“Fine,” she said, and that was all she said until she dropped him off at his house, and she said goodbye.

Chapter 23.

The Allied Stamping shop floor was empty, fine white dust settled on everything, and Roy and Bill were the only two people in the office. There was a skeleton crew of twenty-five on duty that night, mostly hanging out and smoking by the loading dock, and Roy knew the other twenty-four senior fellows on a first name basis. He'd worked with them all for years, and although he wouldn't call them friends, he knew them well enough to understand that they were looking down on him. They showed it in their peculiar politeness – no ribbing, no shop floor pranks – just hello, yes, no, and goodbye. The whole damn place had gone completely professional.

They'd all heard of course, and they'd had some time to talk about it and to come to a consensus – was Roy a poor everyman whom life had dealt a hard blow, or was he some dumb schmuck that couldn't handle his own personal life? Opinion leaned towards the latter.

Roy's seniority and position gave him some power over gossip, but precious little. If any of the loaders, draftsmen, welders, or tradesmen on third shift figured out that he did not have the authority to fire them, nor did he have but the slightest say in who did or did not get fired, then he would get an earful and have to eat his liver.

As it stood, Raymond the senior welder was deferent as he asked about rotating out to second shift while he and Roy stood in the office doorway. Raymond was dressed in blue overalls, black steel-toes, and a dark red flannel shirt. Roy wore khaki Dockers, an untailed white oxford shirt that billowed around his waist, and a brown tie. His

loafers, also brown, had thin soles that little to keep the cold of the shop floor out of his feet.

“I hear tell they’re seeing orders on second shift, and I figured being the senior man on third ought to get me somewhere on second, don’t you think?” Raymond asked.

“I don’t know where these rumors are coming from, but they’re no busier on second than we are. If you wanted to go over to first, I could ask about it – but anyone with seniority on second already had that idea, so there you go,” Roy said.

“Well, thanks for hearing me out,” Raymond said before turning around and returning to his little corner of the shop floor to sip coffee from a stainless steel thermos and to re-read the funnies.

The color came up in Roy’s face. Even Raymond couldn’t be straight with him. He asked a question he’d know the answer to, gotten the answer he’d expected, but then rather than give Roy a hard time he just up and left.

“They can’t even ask for favors anymore,” Roy said to himself.

He walked the shop floor and the loading docks. No one worked. He said hello as he passed the others on staff tonight, and he got polite hellos back, but no conversation, and even less eye contact.

He knew the score. He couldn’t control his drunkard daughter as she danced recklessly across the color line, but that was the way with kids today: they grew up getting a steady diet of liberal value, believing that people really are the same, that we really can all just get along.

Roy never thought of himself as a racist. He’d always maintained that if someone could do the work, they could work alongside him. If they could keep their house up,

they could live next door. He'd never thought about his daughter dating a black man because as far as he knew blacks didn't go in for that sort of thing either, or if they did they just liked big girls, or trashy girls that no white man would want. That's what his father had told him, and he'd grown up in an age when that sort of thing was unthinkable.

He went back into the office and saw Bill at his own desk, playing Minesweeper.

"Hey Bill, how's it going?" Roy asked for the second time that night.

Bill was dressed more casually than Roy. He wore the same ubiquitous business-casual Dockers-and-loafer combination, but he was wearing a polo shirt instead of a buttoned oxford. His shirt was blue, and had the Allied Stamping logo on the left breast. The company gave them away as part of a holiday bundle two years ago.

"Oh, same old," Bill said, and then asked, "how are you holding up?"

Roy pulled up an extra chair and sat down in it. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees and gnawed at his thumb.

"Not good," Roy said.

"It's not right, how you got treated."

"Yeah," Roy said, "I'm getting the stink eye around here something fierce."

"Well don't pay them any mind – they don't know anything," Bill said.

"Thanks for saying that."

"I mean it. These guys don't know anything but what the media tells them, and if they hear on the radio, you know, what they hear – well, they don't know any better," Bill said.

"Well, I don't know anything about that," Roy said.

"With the internet, you can learn anything you want to know," Bill said.

“Sure,” Roy said. Bill kept talking.

“You can learn the truth about anything. You can learn stuff that other people don’t want you to learn. You want to know what our government knew before Nine-Eleven? It’s all out there. Want to know how what really happened to the pentagon? That’s out there too. I can learn anything I want just on this little box. Best thing ever,” Bill said.

“That’s handy,” Roy said.

“Damn sure is.”

Roy stood up to return to his cubicle.

“Can I tell you something?” Bill asked.

Roy turned around to face Bill.

“Something like that comes up again, you give me a call,” Bill said.

“I appreciate that, Bill, I do,” Roy said.

“Anytime,” Bill said.

Roy sat down and started up his own game of Minesweeper to keep away the gnawing feeling in his gut. He blew himself up for the sixth time in a row when the obvious occurred to him.

“Bill, I’ll see you,” he said, “I’m using up a sick day.”

“Well I don’t blame you buddy,” Bill said with such familiarity that Roy winced.

“Yeah, if anything comes up just leave a sticky on my computer,” Roy said, and he was out the door before he could hear Bill’s drawling affirmation.

Roy checked in with his boss, who without even looking up from his desk told Roy to go on ahead, and that he had time saved up, and that he ought to use it or lose it. Roy didn't wait to ask if his boss was sure.

The night was wet and winter-warm. The wind was still, the snow was melting. He got into his truck, waved at the night security man, and left. An hour later he was in Dearborn, seated in Antonio's diner. There were only three other tables occupied: an elderly couple nibbling at salads of iceberg lettuce and slurping at bowls of cabbage soup, a swarthy family of four talking loudly over their decimated plates of pasta about what to get for desert, and a group of three young men in fashionable club clothes looking at each other through bleary eyes and stacking cups of half-and-half into pyramids and towers. He couldn't imagine what they were all doing here at this hour – the partiers made sense only if they had left the club at one o'clock and then decided that the *real* party was at Antonio's diner. The family ranged in age from fourteen to forty – he couldn't guess why they'd be here, maybe jetlag from a long flight into the country, or a long car trip cross-country, and this was the place they chose to stop and refresh themselves.

The elderly couple made sense. Old people – they kept their own schedules. They did what they wanted. They were old enough, and had earned the right. As far as Roy was concerned, if they wanted to eat dinner at two thirty in the morning, that was fine with him, and none of his business.

His waitress was the old woman with pursed lips and smoke-stained teeth. She asked if he wanted coffee, and he took it. She gave him the menu, but he set it down without reading it. He waited. When she came back with the coffee, he asked for Darryl.

Darryl walked like a man of two minds, one wishing to cut and run, the other wishing to stand up for himself. He didn't manage either. He approached Roy's table and found him sipping his coffee unpretentiously.

"You're looking for me?" Darryl asked.

"Yeah, why don't you sit down," Roy said.

Darryl sat across from Roy, looking over his shoulder.

"I'll tell your boss I asked you," Roy said.

"Sure."

"Are you busy?" Roy asked.

"Nah, nobody in my section," Darryl said. He sat a good foot away from the table, having not pushed his chair in.

"Do you know who I am?" Roy asked.

"Yeah."

"Did you know the last time I was here?"

"Yeah, I did."

Roy had his index finger circled around the ear of his coffee mug, and he squeezed it like the trigger on a forty-five.

"But you didn't say anything," Roy said.

"Didn't seem right."

"How didn't it seem right?"

"It's like – I had only met your daughter at a party a few nights before. We hit it off, and here she is with her old man. I know it was strange for her, you know, us having just met," Darryl said.

“You party with a lot of girls?” Roy asked.

“Some, I guess.”

“Well, you can stop partying with my daughter,” Roy said.

Darryl sat mute and brooding.

“You don’t seem like a bad kid up front, but you lied to me, and I don’t go in for that,” Roy explained.

“Little *white* lies?” Darryl sneered.

“That’s got nothing to do with it,” Roy said.

“You know it does.”

“It doesn’t. Look here – you don’t seem like a bad kid, alright, fine. But you’re not straightforward, that’s one thing. For another, I don’t like my girl going to these raves or what have you, especially when she gets abandoned – I don’t think we need to talk about that. For another, you’re just fine at what you do, but Jenna deserves better than this,” Roy said, indicating the restaurant with a sweep of his hand.

“You don’t even know me,” Darryl said, his eyes far off and wide, his lips tightening in a narrow line when he said the words.

“You don’t know me, you don’t know what I do, you don’t know what happened, you don’t know *shit*,” Darryl said as he got up from his chair.

“I know where you’re not welcome,” Roy said.

“You too. Coffee’s on me, don’t let the door hit you on the way out,” Darryl said as he paced back to the kitchen like a man expecting a knife in the back.

Roy placed a five dollar bill on the table, put on his jacket, and drove home.

When Jenna woke up at six, she found Roy waiting downstairs in the kitchen.

“Hi daddy!” she said.

“Hi,” he replied.

“What are you doing up?” she asked.

“I just wanted to see you. I just wanted to talk.”

Jenna smiled at him. She fetched orange juice and a yogurt cup from the refrigerator.

“You know I love you, right?” Roy asked her when she sat down.

“Sure,” she said, still smiling, but suspicious.

“I just want what’s best for you,” he said.

“You’re weird today,” she said.

“It’s been a weird night,” he said.

Roy fetched himself a cup of coffee from the cold pot, microwaved it, and sat back down.

“You’re not gonna fall asleep,” Jenna said.

Roy put up his hand to silence her as he made ready to speak.

“We haven’t really talked about what you’re doing,” he said.

“Well, I tried to call Aunt Melinda, but I just got her machine. I thought today I’d catch her before work.”

“I didn’t mean that – or I didn’t mean just that. That’s important, but, here’s the thing: there’s more to life than just work, and you have to pay attention to that other stuff too. Part of it is having fun, part of it is taking care of family and all that – but part of *all* of it is, well, take these party’s you’ve been going to,” Roy said.

“But I’m not doing that anymore,” Jenna said.

“Right, I know – but you were, and just hear me out on this, okay? When you were going, what if you were working as a nurse with your Aunt, and your boss found out about it – that you were going to these parties and spending your weekends dancing all night.”

“Well, that’s my free time so I’d probably tell her it’s none of her business if she asked me,” Jenna replied.

“Sure, that’s natural. It’s not her business – but that’s not what you ought to do. That kind of attitude will cost you,” Roy said.

“How could it? That’s dumb.”

Roy’s cool broke, but he tied it back together mid-sentence as he said, “it’s not dumb, sweetie, that’s your reputation. That’s how people come to know you.”

“Well it isn’t fair,” Jenna said.

“I know it’s not fair – it’s not fair that we have to work and go to school and all that other business, but we do, so we do,” Roy said sententiously.

“Okay, well, I’m already not going to parties and I’m done with all that stuff, so what’s the big deal?” Jenna asked as she swallowed the last spoonful of yogurt and rose to set her spoon and glass in the sink.

“I don’t want you seeing Darryl,” Roy blurted out.

“That’s not fair!” Jenna whined.

Roy crossed his arms.

“As long as you’re living here, you’re going to watch yourself. That incident last weekend was goddamned *embarrassing!*” Roy said.

“Oh, so I embarrass you?”

“Embarrass *yourself!* You’ve shown *no* consideration for your own job, reputation, or, or, *anything!* If you’re going to live here, it’s going to be by my rules from now on,” Roy said.

Jenna stood mute, her clenched teeth trembling and her hands balling themselves up into fists. She walked with a convincing forced calm past Roy, then up to her bedroom. Roy went to bed feeling satisfied.

22.

Thomas parked in the lot off of Woodward, just north of nine mile. It was Friday. He planned to stay home and maybe catch some sleep, but he'd been dodging his father all week. He'd seen him three times in passing, and every time his father would ask what he was going to do about his car. Thomas would say he didn't know, his father would say "okay" or "alright," and nothing else. Thomas mostly hid out in his room, and went out for a drive or a long cold walk in the evening until his father went to bed. On Friday's, the old man stayed up late watching television and would be impossible to avoid. He didn't want to see him, he didn't want to deal with him. Not after being fired.

He had been early, having headed straight to the store after dropping Nicole at school. Nicole had been particularly bitchy about his use of the car, but he'd tuned it out.

"Don't forget that I don't practice, so pick me up at three," she'd nagged.

He forgot immediately and drove to work.

The door was unlocked, but they weren't open for business. Neil shouted as much from the back when Thomas came in.

"Just me," Thomas said as he approached the sales counter. He looked at the register – no till, not yet. Deejay Deelight only kept a two hundred dollar till because purchases usually fell within two categories – people buying cheap stuff like LED bulbs or slip covers who paid in cash, or huge thousand-dollar purchases like turntables and EQ's, which were paid for on credit ninety-nine percent of the time. Two hundred dollars wasn't worth stealing, even if it had been there.

"Hey, Thomas - hi," Neil said as he came up front from the back. His manner was stiffly cordial, as if he had practiced being friendly, practiced this coming exchange.

“What’s up? I know I’m early, I was hoping I could clock in anyway,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, that’s not – listen, Thomas, I’ve got to let you go, okay? Today. I can give you half an hour on for coming in, but that’s it. That’s from corporate,” Neil said.

Thomas leaned on the counter and clutched his mouth. His eyes were wide and vacant.

“I’m fired?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Neil said, and then added, “I’m sorry I couldn’t give you more warning. Did you get a chance to look around at all?”

Thomas shook his head.

“Well, I’m sorry – good luck though. We’ll mail you your last check,” Neil said, and then he went in the back, trusting Thomas to leave. Stealing equipment or records hadn’t even crossed Thomas’ mind until he was halfway home, and by then he thought better of it. Neil would know it was him, and wouldn’t have any qualms about snitching.

He lay on his bed and tried to pass out, but he had trouble nodding off in the broad daylight. He thought about cleaning his bedroom, tried his hand at it, and gave it up after ten minutes. The carpet of clothes on the floor was too thick to dig through, and half of those clothes he no longer wanted. Deciding what to keep and what to throw away would require too much energy, not that he knew what he was saving that energy for.

He went downstairs to the basement. It was a finished basement with a linoleum tile floor. The laundry room was just off the stairs – washer, dryer, furnace, water heater, and shelves full of canned vegetables and jarred preserves. His weight bench doubled as a clothes rack off to his left. He hadn’t touched it since high school. There was an old

rabbit-ear television and a betamax VCR, the old plaid couch that used to be in the living room had three laundry baskets sitting on it, their contents waiting to be folded. There was a carpet made of old remnants that Thomas' father had put in when Thomas was fourteen – this was to be the kid's rec-room, and now it was just a laundry depot. Behind the couch was Greg Kowalski's home office, an office that had long ago stopped being his own personal domain (as he'd liked it) and was now the family hub for checking email and typing out school projects.

Thomas turned on the computer and modem. The modem automatically dialed their local ISP, and opened up the Netcom homepage. Thomas opened his email account and saw seventy four unopened emails, but nothing he wanted to read. He closed it, and opened an AOL chat window.

Rachel was on, of course, keeping herself entertained at work. Same with Tony Gino, who always set his status to "busy." There were a lot of others, raver contacts he'd picked up over the last few years with online names like d@nc3rb0i and 420_k@ndi_420, but he didn't want to talk to them. There, in the middle of his list, was Haas: Arabhusslah_1.

Thomas brought up a chat window and texted a quick *Whatup*.

There was a pause, and then Haas replied: *nothing sup witchu?*

Thomas got to the point: *You talk to those guys yet?*

Ya nothing yet –ill no tomorrow, Haas texted back.

An announcement came up that Haas was no longer online.

Well, that's something, Thomas thought.

Thomas went over to the couch and put one of the baskets on the floor, and then he took its place. He looked for the remote control for the television, then gave up finding it and crossed the room to turn it on. It wasn't hooked up to the cable box, and so it only received channels 2, 4, 7, 9, 20, and 50 – nine being CBC out of Windsor, the others being local affiliates of national stations. He turned to channel 20 – nothing but an old episode of *The Price is Right*. TV 20 used to show matinees on Saturdays, usually really cheesy B horror flicks like *976 Evil* or *Slumber Party Massacre*, but sometimes they'd show something good, something out of their price range like *Robocop* or *Deliverance* or *Phantasm*.

Thomas turned on the betamax VCR and examined the stack of dusty cassettes next to it. In the stack were almost exclusively movies taped off of television, complete with commercials. He took out his dad's copy of *Red Dawn* and put it in the player to watch it. He saw commercials for Uncle Robinson's Furniture, for 1-900 numbers, for movies that he didn't even remember being released, and that he couldn't remember seeing on the video store shelves.

The movie finished – he put in *Stripes*, then *Alien*, *Spies Like Us*, and *Revenge of the Nerds*. He watched them all back-to-back absentmindedly, paying more attention to the commercials than the films themselves, all of which he'd seen dozens of times. The commercials were more interesting. The commercials would never air again, and as far as Thomas knew, these were the only copies of them.

No home movies, he thought, or maybe these are our home movies. What did we ever do that was worth videotaping? My track meets were boring. Nicole – I guess dad doesn't even have that recorder anymore, and what does she do that's special? Nothing.

She mentors at Sunday school – wooo, let’s videotape eight kids singing “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore” in nine different keys. Mom doesn’t do anything all day but mope around the house. Dad works. I’ve seen dad work. Boring. That’s all we do. Boring nothing, just the four of us being bored.

With a start, Thomas ran back to the computer. Incoming calls, ignored, had knocked him offline, but he redialed the server and logged into D-Luv. The first topic in the forum was the one he sought:

Whatup with PLURfect Match?

This thread, concerning Haas’ follow-up party, was more positive than the last.

I heard it got cancelled one poster had written, but Thomas recognized the poster as Baxter’s SoopahJugalOH ID and ignored it. The next fifteen posts were either other party kids telling SoopahJugalOH to shut up, or Baxter playing the dumb antagonist. Eventually it evened out into more honest speculation.

Its gonna be at the Slaughterhouse again – GAY read one post.

NO CHOPSHOP DUHH ASSHOLE CUZ I KNOW THE GUY WHO RUNS IT AND HE SAID HE ALREADY GOT A DEPOSIT SO SHUT UP! Read another.

The list eventually came to a reasonably trustworthy consensus – the party would be Saturday, start at midnight, and go until whenever. Baxter was headlining at midnight, and the other DBC DJ’s were still hovering around and trying to find their slots. The party was either going to be at the Chop Shop or at Mack-and-Bellevue. None of the regular security posters could confirm that they’d been hired, but that was often a last minute deal. One of the Abstrakt lighting crew chimed in and said that Haas had already paid the deposit on the lighting rig and PA.

Thomas scrolled through the drama – Megan Isom was cutting down party kids who felt the need to judge her publicly for, in their words, ruining Rachel and Baxter. There was a whole thread about Jenna, starting with a transcription of her 9-1-1 call and people quoting the calls back and forth: SHUT UP U R A BLACK GUY WHO IS A GOOD DANCER, *I want my daddddyyyy, I M FUCKING LOST*, and so on.

The phone rang and knocked him offline. He answered it.

“Where the fuck are you?” his sister said.

“What are you talking about? I’m at home, duh.”

“You were supposed to be here a fucking *hour* ago!”

“Okay, I’m coming,” he said. He could hear her screaming and yelling into the phone, but he hung it up without listening. He stood up too fast and felt woozy, and when the wooziness passed it was replaced with the dread that he’d repressed with old movies on video tape. He counted to ten and took an inventory.

I still have a house, I still have a car. Haas is making moves. I’m fine, he thought, and thus fortified he went back upstairs, put on his jacket, and drove to pick up his sister.

She cussed him out the whole drive home – yelled at him for forgetting, yelled at him for being a loser, yelled at him for parking in the street, yelled at him for letting the door shut in her face, for tracking snow in the house, for leaving all the lights on, even for the C- she’d received in Chem 2 because she couldn’t study with her friends at the coffee shop since he was driving her car. Thomas took it mutely and didn’t pay it much mind. She stomped off to her bedroom, and he took a can of Faygo cola from the refrigerator. He took a sip, and the back door, the one which lead to the garage, opened. His mother entered looking thin and worn.

She had a thousand-yard stare on her pale eyes, and she looked right through Thomas. She didn't say anything, but she touched the dining room table, the kitchen counter, the refrigerator, everything, as she passed through to the living room. She touched Thomas' cheek and left him. Thomas shook his head, puzzled, and his father entered the house holding a long, thin paper package - not much thinner than a single-subject notebook, about two feet long, and about six inches wide.

Gregg Kowalski grinned cruelly and he walked into the kitchen, stomping snow off his boots and onto the dining room floor.

"Want to see what I've got here?" he offered, and began to unwrap the package without waiting for a reply. He got the paper off of the thing and held it out for Thomas to see. He held it out longwise, and Thomas saw that it was a sign. It read: *For Sale*.

"It's a seller's market," Gregg Kowalski declared, "and I'm getting while the getting is good! You're out of here! Start packing!"

Thomas stomped into the living room. His mother sat on the couch, looking out the front bay window.

"Mom, what the hell?" he asked.

"I told you something was different," she said, "I told you."

"Don't ask her - she didn't know until today. I wanted her there. I know what she's been thinking. She thinks I'm a heart-attack man, and that I'll kick and she'll get the house. Well to hell with that," he said.

He went on.

"I've worked too goddamned hard to just dig a grave for myself and crawl in," he said. "I've provided for you - I've fed you, clothed you, and given you a place to live.

Where's mine? What do I get out of it? A deadbeat kid, a scheming wife – good riddance. I'm selling the house and moving into an apartment, just me and my darling lady, isn't that right dear?"

Thomas mother looked at her husband with unseeing eyes. "I didn't think you were so petty," she said meekly.

"Petty? You're waiting for me to die. To *die!*" he shouted, and then he turned his full attention on Thomas.

"You're out tonight. Pack what you can and hit the bricks. You can come back for the rest of your shit tomorrow," he said, but by the time he finished he was speaking to Thomas' back. Thomas went to his room and began to retrieve things. He picked up a sweatshirt that didn't smell too bad, a pair of jeans, and two pairs of underwear. He found his old duffel bag and stuffed the clothes into it. Then he looked around for other things he needed. They all blurred together – no one thing seemed more important than another. In no particular order he snatched up another pair of jeans, his first pinewood derby car, his skateboard, and a coffee mug. He put those in the bag, the skateboard sticking out awkwardly, the coffee mug breaking as it hit one of the skateboard's wheels. He found a few other things that he thought he'd need – an old Nintendo controller, a copy of *High Times* magazine from 1998, a *Penthouse* from the year before, and a CD carry-case full of music he hadn't listened to since high school.

He skipped the living room and walked through the kitchen. He picked up his half-empty soda can and took that too. He threw his bag into his sister's car, got in, and started it. He didn't see her chasing after on the slushy street as he drove away.

Half an hour later he was in Ferndale parking his car in the lot just north of nine-mile at a little bar called Faraday's. The bartender was an old high school friend named Mike Holstead. The place was nearly empty – a well-dressed man in his thirties threw darts in the back. A barfly, a woman, sat at the corner drowning herself in pink cosmopolitans. Coming in the front door, the dining room was to the left, but the lights were off. The kitchen was closed. *Night Moves* played on the jukebox.

Faraday's was a sports bar. Jerseys and pennants hung on the wood-paneled walls. The lights dangled overhead on cheap gold-painted chains, and were shrouded with plastic covers that bore the colors and logos of Detroit sports teams: the Red Wings, the Pistons, the Tigers, the Lions, even the Fury – Detroit's arena football team.

Thomas took a seat at the bar next to the server's station. There was no waitress on duty. Mike came over and shook his hand. Mike wore a black polo shirt and jeans. His black hair was short and heavily gelled into a slick pompadour. He had tattoos running up his forearms that stopped at the short sleeves of his shirt.

“What's the good word?” he asked Thomas.

Thomas shook his head bitterly. Mike made him a drink – a vodka and lemonade.

“Make it strong – I'm broke,” Thomas said.

“Don't worry about it,” Mike said, “owner's out.”

Thomas nodded appreciatively.

“You look beat up – what's going on?” Mike asked, and Thomas told him. He left details out, he added others, he more or less got across that he was out of money, out of a job, and out of a home.

“I’ll keep them coming,” Mike said, and he did. He mixed up a pitcher of vodka and lemonade and poured one for himself. Thomas drank like he was dying of thirst. He drank recklessly and messily, and by ten o’clock he was very drunk.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do,” Thomas said.

“Who does?” Mike slurred back.

They had another drink. The barfly at the corner rapped her glass loudly and Mike served her another cosmo.

The dart player sat down beside Thomas.

“I heard some of that story, brother, that sounds rough,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m fucked,” Thomas admitted. Everything in the bar began to develop a fuzzy haze that he tried to blink away. The lights began to dance. The wood of the bar felt soft and pliable.

“Well, you want to tell me about it?” The man asked.

Thomas started his story again, beginning with the rave, fast forwarding to Jenna, leaving out Maria, coming back around to Haas and Four Pines, spending too much time on Justin, until Mike came back to him.

“Angelo, he’s not interested,” Mike said.

The well dressed dart player cocked his head and turned to Thomas while still talking to Mike.

“You sure?” he asked.

“Go down to Temple club – there’s no action here tonight,” Mike said.

“Don’t hate on this,” Angelo pouted, but he laughed and said “wish me luck” before taking up his jacket and leaving the bar.

“Fucking Ferndale,” Mike said.

They had another drink. Thomas asked for pretzels. Mike went to open a bag. The front door opened, and in walked Cassandra Mulgrew.

She looked exactly the same, except in how she dressed, how she wore her hair, and how she put on her makeup. That is to say to anyone else she would have looked completely different than she had before, but it was her – same weak chin, cherry mouth, sparkling eyes, teacup-tits, long legs and generous hips. Thomas would have known her anywhere.

She wore a waist-length leather jacket with a thin belt and silver buckle that dangled down around her thighs. Her jeans were skin tight; her boots were black and narrow. Her hair, which used to hang down to her shoulders in wide finger curls was now drawn up tight with a clip and puffed in the back. Her makeup was very conservative – light mascara, modest lipstick, no blush.

Thomas stared at her slack-jawed. His right hand nervously closed around his drink and he rubbed his left on his knee. He didn't see the man she came in with, but he wasn't looking for him. Thomas stood up, and she saw him.

“Hey *you*,” she said, and smiled.

“Oh my god,” Thomas said, and Cassandra took a few quick steps forward to hug him, and kiss him sexlessly on the cheek. He tried to lean in to her, to take her up in his arms even as she pushed away from him.

“Easy there, you okay?” She said.

Thomas nodded weakly. “It's good to see you Cass, it's so good to see you!”

“Yeah, this is Kenneth,” she said, introducing the man behind her.

He was tall, around six-foot-three, and square in the shoulders. He was swarthy, Indian maybe, but only half. He had skin the color of peanut butter, and electric green eyes. His hair was thick – he wore it brushed back and immaculate, and it swept back away from his forehead and down to his collar. He had a jacket so much like Cassandra’s that it could not have been accidental. He wore designer blue jeans and expensive looking Chelsea boots with gaudy silver buckles.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he said, offering Thomas his hand.

“Yeah,” Thomas said.

“Yo Thomas, you want these pretzels?” Mike asked from behind the bar.

“This is Thomas!” Cassandra said, but she wasn’t facing Kenneth when she said it.

They shared an awkward moment, the four of them. Thomas too drunk and slow to speak, Kenneth too aloof, Cassandra too embarrassed, Mike too bored. Cassandra broke the silence.

“So how are you?” she asked perfunctorily.

“I’m good,” he said, “it’s good to see you.”

“Yeah,” she said, and then ordered two vodka martinis from Mike.

“So who are you seeing these days?” she asked Thomas.

“No one,” he said, “well, Maria – I don’t know if you know her.”

“You’re with Vee-vee now? That’s *crazy!*” Cassandra squealed.

“Who’s Vee-vee?” Kenneth asked.

“Oh, she’s this wild raver chick – she’s from the old days,” Cassandra explained, her voice dismissing of and embarrassed by those same old days as soon as she brought them up.

Kenneth nodded, his face stern with disapproval.

“Yeah, we’re kind of – I dunno. It’s complicated, I guess,” Thomas said.

“Strive for simplicity,” Cassandra said, “it’s our motto.”

“Whose?” Thomas asked.

“Well, ours,” Cassandra said, indicating herself and Kenneth.

“What...you’re married?” Thomas asked.

Cassandra laughed a forced, mocking little *ha!*

“We don’t believe in that sort of thing. It’s just a trapping of the western male mind,” she said.

“The what?” Thomas asked.

“You know, the western mind,” Cassandra said.

“I don’t know what that is,” Thomas said.

“Well, it doesn’t matter – what we have is more important than marriage,” Cassandra said hastily.

“It’s a bond,” Kenneth said aggressively.

“That’s right, a bond!” Cassandra agreed.

“A bond,” Thomas repeated.

“Do you still talk to Haas anymore?” Cassandra asked with more than casual interest.

“Yeah, I see him around – I haven’t seen him lately,” Thomas admitted guardedly.

“I just wondered if, well, do you know if he’s got anything?” Cassandra asked.

“Like – blow, or weed, or what?” Thomas asked.

“Yeah, like that,” she said.

An idea came to Thomas. “I’ve been making moves, I can see what I’ve got,” he said.

“Really?” Cassandra asked, her eyes turning big and bright.

“Yeah, hey, walk me to my car okay?” Thomas said, getting up from his place at the bar.

Kenneth bristled, but Cassandra put a hand on his broad chest and told him it was okay, that she’d be right back.

Thomas was halfway to the door when Cassandra caught up with him, then passed him and walked ahead.

“Vodka and lemonade,” Thomas said, and then started singing a nonsense sort of croon: “Vodka and lemonade, Voodkoo oond loomoonood, Veedkee eend leemeeneed.”

“So, I only have a twenty on me, but whatever you’ve got is cool,” Cassandra said.

“Why’d you leave?” Thomas pleaded with awkward sincerity.

“Why’d I leave what? Detroit?”

“Yes, and me, and the scene,” Thomas said.

“What scene? What are you talking about?”

“Rave, damn it! Why did you give up on it?” Thomas slurred. He stood between his sister’s car and the one next to it. The other car had been there for days, and it had a crust of snow on top. Thomas broke the crust on the snow and started to make a ball of the dense, wet snow underneath.

“Give up on it? That’s dumb! That’s like asking why I gave up on, I don’t know, driving a Chevy! It’s not some big thing – I don’t know why you all think it is. It’s just for fun,” she said.

“Was I just for fun?” Thomas asked.

“You’re drunk,” Cassandra said.

“I’m not that drunk,” Thomas said, wobbling to the side and banging into his car.

“Look, it doesn’t matter. I’m with Kenneth now and we’re doing important things.”

“Why did you come back?” Thomas whined.

“I still have family here and Kenneth wanted to meet them and – do you have anything? Or were you just dragging me out here for this?”

Thomas pulled his keys out of his pocket and promptly dropped them on the ground into a pile of gray slush. He bent over to pick them up and lost his feet. He dropped to all fours, and when he hit the ground he threw up on the keys he was trying to fetch.

“Oh god, you’re a mess,” Cassandra wailed.

Thomas retrieved his keys and stood up. He dunked the keys into the snow atop the neighboring car to clean them, then nearly forgot to retrieve them. He took them out and held up the door key.

“I’m fine,” he said, and then looked around and asked, “where’s my snowball?”

“Your what? Oh, you dropped it,” Cassandra said.

Hot tears began to run down Thomas’ cheeks. “I can’t do anything,” he sobbed, “I can’t do anything right.”

Cassandra put her arms around him and put his head on her shoulder.

“I love you Cass, I love you so much!” he said.

“Shhh, shhh – don’t talk,” she said, rolling her eyes up to the stars and patting him on the back.

“Cass, I’m in some shit – I’m in trouble, I’m bad,” he sobbed.

She let Thomas cry on her shoulder for a while longer, and then pushed him away. She took the keys out of his limp hand. His whole body seemed detached from the world – he was standing asleep, passed out on his feet. She shook him as she unlocked the car and opened the back door. He came to with a slobbery *huh?*

“Here sweetie, lay down in the back,” she said. She pushed him into the back seat and zipped up his jacket. He reached for her, but she dodged his grasp.

Thomas heard a voice call Cassandra, and he heard her shout back for Kenneth to hold on a damn minute, that she’d be right there, and she was the Cassandra he remembered in that moment – beautiful, brassy, belligerent, not this sheepish little tag-along he’d seen tonight, not the kind of girl who would be a mouthpiece for an over-done douchebag who took his pick-up lines from old Philosophy 101 texts, not the kind of girl who would go begging her friends for coke for that same guy.

“You can sleep it off here,” she said, “Promise me you’ll sleep it off, okay?”

“I’m cold,” he said.

“Promise me.”

“I’m cold.”

“Promise.”

“I promise,” he said.

“You’ll warm up in a minute,” she said. She left him shivering, then gently locked and closed the door.

23.

Thomas woke up with a jolt on Saturday afternoon. Snow had fallen and blocked the windows. No one had disturbed him as he slept. He ached all over. He sat up and his head swam. His teeth felt raw on one his right side, the side that he'd lain on – stomach acid had corroded the enamel, and when he sucked in breath through his mouth, they screamed. There was something crusty on his face, and when he felt it he saw red flakes of dried blood – not too much, just a nighttime nosebleed in the desiccated air of winter.

He got out of the back seat, found his keys in his jacket pocket, and got in the front. He had a parking ticket, or rather Thomas' sister had a parking ticket. He threw it on the ground and drove away. His first thought after wiping his face as clean as he could with his bare hand was that he needed to find out where it was going down that night, and that Darryl was the last person he hadn't pissed on or weirded out. He started the car on the third try, and drove to Antonios.

Dearborn was a good distance from Ferndale, a half-hour drive at least if he kept the peddle down. He passed closer restaurants – Bart's Supper Club was right down the street. The Woodward Avenue Brewery wasn't open yet, but he was pretty sure that Comos was. They were all fine options, but Thomas wasn't that hungry – he wasn't even hangover hungry – he had no craving for salty fatty food, or for bread to soak up the alcohol in his system. He remembered then that he hadn't eaten a substantial meal since the morning his car was stolen nine days ago.

He wondered how long he could go. He had no money, or very little at any rate – about twenty dollars. He felt his stomach – it was as tight as a drum. It ached dully, but it always did – he hadn't thought about it in a long time. There was a sharp pain when he

pushed on it, and he began to feel queasy. He drove another block down Woodward and saw a donut shop, where he bought two double chocolate donuts and a large coffee. The donuts went down slow and hard. They had no flavor, just a sticky richness in the back of his throat and an impression of sweetness that he couldn't really taste.

He tried the coffee – it might as well have been warm tap water.

He put his nose to the opening of the cup and inhaled deeply. Nothing. He put his nose in the donut bag and tried that too, with the same result. He experimented by degrees, trying his own armpit, an old McDonald's bag left there by his sister, and the car's ashtray. He smelled nothing, and he tasted very little more.

It's all boring, Thomas thought, this flavorless food, the dull coffee – nothing has anything left to it. The snow has washed everything white and the sun hides, keeping everything half-dark even at noon. The whole world has gone lame and monotonous.

That's what people want though – for everything to be lame and monotonous. That's why there are no parties: nobody wants them anymore. They'd rather just sit around and watch Friends than make any themselves. They'd rather watch Solid Gold than learn how to dance – if that's even still on. American Idol? Whatever. It's all baby food, just easily digestible crap.

He left the donut shop and drove up eight mile road. He drove past the Michigan State Fair Grounds, which were completely empty and covered in slushy snow. He'd been to the Michigan State Fair a few times in junior high and high school. It was alright, a place to get high, eat elephant ears, and ride dirty rattle-trap roller coasters.

He drove past The Booby Trap strip club, where Stevie D had taken him on his eighteenth birthday, the only club in Detroit where the girls danced all nude that was also

eighteen and up instead of twenty-one. He remembered it in bits and pieces – that it was very dark; that they were the only patrons except for an old white man on a rascal scooter that bought a whole night’s worth of dances from the only pretty girl in the joint; that the bouncers were big, black, and bored; that the little light there was came from neon tubes and a large jukebox that served as a DJ; that the girls were mostly old, or fat, or had pimples on their backs and arms. He tried to smoke a big cigar that night, a birthday present from Stevie, but he didn’t quite have the hang of it. He didn’t cut the mouth end and he kept trying to suck smoke through the leaf. Stevie set him straight and cut the slobbery tip off with his pocket knife, and when it really got to smoking, one of the strippers came up to their table and asked to try it while she wiggled her way onto Thomas’ lap, and he said sure, but she smoked it like a cigarette and fell dizzy off the slim and short stage halfway through her next dance.

The rest was all service stations, tire and rim shops, a Goodwill, and some parking lots. Thomas turned right on I-75 and headed south, merged onto I-94, exited at Michigan Avenue and rode that to Telegraph, which he drove to Antonios. It took just over half an hour, but driving anywhere in Detroit does. He consciously avoided his usual parking space and parked closed to the front door. He locked his own doors, checked them, left the car, then came back to check them again before going in.

Inside, he didn’t wait to be seated. The hostess, the old woman with the pursed lips and smoke-stained teeth, nodded to him and he proceeded to his usual booth to sit alone. The hostess brought him coffee.

“Rough night?” She asked.

Thomas nodded, and loaded his sugar with coffee and cream.

Darryl took the seat opposite him.

“You look like shit,” Darryl said.

“Shitty day,” Thomas replied.

“You want something to eat?” Darryl asked.

Thomas shook his head. “I’m not hungry,” he said, and his stomach bubbled in argument. Thomas winced.

“Get drunk last night?”

“Yeah,” Thomas said.

“You been drinking a lot, huh?” Darryl asked.

“Might as well – nothing else going on,” he said.

“I hear that,” Darryl said.

“You know what’s up with tonight?” Thomas asked.

“Chop Shop, doors at ten, Baxter goes on at midnight. Ten dollar cover,” Darryl said.

“Not the Slaughterhouse again?”

“Nah, last one got too big. Haas said it was either gonna be the Chop Shop or Mack-and-Bellevue,” Darryl said.

“Ugh, fuck ‘crack-and-hell-view’,” Thomas said.

“Ghetto ass shit,” Darryl agreed.

Thomas drank his coffee and Darryl twiddled his thumbs.

“What’s up with you?” Thomas asked.

“That girl’s old man came in here yesterday. Told my black ass to stay out of his white neighborhood,” Darryl said.

“Fuck that,” Thomas said.

“That’s what I was thinking. I don’t know – I’m not really that into it, you know?”

“So what though? You gonna just break of chasing that tail ‘cause her old man said so?” Thomas asked.

“It’s complicated,” Darryl said.

“Don’t sound complicated to me. You want to get with her, it ain’t none of her old man’s business,” Thomas said.

Darryl thought about it.

“You’re right,” he said, “but I ain’t gonna call her house to hook up. He answered last time and she didn’t get the message.”

“She’s got a cell now, as if you ain’t heard the radio,” Thomas said, “call Rachel and get it.”

“I’ll do that,” Darryl said thoughtfully.

The restaurant was dead, and Darryl had nothing to do, so he poured Thomas another cup of coffee and got one for himself too.

“I saw Cass last night,” Thomas said.

“Redheaded or – “

“Yeah, Redhead,” Thomas said, cutting him off.

“How she doin’?” Darryl asked.

“I don’t remember,” Thomas said.

“You must have been tore up.”

Thomas nodded.

“She put me to bed in the back of my car,” he said.

“Damn.”

“Yeah – she was with some guido, I remember that. She kept talking about dominant male minds or something,” Thomas said.

“Huh?” Darryl asked.

“I don’t know. God, it’s not what I thought it would be like!” Thomas groaned.

“How you mean – with Cass?”

“Yeah just –you know how you see things kind of play out in your head, and then it really happens and it’s nothing like you pictured? That was it. That’s what seeing her was like. I was drunk and she was a bitch,” Thomas said.

“What did she do that was bitchy?” Darryl asked.

“I don’t know – just the impression I got. Like, this dude she’s with is telling her what to say and what to do, you know? That’s not how I remember her.”

Darryl nodded and said, “I didn’t know her that well.”

“Yeah, she wasn’t around for very long,” Thomas said.

Thomas slid out of the booth and stood up.

“I’m gonna get out of here. I got some errands to run,” he said.

They shook hands, and Thomas left.

Darryl called Rachel from the kitchen phone. She answered after two rings and was only too happy to pass along Jenna’s cell phone number. Darryl wrote the number on an order ticket, thanked her and hung up.

He turned the ticket over in his hand, watched it turn for a while, and then called the number.

“Hello,” Jenna answered.

“You alone? Can you talk?” he asked.

“Yes – who is this?”

“Darryl,” he said.

“Oh hi!” she exclaimed.

“You know about the party tonight?” he asked.

She hesitated, but answered yes.

“I’ll understand if you don’t want to go,” he said.

Another pause, and then she said, “Pick me up at 10:00,” and gave him directions to her block, but not to her house.

Thomas drove down his street, stopping shy of the corner due south of his father’s house. He had planned to pick up a change of clothes, and to rummage around his floor for any spare cash. He had a basketball that he wanted, a few CD’s, but mostly he could live without the things in his room.

He didn’t drive the last block. The for-sale sign was out in front, perched like a wide porkpie hat atop a larger sign for a commercial realtor. His father’s car was in the driveway. It was Saturday, and of course his father was home. He worked and he watched television, and both of them he did by himself as much as possible. The man didn’t have any friends, no hobbies.

Just then, his father emerged from the house. Thomas sat perfectly still, killed the engine, and slunk down behind the dash. He watched his father, who kicked the light snow on the driveway as if considering whether it was worth shoveling. He decided it

wasn't and turned to go back into the house, but then stopped to straighten the sign in the yard. He stepped back to admire it. He went back inside.

Thomas' father had been swept up like everyone else from his generation into believing the Detroit myth – that if you didn't drop out of high school, kept your nose clean, and got a job at the Big Three, you'd be fine right through retirement. You just had to keep your head down and not volunteer anything, do what you were told, and forty years later you'd find yourself settled into a neighborhood with full-grown kids, a pension, and enough spring in your step to enjoy it.

They'd stopped peddling that myth about the time Thomas was halfway through high school. They had names for it – career diversity, self-branding, flexibility – but it all came down to: don't count on anything we've said for the last fifty years, because you ain't getting *shit*.

They'd taken care of Thomas' father so far. He'd done what he was told. He never raised a stink. He wasn't too smart that he couldn't razz the college boys that thought they knew something about business, nor too dumb to make fun of *those guys from Detroit* that worked the line. He was so perfectly in the middle that nothing should ever have gone wrong.

Baby-food bland, Thomas thought, *no sweet, no sour, no high, no low – just Gregg Kowalski and his magical boring family.*

Thomas put the car in drive and left the neighborhood. He had a few hours to kill. He had no one he needed to see, and nothing he needed to do, and no money to do it with. He could sweet talk someone at the door, and they'd let him in with no cover – he was well known and well liked enough for that. He could swipe a bottle or two of water if he

got thirsty, and he already knew he wouldn't need to eat. *I haven't eaten all week*, he thought, *why would I need to start now?*

He took a tour. He drove 696 up to the wide open asphalt prairie of Groesbeck Avenue and took that to fifteen mile road where he turned left, back towards Sterling Heights and Warren. There were two or three service stations on every corner, but he had plenty of gas – his sister had filled up the big tank two days ago, and the car got good mileage. Gas was up to over two dollars a gallon.

He drove past dozens of diners serving hundreds of coffees, burgers, omelets, Coney island hot dogs, whatever the people wanted. He could see the menus now – appetizers on the first page, salads under that, then burgers, then subs and sandwiches, then home-cooked specialties, followed by Italian and Mexican. Drinks were second-to-last, and at the trailing edge was an unobtrusive *healthy choices* menu that no one ever read.

He passed Sterling Heights High School, a dated super-modern relic of the 1970's that must have looked high-tech and sophisticated when it was built and invited in its first graduating class. It was made of cinder blocks painted over with so much semi-gloss that the surfaces were smooth and sticky-soft, in shades of bismuth pink, mint green, or cream beige, all colors that at some point in pseudo-science history were supposed to be calming and conducive to concentration and learning, back in the days when people thought they had the whole world figured out, thought that they'd cracked the secrets of the human mind in such a way that a color or a song or a certain level of lighting could control a person's behavior. Now they went back to what had always worked – men with guns. Nothing says *obey* like a cop with a uniform and a sidearm, ready to shoot some

school-of-choicer, or *Detroit-honor-roller* for having their hood pulled up and their quick hands in their pockets. What did it mean to be a Homecoming Queen or the Big Man on Campus at such a place? The McDonalds down the road had more spirit.

Diner, gas station, Coney island, hotel, office, gas station, gas station – they blurred together. No one was better than another. People grew their own regional loyalties mostly based on what was close, but there was no real way of telling one block from another. Some blocks were unique enough, like Van Dyke between thirteen and fourteen mile road, the block with the huge indoor golf dome and the giant super K-mart, but then the unique blocks were nothing but suburban pabulum with the volume turned up. It was all bland and boring, nondescript and plain – and there was plenty of it.

By ten o'clock, Thomas had driven sixty miles through the suburbs and could not recollect a moment of what he had seen. He spent the last hour with one eye on the road and one eye on the dashboard clock, and at ten o'clock on the nose he merged on to I-94 at twelve-mile-road and drove to the Chop Shop. It took about half an hour to get there.

Chapter 24.

On the other side of the state, while Thomas talked to Darryl at Antonio's, Justin hunched over a public computer at the Four Pines Public Library, and explained the D-Luv forum to Eddie, who bent over his shoulder.

"Alright, so this is a big internet thing where they all talk about what parties and what-not they're going to, and we just have to figure out what it's called," Justin said.

Eddie stank. His skin wept whiskey and gin, and he hadn't bathed in days. Justin breathed through his mouth as he spoke.

"Well where the fuck is it?" Eddie growled. A woman behind them made a shushing sound, but Eddie cowed her with an evil wide-eyed glare.

"It's either at the corner of Mack and Bellevue or some old chop shop," Justin said.

"Well, which is it?"

"I don't know yet – I called the info line, but it says to call back later. I asked on the message board, but people just called me a fag," Justin said.

"Get the car – we'll check them both."

"But they're on opposite sides of the city?" Justin whined.

"You got something better to do?" Eddie asked, and could not have made a clearer threat.

Justin walked out to the nearly-empty parking lot, which was shared by the library, city hall, and the police station. It was mostly empty – the best and closest parking spots by each municipal building were filled up, and the few other cars slowly

trickled away from the doors. The middle of the lot was open, empty, and cold. The sky was overcast, dove-gray. The wind was bearable, the snow still white and thick on the ground.

He felt like a fish in a barrel.

What if I just ran? He wondered, what if I took off and left him here? Then he'd have to cross the lot, maybe get picked up by his old buddies – wouldn't have to worry about it again.

Sure, he'd make a big stink, tell mom, raise all kinds of hell, but it'd be him that went to Jackson and not me.

But he's my brother, he thought, and that one thought stopped his flooding fantasy of disloyalty like a dam.

Eddie knows what he's doing, he'll take care of this thing, he thought.

He started the car, let it warm up, and pulled it around to the back entrance of the library. Eddie, hidden in the shadows of the doorway, slinked out while looking over his shoulders and got into the passenger's side.

"Go, go, go!" Eddie commanded.

Justin hit the gas. The car lurched at the sudden acceleration, and they were on the road.

"That goddamned librarian was asking me about a thousand goddamned questions," Eddie said.

"Well, it's not like she could know anything," Justin offered in consolation.

Eddie snorted and sneered and said, “well what would you know about that? You know what everybody’s thinking all the time? Come on, Karnak, what am I thinking right now?”

“I’m sorry,” Justin said.

“Goddamn right you are – what took you so long?” he asked as he reached under his seat for a pint bottle of Jack Daniels.

“I warmed up the car – it was freezing and I figured you’d be more comfortable,” Justin said.

Eddie drank and said, “that was dumb.”

Justin’s hands clenched the wheel.

“But thanks,” Eddie said, “it was dumb, but it was a nice gesture,” Eddie said, and Justin’s hands relaxed.

They gassed up at the Texaco station on the edge of town, and drove up M-60 towards I-94, exactly the way Thomas and Haas had gone before.

Roy’s house was empty – *wrongly* empty. In the same way that he could hear the television whine when it wasn’t tuned to a channel, or know that the refrigerator was working to hard even though he didn’t actually *know* how often it should run, he knew the house was empty. Jenna could have been out, sure, but instinct told Roy that she would have stayed home tonight. He called out her name, but she didn’t answer. He had the curious disappointment of someone who flicks on a disconnected light switch and, expecting light, gets nothing but a muted *click*.

He showered and dressed – it was night time, a little after 10:30. He was on third-shift hours, and he naturally slept through the day. He'd stopped trying to fight it years ago, about the time Jenna started high school. It only bothered him when he missed a fishing trip, or when he had to go to the bank and plow through into late morning in order to get his business done. Normally, he found being a night owl advantageous – no crowds, rarely any traffic, the comparative quiet of his “day” to that on the other side of the clock.

But it was too quiet in the house, and he knew she was out, and that she wouldn't just be out at Denny's. He'd pushed too hard, he was sure, but he still felt justified. What he'd said was for her own good, and when she got home, she would catch it. It was always easier to hit hard up front and then back off, which was what he intended to do. If he could keep her from seeing that boy and keep her out of downtown, great – if he could just keep her out of town and be enough of a nuisance to hinder the relationship until it wound down naturally, good. If the whole thing backfired and she was going downtown with him – that was no good at all.

He made a simple breakfast – one fried egg, one English muffin, one glass of orange juice. He microwaved and drank the two cups of cold coffee in the decanter. He cleaned his dishes. Then he got nose-y.

He went upstairs to Jenna's room and knocked gingerly on the door, then more firmly when he heard no answer. He pushed the door open a crack, then wider, and finally walked in. He turned on the bedroom light.

She'd cleaned the room, which wasn't surprising since she often cleaned when she was angry. The dirty clothes overflowed the hamper, but they were at least in the

hamper as opposed to congregating on the floor. The blinds were closed, the bed was made, and on the bed was a glossy black card. The card read:

Mustang Productions and Detroit Beat Collective are proud to present:

*PLUR-fect Match
ANOTHER nite of hardkore old skool:
Last time, we brought it and you caught it, so let's do it again!
Big ups and warm welcomes to the Newest DBC spinner,
Superstar DJ B-X-T!*

On the other side were DJ biographies, a time, a date, and a number to dial for information. He dialed the number, but the recorded voice told him it was too early, and that he should call back.

He tapped his foot impatiently, biting his lip. She was out – probably with that boy – and she was in the city. He went downstairs to the list of important phone numbers on the refrigerator, but he had not written down his daughter's cell phone. He cursed himself, and then called Bill.

He reached Bill's house in ten minutes, and inside Bill showed him a busy internet message board on his computer.

"This is it here – they're calling it *Plurfect Match*, and it's at an old auto-garage in Detroit," Bill said.

"I can find that, I think," Roy said.

"Hey, you want an extra set of eyes?" Bill asked earnestly.

"I'm sure it's alright," Roy said.

"That's a rough neighborhood – why don't you let me ride shotgun?" Bill asked, and he seemed so eager to go that Roy agreed.

Chapter 25.

At the Chop Shop, party kids parked in any of the nearby potholed and dark lots – nobody else was using them – because the old body shop was overfull of beat up and busted old cars from every model year since 1970 and had no more room to host its guests. The lot was caged in by a tall chain-link fence crowned with barbed wire. Anyone could walk around the lot unimpeded, but at the front door, two tough and surly men stood ready to frisk partiers, and make sure they handed their ten dollars to the skinny goateed kid with the cashbox.

Thomas knew the kid, though he ran with a different clique. His name was Todd, and he was a heavy junglist – a party kid who listened to a lot of jungle and drum-and-base, who wore camouflage pants and thick, baggy hoodies, and alternated between weed and speed depending on his frame of mind. He was a pushover to let Thomas in for free, and he told him that he was one of the first ones in.

“Where’s Haas?” Thomas asked.

“I don’t know – said he’d be late. Megan’s the last person I know that talked to him,” Todd said.

Thomas shook Todd’s hand and went inside. The Chop Shop was as filthy and dark as ever. Todd sat in a sort of foyer that was warm and well lit compared to the night outside, but the black cave inside was like Michigan winter neon-lit. Lights slashed through the blackness left and right, disco balls shot bright spots near its own base and phantasmal wands of weak reflection out beyond. Everything steamed – the lights, the

speakers, the few bodies trying to dance to ward off the frigid cold. It wasn't the biggest venue, but big enough that light from the brilliant and fast-moving spots near the ceiling were dim and slow by the time they reached the back wall.

Finesse was behind the decks spinning a Goa set, a trippy sort of psy-trance that followed the trance conventions of build up, crescendo, drop, repeat, but interwove that texture with undulating rhythms, Tibetan throat singing, any manner of strange tones. To listen to goa trance was to experience the mental equivalent of standing up in a row boat. It was a primal sort of music, very *spiritual*, they called it – the sort of thing that ravers at summer festivals listened to as they formed close circles and stripped nearly naked to dance without form or rhythm, just sweat and vibe.

Thomas hugged himself and let out a billow of steam. Instinctively he reached for his phial, but the empty thing back in his pocket. There was nothing to speed this part of the night along – he could only endure it.

The bathroom was in the back, and though he'd been to parties here before, and knew what to expect, nothing ever really prepared him for the nastiness of it. The floor was an ice rink of backed-up sewage: water and urine suspended all other manner of excrement as well as old glow-sticks, flyers, tampons, and discarded clothing in a solid and treacherous mass. The toilets didn't work, naturally, and the partitions between walls were broken, so boys and girls used the same room, usually just unzipping in a corner and letting fly. Mercifully, the lights didn't work and so the real horror of the place could only be guessed by the feel of the squishy and uneven floor, and the rank smell. Thomas pissed in the back corner and let his eyes adjust to the darkness, then shook his head in disgust.

There were two significant rooms to the venue – Finesse spun in the main room surrounded by his DBC friends. Thomas recognized Megan Isom and Mike Armstrong. The three, along with a few other people Thomas didn't know, stood behind a white limousine. The turntables were balanced on the roof of the car, and Finesse spun records with the top half of his torso emerging from the sunroof. Green and purple spotlights waved back and forth across the group and the car. They seemed caught up in themselves, talking and drinking liquor from plastic cups. Even Finesse only paid an inkling of attention to the turntables when he changed records - otherwise he laughed and joked with the rest. Thomas did not go to them.

Instead, he went to the back room. There was a narrow passageway connecting the two, and off to the right of that passage was a walk-in safe. It always terrified Thomas. No one had ever been shut into it that he knew of, but the thought of being shut into total darkness behind eight inches of hardened steel with only a bunch of incoherent doped-out party kids to release him persisted in his mind with terrifying vividness. He shuddered as he passed.

The back room wasn't in use. There was a heavy steel desk here facing the back wall that was usually in service holding up turntables, but now it just had a couple of sketched out ravers trying to huddle for warmth and give each other back rubs. There were three or four party kids falling into their own k-holes, the hallucinogenic slump of a ketamine overdose, who sat on the floor with their backs against the walls staring straight ahead and seeing nothing. There was an older black man here too, laying under a blanket to the right of the steel desk. Curious, Thomas looked closer – it was Muddy, the old toothless parking lot attendant from the Slaughterhouse. He clutched a pint bottle of

Night Train, and empty forty-ounce bottles of beer and malt liquor surrounded him like glass sentries. Thomas left him alone and returned to the main room to wait for Haas.

The crowd grew and the room began to warm up. The light from the strobes and spots overhead now fell on party kids in heavy sweatshirts and wool skull caps, all crowding together or dancing wildly for warmth. Smoke from dozens of cigarettes and a handful of joints mingled with the steam from their sweating bodies to make a putrid haze that filled the upper half of the venue and drifted out through the wide open gashes torn in the ceiling.

Darryl and Jenna found the place like that at eleven thirty. They paid their cover giddily, and immediately bought two bottles of water.

“It’s too cold to drink water,” Jenna said.

“You’ll be sweating in no time, so drink up,” Darryl said.

“Do we want pills?” Jenna asked.

“You go on ahead if you want. I’m gonna get my dance on for a minute,” Darryl said, and Jenna joined him in the middle of the floor. Darryl avoided any downrock – he stayed on his feet and kept it simple to keep from touching the floor with anything but the soles of his shoes, and to stay dancing with Jenna and not relegate her to mingling in with the crowd, friendless and alone.

Maria found them. She had come alone, and seemed cheerless. She pressed her thumb into Jenna’s ear and asked if she’d seen Thomas. Jenna replied that she’d just arrived. Darryl said the same, but added that he’d seen him at Antonio’s that day. Maria frowned and tried to dance, managing nothing more than a weak kick-step, but between the three of them – Maria, Darryl, and Jenna – a mood began to catch, and the other party

kids started to hop and skip along until that particular portion of the room began to look like something approaching fun.

Rachel arrived next, hanging on the arm of Tony Gino with the carriage of a golden-age actress. Tony looked around nervously, but then relaxed when he didn't see Baxter or Thomas, or anyone else who would recriminate him right off the bat. Both were dressed to impress, fit more for a night at a downtown club with a twenty-dollar cover than a west-side warehouse rave. They nearly matched, both dressed in black slacks and black sweaters with silver earrings and polished leather shoes, but Tony wore a navy peacoat, and Rachel wore a black belted leather jacket. Nate Dog followed them in, wearing phat pants, white adidas sneakers, a triple extra large hoodie that came down to mid thigh, and a neon orange bucket hat.

They found Jenna, Darryl, and Maria immediately. They traded hugs and the started to dance together, smiling widely, until Maria pulled Rachel aside. They spoke with their thumbs in one another's ears.

“What?” Rachel asked with hostility.

“Nothing, I just wondered if you'd seen Thomas,” her cousin said.

“Haven't seen him, wouldn't want to,” Rachel said.

“What's up with you and Tony?” Maria asked.

“Why does everyone think it's their business?”

“I'm just asking,” Maria said.

“Well it's just a thing,” Rachel said, and then asked, “are you holding?”

“I've got nothing – I thought Tony would have a little.”

“All gone,” Rachel frowned.

“We’ve got to find Thomas or Haas - I don’t trust these shady fucks,” Maria said, indicating the baggy-clothed boys who gathered around the back restroom, offering pills, coke, or whatever else they had in their pockets to passers-by.

Rachel said nothing, which was a sign of agreement. She was busy trying to burn a hole in Megan Isom’s head with her eyes, but if the other woman felt it, her head stubbornly refused to burst into flame.

“What a cunt,” Rachel said, but Maria had moved on to look for Haas.

Partiers continued to trickle in as midnight approached, and the main room had nearly filled to capacity. Thomas wove his way around them deftly, looking always for Haas and dodging anyone he knew, giving the occasional hug or handshake to a casual acquaintance here or there, but never engaging anyone for long. His eyes darted anxiously about, but he did not see Haas, and he did not see Maria until she had him cornered.

“Thomas!” she screamed so that he would hear. He turned to face her with a sense of resignation more fit for the gallows than a party. He smiled and waved, and sturdied himself for conversation.

“Where the fuck have you been?” she yelled, this time out of anger.

Thomas shrugged and said, “I’m looking for Haas, have you seen him?”

“Fuck Haas! Everyone’s been worried sick about *you*,” she said.

“I’m not holding anything,” he said with a shrug.

“That doesn’t matter,” she said, but her eyes began to play from side to side as she waited for Thomas to speak.

“I’m broke,” he said, “Haas has all my money. That’s why I’m looking for him.”

“Oh, well, okay – let’s look for him together!” she said, her mood suddenly brightening.

“You’re not holding anything?” Thomas asked furtively, “this whole thing is – you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Maria frowned, and then looked towards the bathroom thoughtfully.

“Do you want a pill? Or blow? Or what?” she asked.

“Blow,” Thomas said eagerly.

“Hold on,” Maria said, and hurried over to one of the boys she’d dismissed as shady not so long ago. She came back with her hand clenched tight, anxiously looking about.

“Shake my hand,” she said, and slipped Thomas a tiny plastic bag.

Thomas led her to the back, which was exactly as he’d left it except for the addition of another dozen ravers giving light shows and massages, or squatting against the walls. The light from the glowsticks was dazzling in the darkness, and Thomas found he had spots before his eyes. When his vision returned, he poured some of the coke from the bag onto the back of his thumb and did a very chunky and clumsy bump. The rush was nearly immediate – the familiar aspirin flavor in the back of his throat told him that the good feeling was on its way, which was a good feeling in and of itself. His pulse quickened, his jaw clenched, and his sense of urgency in finding Haas renewed. He surveyed the room again. Muddy was still laying under his blanket, but he no longer held the bottle of Night Train. His eyes were wide open, staring straight at Thomas, who quickly looked away and left.

“Let’s dance – he’s probably coming with Baxter,” Maria said cheerfully.

“Hey, look – are we cool?” Thomas asked.

Maria’s smile vanished. She had been reaching out to take Thomas’ hand and lead him to where the others were dancing, but she let the hand fall.

“Whatever,” she said, “just have fun.”

Thomas nodded and followed behind with heavy steps.

They found Rachel, Tony, and Darryl. Nate was off to one side, trying to pick up a heavily candied raver girl. Thomas recognized her – it was his friend Lissa, and she was fifteen. He figured that Nate didn’t know about their six-year age difference. Maybe he didn’t care. The scene had always been an ageless thing, it was more about who you knew and what you did within it that determined who you were, and if you were a little too young or a little too old, a little too much of a geek, that got overlooked if you could dance, or spin records, or if you had pills or you knew the right people.

There was an awkward sort of hello between Thomas and Tony, and they danced opposite each other, not making eye contact, each trying to pretend the other wasn’t there. Jenna and Darryl danced together, and Thomas looked on appreciatively – Jenna was picking up some of Darryl’s style. She would probably be a good dancer. He noticed that Darryl was keeping it simple, and he understood why – he used to the same thing with Maria, and Cassandra before that.

Thoughts of Cassandra welled up in him and choked him. He began to dance with vigor. He gave into the beat, really surrendered to it, and he started to break out all his old moves. He danced with abandon, with the same heedless and invulnerable spirit of a running child who has not yet learned to fear a fall. It was therapy to abuse his feet, to tax

his muscles, to make his joints and bones ache. The more he danced, the more his endorphins kicked in, and the less he thought about anything.

It takes courage to even start to dance, to admit that you don't know how, but to take a few tentative steps and try to time them to the rhythm. Some people get good and drunk first, and they might even look okay, dancing on the front-beat, ones and threes, knees bobbing, feet planted firmly in place. Wedding dancers, bar-mitzvah breakdowns, one-too-many at the company party – even that little bit takes a tremendous amount of confidence. Some people never dance, they just hold up the wall wishing that they knew what to do at best, or at worst developing a pathological hatred for dancing, calling it vain and shallow, even sinful.

After those first steps come the second, and the third. It's not hard to learn how to dance. Playing an instrument, making money, painting a portrait – it's yours if you want it. But not many people know what they really want. They don't want to play an instrument, they want to be musicians. They don't want to make money, they want to spend it, and so on. Dancing is not hard. Dancing *well* is a skill. It takes tremendous strength and endurance, and the ability to listen. Foreknowledge of a song doesn't hurt either – it looks good to freeze on a drop beat, or spin on a rewind, but if you dance long enough, you can dance to anything, so long as it's what you want.

The more you dance, the better it feels. It can hurt, yes, in the knees, the lower back, between the shoulders, the feet, the shins. Dance long enough and you'll be in a world of pain – something will break or tear or otherwise give and you'll lay yourself up but good, but before that crash (that crash which need not even be inevitable!) is the bliss

of synchronicity and unity, the exhilaration of competition, and the adulation of the crowds who watch and cheer.

The floor of the Chop Shop was rough and uneven, a mix of brick, broken concrete, and bear earth. It was pitted and cracked, and Thomas came down hard in just such a pit with the outside of his right foot. Expecting solid ground, Thomas barely had time to open his eyes in alarm when his foot sliced through thin air instead. His ankle twisted violently to the inside with a sound like ripping burlap. There was a sharp stab of pain, then a swollen numbness, followed by a long, slow hurt.

“Oh fuck,” Thomas said as he hopped on his left foot.

Darryl saw Thomas’ step go foul, and said “you turn it?”

Thomas nodded.

“Alright, let’s get you off it – lean against this post – alright, I know I got a brace in my car – I’m-a be right back,” Darryl said into Thomas’ ear.

Thomas grimaced and Maria asked what was wrong. He explained, and she frowned sympathetically.

“Know what you need?” she asked.

Thomas shook his head.

“Phatty rolls yo,” she said, and put a pill in his hand.

“I don’t have any money,” he protested as he pocketed the pill.

“It’s okay, get me back when Haas gets here,” she said.

“Got water?” he asked.

She trotted off to the water seller and bought two bottles.

Someone behind the turntable turned the volume of the music down to about half of its window-shaking level, and Megan Isom picked up the microphone.

“What’s up Detroit?” She asked, and the crowd cheered and whooped, and raised their lighters and glowsticks into the air.

Rachel grabbed Tony by the arm and started to drag him towards the back room.

“Come on, I’m not listening to this shit,” she said, and Tony was towed behind.

“I said what’s up DETROIT? How you motherfuckers feeling out there? Cold enough for you? Listen, we’ve got our main man, the newest DJ in the DBC family, mister superstar DJ B-X-T coming up next, and he is going to tag team the *hottest* track, the fucking *sexiest* track you have *ever* heard in your lives!”

Maria was back with two bottles of water, and she handed one to Thomas. He drank, but he didn’t take the pill yet. He was watching the front of the room for Baxter and Haas.

Baxter appeared behind the decks from some unseen quarter. Thomas knew that unless there was a secret entrance, he had been there the whole time. Thomas blushed with embarrassment, certain he’d been seen and ignored.

Baxter’s hair gleamed from the thick gel holding it in place. He wore oversized sunglasses speckled with rhinestones and gold that twinkled and glistened in the spotlights. When he held his hands up over his head as if holding back the wave of wild applause that rushed over him, gaudy rings sparkled on his fingers. He wore skin-tight a silk shirt, unbuttoned to his ribs, showing off his smooth, hairless chest, and over that he wore a sleek, dark brown calfskin jacket.

“Give it up Detroit for DJ B-X-T and his tag team partner, DJ Finesse!” Megan screamed, the microphone feeding back, but the crowd too wild and loud to hear.

Baxter laid down a record and signaled to Finesse that they should start the change-over. He took the microphone from Megan and said.

“Thank you Megan, much love Detroit –how you feeling tonight? Yeah, fuck yeah, I love this city! I fucking love this city! Listen - the man of the hour cannot be here. You all know Haas, and his camel-jockey ass is heading back east for a little vacation, but he wants to say he’s got mad love for you all – we’ve had a PLUR-fect fit, a PLUR-fect match, and that when he gets back...when he gets back, it’s going to be PLUR-fect timing!”

The ravers went delirious, and they gaped and gasped, screamed and whistled in a frenzy. They were stirred up and wild, thinking their scene was coming back, and they reveled and spun in the pale green and dark purple light. As the first notes of the track dropped, the spotlights went out and ultraviolet black lights came up so that the eyes and teeth of everyone assembled glowed yellow-white.

Thomas’ stomach turned. Haas had skipped town with Thomas’ last eight hundred dollars. It was gone. It was over.

“Thomas?” Maria asked.

“No, I don’t,” he said, answering whatever question she was going to ask.

She left him and hurried away to the back room. The beat kept thumping, a little more techno than what Baxter usually spun, a little less playful. It was top heavy and dry.

Idly, Thomas fingered the pill in his hands. *Why not?* He thought, *go with a smile*. He looked at the pill carefully under the dark light. It was freckled. *Heroin, a*

bonus, he thought glumly. The side he saw was smooth. He flipped it over, and there embossed on the opposite side was a grasshopper.

He nearly dropped the pill, and then he shoved it in his pocket. His foot failed him as he put weight on it, and he remembered to half-hop afterwards. He headed towards the bathroom, as cool and collected as he could manage. He saw the boy that Maria had bought the pills from. He wasn't hiding.

He was very skinny with a long mulish face. His eyes were light green, nearly yellow, and he was heavily freckled. His reddish-blond hair was kept in a short crew cut, and he wore no hat. He wore a gray ENYCE sweatshirt two sizes too big, and pants to match.

“Want a pill bro? Want yayo?” he asked Thomas.

“Where did you get them?” Thomas asked.

“What are you, a narc? You know you have to tell me if-“

“Where the *fuck* did you get them?” Thomas screamed.

The skinny dealer ran, pushing Thomas out of the way. Thomas landed on his weak ankle and took a spill. His bare hands touched the floor and he squealed with revulsion, then he managed to right himself. He was on his one good foot in no time, and chasing wildly after the skinny kid.

A bouncer caught him halfway between the bathroom and the door.

“Cool it, what the fuck do you think you're doing?” the man said. He was a solid wall of muscle in a tight black sweater. He was black, tall, probably three hundred pounds, and looked like his day job was bending crowbars for wholesale.

“He's getting away!” Thomas shrieked.

“That’s it, you’re out of here,” the man said, and took Thomas by his arm.

“That’s what I fucking *want!*” Thomas yelled.

The bouncer had Thomas half off the ground, but from the wrong side – Thomas was forced to walk on his bad ankle, and the pain was excruciating. Todd, the man at the door, asked what was going on, but Thomas was in no mood to explain, and the bouncer didn’t bother.

Todd ignored Thomas and told another bouncer to step up beside him.

“It’s ten bucks each,” Todd explained to two older men who were trying to crash the gate.

“We’re just going in and out!” Roy said, but Thomas didn’t catch the rest.

The bouncer let Thomas down outside the door. There was a line of party kids, thirty or forty altogether, who either whistled or jeered him as he was evicted.

“Now don’t let me catch you in here again,” the bouncer said in a voice as thick and slow as a barrel of tar.

“God damn it, let me go!” Thomas wailed.

The bouncer gave Thomas’ arm a painful, final squeeze, and a little push for good measure. Thomas hit the ground clumsily and clambered up to his feet before setting into a lame-legged run. He didn’t get far at all – Eddie McAffrey grabbed Thomas’ arm from around the hidden corner of a rusting minivan.

Chapter 26.

Roy and Bill stood google-eyed beyond the entrance. The main floor of the chop shop was a gyrating mass of gray and purple, dotted with jaundiced eyes and neon teeth all bouncing in synchronized cadence to the sinister beat coming out of a white limousine. “This is the place,” Bill said.

“What?” Roy asked.

“I said this is the place!” Bill repeated, but Roy still didn’t hear. He charged headlong into the throng of party kids, yelling for his daughter.

He grabbed at other ravers indiscriminately, looked them in the eye and shouted *Jenna, have you seen Jenna?* but all he got in reply was a gaping pie-eyed stare and the impression of being giggled at as he passed. The bass thumped the walls of his chest against his heart like a trampoline, and he found that he was timing his steps to the beat, and that he couldn’t stop doing it even when he noticed.

He got lucky when he reached the center of the floor and found his daughter dancing all by herself, sweat streaming down her brow, even shining on her bare belly – she was down to jeans, a sports bra, and a visor, chewing a pacifier between her teeth. She had a circle around her, though only about a quarter of the boys seemed to have a lascivious interest – the rest stared vacantly or were dancing themselves. He broke through the wall of the circle and seized Jenna’s shoulders.

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” he asked.

“What?” Jenna asked.

Roy repeated himself, but still wasn't heard. He indicated with his hand that she was to follow behind him. She took a step to do so, and Roy turned his back.

That's when he heard Jenna cry: *Daddy!*

He yelled "don't 'daddy' me!" before he realized the sound wasn't coming from his daughter behind him, but from the speakers ahead.

The speakers thumped out their beat: *Boom-tup-boom-tup-boom-tup* and a squishy synthesizer line hummed along on top like a broken harmonium. There was a bouncy and bubbly midi riff over the top of that, reminiscent of a xylophone being played with unusual slowness. Above all that came the lyrical riff:

Daddy!

I want my Daddy!

My Daddy / he's a black guy

My daddy / is a good dancer

I'm stuck in Detroit! I'm fucking stuck in Detroit!

I want-want-want-want

My daddy-daddy-daddy-daddy

Daddy daddy (pop that pussy)

Daddy daddy (Who's your daddy)

Daddy daddy daddy daddy daddy daddyyyyyyyyyyyyyy

Aghast, Roy charged the limo, determined to stop the record. There were too many party kids in his way, laughing, dancing, kicking, and jumping, and by the time he fought his way clear, the bouncers saw his path of chaos and were immediately in his way.

Roy was significantly bigger than Thomas, but even he would have been no match for the body-building ex-cons that made up the security team. They grinned menacingly, and behind them the DJ's high-fived each other and laughed.

"I think you in the wrong place," one of the bouncers said.

Roy, turning a violent shade of purple-red, held his tongue and looked behind him for Jenna. She had stopped dancing, but she still held the pacifier between her teeth. She had pulled her visor down over her eyes, and held her hand out for her dad to take. He clutched it angrily and dragged her behind.

One of the bouncers stepped in front of him with his hand up, signaling for him to stop. Roy's eyes flashed with Old Testament hatred, but the bouncer was unmoved.

"The girl stays," he yelled.

"This is my daughter, goddamn it!"

The bouncer, holding Roy in place with one slab of hand, leaned towards Jenna and asked her to confirm it. Jenna leaned in herself, put her thumb in the bouncer's ear and began to speak into it.

Roy, completely unfamiliar with the technique and thinking his daughter was crassly showing off, tried to push the bouncer and yanked Jenna's hand. The push only had any effect insofar as Roy shoved himself a good foot to his left, but he did keep Jenna in tow. The bouncer signaled for his fellow to stop them, and the other bouncer stepped in Roy's way.

This bouncer was even bigger and meaner looking than the first. His face was scrunched in on itself and too small for its bald head. His jaw was a cinder block. He had

an ugly scar from the inside corner of his left eye, across his nose, and down to his jaw. He had no neck to speak of, and his chest stuck out an easy eight inches from his chin.

Roy stopped dead. Jenna bumped into him.

“This is my goddamned *daughter*,” he exclaimed.

The bouncer didn’t hear – he only shook his head *no*, and then his eyes widened as he felt something small and hard press into the small of his back. The bouncer turned around slowly to see Bill – jaw trembling, eyes wet and wide – holding a nickel-plated .45 pistol to his midsection.

The bouncer put his hands up and took a step back. Bill waved Roy forward, and Roy stepped around the big man to follow Bill out to the parking lot.

The first bouncer, the one who Roy had attempted to push aside, was on his cell phone dialing 9-1-1. The second bouncer kept backing up with his hands raised in the air until Bill, Roy, and Jenna rounded the corner to the room with the cash box. He took a tentative step forward, and there was a scream from the back room behind the safe – a scream so loud that it could be heard over the music and the shouts and whistles of the partiers. Both bouncers looked behind them, and then it was all they could do to stay on their feet as hundreds of party kids rushed past them like a riptide.

When Rachel hauled Tony to the back room, she’d only wanted to get away from Megan Isom, and bitch about Baxter.

“He’s such an *asshole*,” she said.

“Yeah, I know – can we talk about something else?” Tony asked as he tried to press closer to her.

“Gino, what are you doing?” she asked.

“What do you think I’m doing?” he replied, and lowered his lips to kiss her.

“Ew, no!” she said, and pushed him back.

“What the fuck?” he asked, and then he shook some of the confusion out of his head and said “Okay, fine – I get it. You want a cuddle-slut. You want a boy-bitch.”

“Knock it off,” she said as she dragged angrily on her Parliament.

“Did Baxter have to put up with this shit from you?” Tony asked, and then dismissed her with a wave of his hand, and turned his back to leave her.

Rachel leaned her butt against the steel desk, smoking angrily and making faces at Tony’s back. She looked around at the ravers giving light shows, making out, trading backrubs, or stumbling out of their K-holes and made a sour face of disgust. Two eager kids jumped on the desk beside her and started making out and grinding their crotches together. Their hands held glowsticks and blinking, lighted toys that they waved by each others faces.

“Do you fucking *mind*?” she whined as they bumped her with their elbows. She looked directly into one of the bright LED toys and her eyes seared painfully. She saw spots. She turned away from the desk, took a step, and a half-dozen empty forty-ounce bottles fell like bowling pins, tinkling, ringing, and breaking.

“God *damn* it,” she said. She crouched down to right the bottles. Her eyes had still not adjusted to the light, so she didn’t know what her hand bumped into – only that it was slightly too soft to be the floor, but too hard and too low to be anything else. She touched it again – something furry, and then something rubbery and cold – the rubbery and cold thing had a rift or break in it, and when her finger dipped in, she felt something hard – her

hand recoiled back. One of the ravers dropped a glowstick to where Rachel crouched. It rolled past her heel, down to her toe, and illuminated in pale purple the waxy, wide-eyed and unmoving face of poor Muddy.

“Oh fuck, oh my god, oh fuck, oh fuck,” she said, and then she screamed.

The McAffreys held Thomas just out of sight of the line and the door. Justin was bundled up in a thick Red Wings starter jacket, and he stood with his hands in his pockets. Eddie wore a thick leather jacket, police-issue with straps, slots, and holes to accommodate a nametag, a badge, and other cop accessories, although none of them were in there now. It was the first time Thomas had a good look at Eddie face to face, and he saw a ragged and angry man, half mad with desperation. Eddie had let himself go - his beard was shaggy and unkempt, his hair was unwashed and greasy. His breath stank like old bitter coffee and rye.

“Where you think you’re going, *Tom*?” Justin asked.

“Let me go!” Thomas shouted.

“I don’t goddamn think so, punk,” Eddie said.

“Where’s the shit, boy?” Justin asked.

“I don’t fucking have it, that kid does!”

“What kid? That goddamn sand-nigger?” Eddie asked.

“No, the other kid, the kid that’s getting away!” Thomas yelled and pointed out to the lot.

Eddie brandished a pistol, a .357 revolver with a long nose and black Packmayr grips – a performance gun. He held the muzzle beneath Thomas’ chin.

“Give me the shit!” he screamed, flecks of spittle flying off his tongue and wetting Thomas’ face. Thomas squinted and put his hands up. Justin slapped one hand down.

“You better give it to him – don’t fuck around,” Justin said.

Thomas let Eddie hold him up by the collar of his shirt, eyes closed, one hand up, taking his breath in terrified, shuddering gulps.

“I don’t have it – I swear to god I don’t have it. My car got stolen and –“

“Bullshit!” Eddie screamed, his voice boiling over and hissing. He cocked the revolver slowly, so that Thomas would hear it clearly and feel every percussion of the hammer against his jaw.

“Oh God, oh Jesus, I swear to God I don’t have it. I don’t have it. Haas is gone. Haas doesn’t have it. I know who has it and he’s, he’s, he’s-“

“He’s *what?*” Justin growled.

“He went that way – he went that way – I was chasing – I chasing – I was after –“ Thomas sputtered between broken breaths, pointing out away from the door of the Chop Shop.

“Would you put that fucking thing away? What the fuck did you bring that for?” Roy yelled as they hurried past Todd and out the door.

“Because I’m prepared like a goddamned boy scout and you ought to be thanking me or you’d be some, you know, some *bouncers* girlfriend right about now,” Bill said.

His voice was full of bravado. He was positively turned on.

Roy slowed his pace and said “You’re goddamned paranoid. Bill, I thank you but you have a goddamned problem.”

Bill waved him off and began to put his pistol back in its holster.

“The Shadow knows,” he said.

From the opposite end of the lot, Darryl approached the venue with a cold compress from his first aid kit in one hand, and a neoprene ankle brace in the other. The light was in front of him, the dark shadow of a rusted minivan to his left. He saw nothing in the shadow. In the light he saw Jenna being dragged by Roy, and a man with a gun whom he did not know.

“That’s him! It’s that nigger!” Justin shrieked.

“Hey! Hey!” Darryl yelled at Roy.

Bill pulled his pistol back out of its holster and aimed it at Darryl.

“Back off! Back off!” Bill yelled.

Eddie pushed Thomas into Justin, who caught him roughly by the elbows, but Thomas went as limp as a ragdoll, his stomach in painful knots, and Justin dropped him. Eddie stepped just beyond the shadow of the minivan and fired one fast shot at Darryl. Darryl fell spinning away from where the bullet caught him in the side. He curled into himself, his hands reaching and clawing at the wound. He cried out and then flopped over onto his back. He rolled over onto his belly, then onto his back again, as if he could spin around fast enough to escape the pain.

Eddie spun around, gun swinging wildly, looking for witnesses. Bill saw Eddie and sighted carefully. He pulled the trigger slow and calm, just the way he’d been taught

in firearms safety school. There was a flash of light, a loud crack, and a thin puff of smoke, then Eddie McCaffrey fell to the ground. The top half his head landed a quarter-second later and three feet away.

A deluge of ravers broke down the Chop Shop door with the fury of a stampede. Outside they tripped on potholes and slipped on ice as they scrambled screaming for their cars, and they started them in a chorus of chirping alarms and revving engines. Some ran right past the violent scene outside, others saw the blood and turned around.

Justin McCaffrey ran to his brother and tried to drag him away, but the body was too heavy, and the ground too slick. He slipped, but did not fall. He caught himself and knelt blubbing beside his brother.

“Oh god Eddie, oh god, oh god, oh god, I’m sorry Eddie, oh god, oh god, I’m sorry,” he sobbed.

Jenna shrieked once and buried her face in Roy’s chest. Roy held her close.

“It’s okay sweetie, it’s okay, everything’s okay,” he said, “I’m right here.”

Thomas stood up, wincing as the weight hit his bad foot, but too hopped up on adrenaline to mind the pain. He limped over to Darryl.

“Darryl! Darryl!” he shouted in Darryl’s face.

“Oh fuck it hurts!” Darryl panted.

“Come on, we’re going to a hospital,” Thomas said.

Thomas pulled on Darryl’s arm and Darryl screamed in agony. He stopped pulling and got on the ground with him. He put his hands under Darryl’s armpits and started to lift him gently and guide him to his feet.

Darryl groaned sickly. Blood ran out of his wound and was flooding his sweatshirt with dark redness. The stain was past the waist of his jeans and making progress towards mid-thigh.

“Come on, come on, *come on!*” Thomas urged. They locked arms, leaned on one another, and hobbled off towards Thomas’ car.

Chapter 27.

Thomas drove. His ankle ached, but he didn't mention it to Darryl who lay bleeding in the back seat.

"Darryl, keep talking to me," Thomas said.

"I only got one thing to say – fuckin' shit hurts!" Darryl exclaimed.

"Keep saying it then," Thomas said.

Darryl repeated it a few times, his voice pained and ragged.

"Where the fuck are you *going*?" Darryl asked.

"I don't know where the hospitals are," Thomas said, "I'm not sure where *we* are."

"Oh fuck man – where's the Lodge? Henry Ford is on the Lodge and Grand," Darryl said.

"I don't know where the Lodge is! I don't know where we are!" Thomas said, trying to push down his panic.

"It's east of us – know where east is?" Darryl asked

"No," Thomas said.

With an awful groan, Darryl sat upright in the back seat.

"You're gonna open that up again!" Thomas admonished.

"What street is this up here?" Darryl asked.

"That's gonna hit Davison or 96. Davison hits the Lodge – I don't know about 96."

"Which way do I go?" Thomas asked.

Darryl had slumped back into the rear seat.

“Fucking shit *hurts*,” Darryl said.

“Darryl, just point man – left or right?”

Darryl waved his free hand, the hand that wasn't covered in blood and holding back his insides – but he didn't point out any one direction. Thomas took a deep breath and turned left.

He passed by an oncoming police car and slunk down in his seat. He didn't freeze up, but he kept his face still and his eyes steady on the road in front of him. The cop car drove past them and as Thomas watched in his rear-view mirror, he saw the police car pass him and turn right. If the cop was heading to the Chop Shop, he was turning on Fullerton, and if that was all true, Thomas knew where he was. He drove an anxious block and there was Davison in front of him. He turned right – the John C. Lodge expressway was just nine blocks down, and once he was on the highway it was a clean, straight shot to the hospital.

“Darryl, you still alright?” Thomas asked.

“You know what I'm gonna say.”

“Just hang in there – we're almost there,” Thomas said.

“I left the shit for your ankle,” Darryl said.

“It doesn't even hurt anymore.”

“That's good,” Darryl said.

They drove another half mile.

“What are you gonna do?” Darryl asked, his voice was starting to slur, his words were soft and velvet.

“I don’t know,” Thomas said.

“Furreal though,” Darryl said.

“You got shot and you turn into my dad,” Thomas said.

“Dishtract muh,” Darryl mumbled.

“We’re going to the hospital – we’re gonna get you taken care of,” Thomas said.

“Denn whut?”

“Just worry about that first, okay?” Thomas asked, and when Darryl didn’t answer, repeated, “okay?”

“Kay, Thomuss, kay – tell muh den whut,” Darryl groaned.

“Then a doctor fixes you up, that’s all,” Thomas said.

“Den whut?” Darryl asked.

Thomas stared straight ahead, watching the road, watching for a sign pointing to the hospital.

“Den whut?”

“Then I don’t know what,” Thomas said. Tears started welling up in his eyes. His stomach ached, the pain returned to his twisted ankle. His spine felt stiff, his mouth was dry.

“Haas is gone, I don’t have a job, I don’t know what the police know, so I don’t know what. Oh, and I’m homeless,” Thomas choked, “I’m sleeping in my car – in my sister’s car, that I stole.”

“Stay my place,” Darryl said, “go Canada, go away, stay here.”

Thomas found the hospital and took the off ramp. He didn’t have to do a thing at receiving – he just pulled the car up and the attending security and RN’s pulled Darryl

out. They took him inside on a stretcher – it wasn't like the movies. There seemed to be a lot more fumbling, less panic and shouting. It was surprisingly casual, very relaxed, but still expedient.

They banged the double door to the ER open with the stretcher – that much was like TV, but since TV formed Thomas only impression of hospitals, he didn't know what to do now that the action was in the other room, that he'd been cut, wiped, or faded away.

“Ain't you gonna go?” one of the security guards asked. He was old, retirement age, with salt-and-pepper hair and freckled black skin. He was tall, shuffly, he had the kind of build that suggested orthopedic shoes.

“I want to make sure he's alright,” Thomas said.

“Won't know for a while – and there's gonna be police,” the guard said with a shrug.

“Just to drop him off? I thought this was, like – I drop him off and that's it?” Thomas suggested.

“Could have been if you'd left, but now you here, and there gonna be cops,” the guard said.

Thomas shrugged and started inside.

“You gotta move your car,” the guard said.

Thomas moved his sister's car to the visitor parking lot and walked back to the hospital entrance.

“I thought for sure you were going that time,” the guard said.

“Can I see my friend?” Thomas asked.

“You can wait in the lobby, but if he in the ER, you can’t go see him, no,” the guard said.

Thomas limped into the lobby. A black woman, about twenty years old, sat reading Newsweek by the vending machine. Two kids played lazily with a pile of Legos at her feet. The receptionist flipped through charts, back and forth, back and forth. The lobby was big and wide with a high ceiling. The floor was marble, inlaid with a brass circle touting the hospital’s virtues, but Thomas was too exhausted to notice. He found a chair, slumped down, and passed out.

The police woke him up, but he wouldn’t talk until he’d seen Darryl. They told him he was fine, that the shot hadn’t hit anything vital, but Thomas clammed up until he was let in. Darryl was asleep with two IV’s, one blood, one plasma and antibiotics. He looked pale, but very much alive.

He gave his account of the story three times, each time getting closer and closer to the truth until at last they had it – why the McAfreys were there, why they shot Darryl, and so on. They didn’t believe that Thomas didn’t know anything about Bill, but by the end of the night they had to swallow it.

“Don’t leave town,” they told him, just like the movies, and he didn’t.

Chapter 28.

He cleaned up. A lot of them did. A lot of them went on to straight jobs, such as could be found in the state, and some just left for Chicago, New York, Seattle, or LA. No hard feelings – it was over. PLUR-fect Match was the last big party for them, and with the way *that* ended, they were fine. The youngest of their clique – Lissa, Sally, and their rich friends from the far northern suburbs went on to the next scene, onto Emo, Screamo, Indie, and Goth, then away to college and into jobs. Tony Gino dropped out that night. Without Baxter and Thomas to show him around, he drifted around to some of Detroit's clubs, saw one or two familiar faces and couldn't make his own headway in. He gave the whole thing up and stuck to his work. He did well for a while, but he went bankrupt in 2004, walked away from his condo and mortgage, and moved to Chicago. No one heard from him after that.

Baxter was a hit in Berlin, and also in Tokyo, Madrid, Ibiza, and Miami. He played the exclusive clubs in Las Vegas and the dives in LA, and he made lots and lots of money. He outgrew Megan Isom within a year, but they stayed in touch. He knew everyone and mingled freely. He claimed Detroit. He got searched at airports, but the narcs never found anything, and it was rumored that he'd turned snitch, but no one ever confirmed that just like no one ever confirmed with real surety what happened to Haas.

Thomas knew Haas had never made it back to Kuwait. D-Luv was lit up two weeks after the party with news that Haas had been caught at the border, that the DEA had been watching him for a long time and wanted him to turn snitch, and afterwards two stories emerged.

Some said that Haas did what the DEA asked and ratted out everyone he knew, from top to bottom. They said that he'd been relocated to Texas and continued to two-face everyone he dealt with there, but the scene was wide and diverse, and the general consensus was that if Haas was snitching in Austin, or had rolled over on everyone he knew, then people in Austin would have told their friends in Detroit, or everyone in Detroit who'd dealt with Haas would be locked up, and that just wasn't the case. Still, whenever someone *did* get pinched, someone invariably asked what they had to do with Haas.

The other story went like this:

Caught at the border with warrants for his arrest, Haas surrendered to the Department of Homeland Security and spent a few months in custody trying to squeal on everyone he ever knew. Because he was a foreign national by birth, it would have been easy to charge him with comforting the enemy in times of war – dealing drugs to give money to his Taliban / Al Queda / Hamas / Iraqi friends. He would try to give up everything he had, but no one in DHS cared about a few thousand in narcotics here or there. They cared about what he had to say alright, just not what he had to say about *that*.

Of far greater worth was Haas' way with language, his fluency in Arabic, Farsi, and English. He would have made a top-notch translator, and the government had enough dirt to hold him to it, if they wanted to, and so those not looking over their shoulders for narco men believed with growing seriousness that Haas was now laying bullet-riddled, face down, in a shallow grave in Tikrit, or knee-deep in his own filth in a solitary cell at Gitmo.

Darryl stayed clean, even if he did linger on the pain killers for a while after his surgery. He got better, but never quite got back to one hundred percent. His crew, the Hot Motor City Clique, moved on without him and entered some competitions, but they never got very far. Most of them came back to Detroit and took what work they could as their twenties crept towards their thirties, but Darryl did okay. He graduated from Henry Ford, moved on to Eastern Michigan, got mostly B's, a few A's, a couple C's, and graduated a few years later. He worked sales for a safety supply distributor, and spent his weekends with Jenna. They'd stayed together. Jenna had been obstinate, Darryl persistent, Roy indulgent, and it worked out as it often does. Roy rationalized it later, saying that he just hadn't known what a good kid Darryl was, that, hell, he was better than a lot of the *white* kids he knew.

Roy vouched for Bill at Bill's trial, but the whole thing got washed out quickly. The defense attorney painted Eddie and Justin as real degenerates, and pointed out that Bill always paid his taxes, had a steady job, and had a legal permit to carry, and that was the end of it. The jury, six white men, two black men, three white women, one Latina woman, decided not guilty. Bill was picked up as a sort of folk hero, and when he was laid off from Allied Fabrication, he found easy work out in Holt, near Lansing, doing the same work for less money at a much lower cost of living,

After his brother's death, Justin McAffrey fled to Grand Rapids even though he'd not been formally charged with anything. He lived underground in paranoia for years until he ventured to try moving some bunk product in South Bend, Indiana and caught two slugs to the chest. That was 2005, the same year Maria died of a cocaine overdose after a three-day speedball bender.

Thomas and Rachel talked at the funeral, a hot day at the end of May. There were others there, naturally – Jenna with Darryl, Tony Gino, a big bouquet of flowers from Baxter – but mostly it was a quiet family affair. Maria’s mother avoided Thomas. Rumors persisted that she’d gone a little crazy as her daughter spun downward, and that she blamed Thomas in some unclear way, but Maria seemed to exist a long way back in Thomas’ past.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” Rachel said, her eyes were bloodshot, her nose raw. She had a rockabilly look– her hair styled up in a winged coiffette, long lashes, fishnet stockings under her funerary dress. She introduced Thomas to her boyfriend – Mike Holstead, the pompadoured bartender from Faraday’s. They all shook hands and watched the other mourners file past.

“Yeah, I been busy,” Thomas said.

“Oh yeah? What doing?” Rachel asked.

“I’m working at World Records – it’s over by Antonio’s.”

“Oh, well you must love that the scene is coming back,” Rachel said.

“Is it?” Thomas asked.

“Yeah, that’s what they’re saying on D-Luv.”

“I don’t know – I don’t go out much anymore,” Thomas admitted.

“Are you managing or whatever?”

“Nope, just stock and sales,” Thomas said with a shrug.

Rachel looked as though she’d stepped in something and asked, “how’s that working out for you?”

“It’s good – real good, you know? It’s just work though. I don’t know – it’s fun. The pay is okay, so whatever,” he said.

“Yeah, well, that’s good,” Rachel said through a shallow grin before excusing herself to talk to Jenna and Darryl. Mike lingered behind.

“You doing okay?” Mike asked.

“Me? Yeah, why?”

“I don’t know, just – all this,” Michael said, waving his hand to indicate everything and nothing.

Thomas said, “it could have been any of us, you know? We all just got lucky, is all.”

“You think it was luck?” Michael asked.

“Yeah, mostly. I mean – shit, I was doing so much blow my nose rotted out, you know? Rachel was skin-and-bones for a long time – was she when you met her? No, well she was for sure. Baxter had some kind of collapse in Ibiza from what I heard, so yeah, we were mostly lucky.”

“But you quit, didn’t you? You all did.”

“Right, we all did mostly. But that whole thing with the cops, that was luck too,” Thomas said.

“What thing with the cops?” Michael asked.

Thomas looked puzzled, maybe a little hurt, or maybe like Michael was putting him on.

“I guess I really haven’t been in the loop - I told them everything when I took Darryl to the hospital, then they had questions for me for the next couple months, but

when everything stacked up they didn't have any actual evidence that I'd *done* anything. You can confess to just about anything and it's still on them to prove it.

"So they wanted me to snitch on people, but they didn't have anything to threaten me with, and Haas was my only connection, so that was it."

"Shit," Michael said.

"Yup. Then they found my car, and I figured I'd get busted then – but they only found some residue in the ashtray. The whole thing was jacked – they took the tires, the stereo, the fucking seats..."

"Sell it for scrap?"

"Yeah – I bought that P.O.S. over there for about a grand," Thomas said, and pointed to a green Toyota Carolla in the parking lot.

"So nobody went to jail or anything?" Mike asked.

"The guy that shot the cop did, but just for a couple days."

"I read about that in the Freep."

"But yeah – none of us got in any trouble or anything," Thomas said.

"That's lucky."

"That's what I said."

Michael looked Thomas up and down – Thomas wore a second-hand charcoal suit, black tasseled loafers, and a black silk tie that shone with newness. His hair was trimmed short into a soft buzz cut, and he was clean-shaven. His face was fuller, his eyes less sunken. He looked alright. Michael shook his hand and left him.

The mourner's left, and Thomas followed behind them like a man afraid of contagion. This wasn't a hierarchy – no one was more hardcore than another, no one was

a tourist or a poser. He didn't look down on them, and he hoped they didn't look down on him. He just stood apart and behind, exchanged a few nods and smiles, and then got into his car and left.

No one ever told him that he didn't have to play the game, but he learned. He learned that he didn't have to be part of any scene, that he didn't have to tag along with Baxter or be in good with Haas. He didn't have to work at General Motors or Ford, or spin records, or do anything but wake up, work a day, pay his rent, and sleep, and when he stopped to think, when he cleaned the heart-racing drugs from his system, quieted down the ear-busting music, and wiggled out from under the pressure of his dad he understood that it would be okay to just get by, to rent a small apartment and find a job he didn't hate, to live simply, to relax, to be okay with himself as he was – a slacker, a young man from the suburbs with no big plan, no more and no less.

The funeral was over. He would skip the reception. The sun was shining, it was a beautiful hot day, and he had the rest of the afternoon off work.

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