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The Burn: A novel

Kevin Michael Capp
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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THE BURN: A NOVEL

by

Kevin Michael Capp

Bachelor of Arts
University of South Florida, Tampa
2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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

**Graduate College
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Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative

ABSTRACT

The Burn: A Novel

by

Kevin Michael Capp

Doug Unger, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

The Burn: A Novel tells the story of Richie Thornton, a 21-year-old former petty criminal and minor drug dealer. He's left his sordid often violent past behind him, and now lives with his college-age girlfriend, Laurel Metti, and her parents. It's a strained existence, primarily because Richie doesn't feel he belongs, but he makes do, working as a stockman at an organic food store.

Then he discovers that his cousin, Robert, has been released from prison early. Robert had been put in prison for attacking Laurel one year ago, and his release spells trouble for the new life Richie and Laurel have established for themselves. Richie ultimately decides it's either Robert or him, and sets about attempting to locate his elusive cousin and put him out of commission.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER 1	1
CHAPTER 2	18
CHAPTER 3	32
CHAPTER 4	43
CHAPTER 5	59
CHAPTER 6	79
CHAPTER 7	95
CHAPTER 8	115
CHAPTER 9	132
CHAPTER 10	149
CHAPTER 11	165
CHAPTER 12	188
CHAPTER 13	204
CHAPTER 14	219
CHAPTER 15	235
VITA.....	270

CHAPTER 1

Fronting a strip mall ripe with palms and pink Hibiscuses, Health Nuts Food and Beverage fit into upper-class Temple Terrace by selling an all-natural lifestyle at least one of the store's employees, Richie Thorton, couldn't understand, both because he didn't want to and because it was simply foreign to him. From this mystery came his dislike of the store's customers and its organic food products, as he didn't trust either. Bunch of fakes.

Today Richie had juice on the brain. Orange juice, grape juice, apple juice, cranberry juice—his whole world, it seemed, had turned into one bottle of pure, one-hundred percent, not-from-concentrate juice. He'd stood in the warehouse in the back of the store unloading a semi-truck filled with bottles and bottles of the stuff for the last three hours, and he was tired. Feeling it, man. Since, at 20, Richie was at least ten years younger than most of the stockmen he worked with, he looked nothing like them, his size being more proportional. He had sturdy arms hanging from a broad shoulder-line and a wide, muscular chest and flat stomach all held up by a pair of thick legs. They had arched backs and paunches and legs weighted with excess. His only un-youthful element was his thinning, dirty blond hair. Most of his co-workers still had all theirs, a fact that was not lost on Richie.

The back door had been open for so long to accommodate the semi-truck that the

warehouse had filled with Tampa's summertime heat. Richie could barely take it anymore. Though it had just turned eight p.m., his muscles ached as if it were midnight. Something gotta give.

"Come on," Johnny said to Richie, rumbling towards the truck's open trailer, his back soaked with sweat. "Let's clear this baby out."

Payday was tomorrow, and Richie hoped his one-dollar-an-hour raise would finally show on his check. But, given his record and the way he landed his job, there wasn't much he could do if it wasn't, and in that way he was a lot like the old grunts he worked with, taking it from management as if he wanted the ill treatment. Pussy shit. He pulled the bottom of his shirt up, slid it across the sweat beaded on his forehead, and moseyed over to the trailer. "Don't you want the dolly?" Richie said to Johnny's back.

"Naw, man. We don't need it. Ain't but two crates left."

"Man, I ain't dragging them crates out one by one."

"Ah, quit your crying." Johnny lumbered up the ramp and into the trailer. Huffing and puffing, he repeated, "Ain't but two crates left."

In a weak protest, Richie shot a bird at Johnny's back, before following him into the trailer. Johnny bent down in front of the crates and puzzled at them, scratching his chin.

"You sure you don't want that dolly?" Richie asked with a sigh.

Johnny waved Richie off, wrapped his tubular arms around the top crate, and heaved upwards. Before he could take even one step forward, Johnny keeled over and fell forward right onto the crate, almost bouncing off it before tumbling to the floor with a hollow thud that echoed in the trailer. He lay on his back, clutching his chest, his face wrinkled in pain.

“God damn it,” Johnny said. “Go get that damn dolly, will ya?”

After Richie helped Johnny up, he emptied the trailer while Johnny sat on a stool by a package of organically grown asparagus, occasionally wincing in pain. Richie asked Johnny if he was OK and Johnny said yes. Since the store was closed, only every other light was on, leaving some aisles dark. Richie needed to cool off, and as he did most nights when the heat became too much in the warehouse, he posted up in the dairy aisle. The chill combined with the hum of the coolers soothed Richie. He stood there, enjoying the freeze and the solitude. Then a pair of voices floated out from behind the front-end supervisor’s office door, and Richie’s trance ended. Weren’t he and Johnny the only ones left? The door opened, and Maria, blonde and beautiful, even in her plain, blue cashier’s outfit, emerged and waved back at someone in the office, before bouncing off down one of the darkened aisles.

Terry emerged from the office, his shock of red hair gelled neatly into a swift part, shutting the door behind him. A squirmy grin hung on the side of his face, as if it had been tattooed on. He stopped upon seeing Richie. The grin faded.

“Hey there, Richie,” Terry said, the grin reemerging. His dress shirt was wrinkled in two distinct spots on his chest, as if some one had been clinging to it. He stepped towards Richie. “Thought everybody had cleared out.”

“Not yet,” Richie said. You sly motherfucker, you.

Terry snapped his fingers and pointed at Richie. “Say,” he leaned in. “Can you keep a secret?”

“Sure.”

“How’d you feel about getting paid a day early?”

“Works for me.”

“Ha. Sharp like a tack,” Terry said, heading back to his office. He came back out with the check in his hand a few seconds later. (Better have my raise on it.) “Don’t go spending it all in one place.”

“I’ll try not to.”

Terry smiled awkwardly, and said, “All right then.” He walked off.

When Richie flashed his check, complete with the raise, at Johnny, he grunted, lifted himself off the crate he’d been sitting on, and rumbled out into the store without a word. Richie followed. The store had an eerie feeling during off hours. There were no old folks reading labels, asking Richie questions he didn’t have answers to, like whether the grapefruits came from Odessa, and there were no employees swarming the place, asking customers what they needed, stocking shelves, bagging groceries, all while assuming the enthusiastic pose demanded by management. Hate smiling.

Outside, the vast parking lot felt just as strange. Temple Terrace, unlike the other side of Tampa where Richie had grown up, shut down around eleven and, even though the big hand had just swung past the eight, the city had already started to crawl into bed. “If that prick Terry don’t believe me about my back,” Johnny said as he locked the front doors, “you’re my witness.”

“Don’t forget Maria,” Richie said.

“Hold’s no weight. When you’re at the top of the food chain, it holds no weight.”

Richie stepped out from underneath the awning in front of the store, and said, “He thinks it does. You shoulda seen his face.”

As usual, Johnny waved Richie off, and tramped out towards his Dodge Neon. “Been

going on long before you got here,” he said, opening the door to his car. “It’ll be going on long after you leave.” He grunted with pain as he squeezed into the car, and drove off.

Richie pulled out a box of Marlboro Lights and fired up. Ten minutes later, Laurel’s silver Acura zipped up to the curb. Richie slid into the leather seat, which groaned under his weight. “You’re late,” he said.

“Only by twenty minutes,” Laurel said, nervously running a hand through her blonde-streaked hair. She checked the rearview mirror, then both side mirrors.

Richie rolled down the window and ashed his cigarette. “Why you so fidgety?”

“I’m not fidgety. I’m not. What?”

Richie eyeballed her a moment, then pointed to the half-dozen shopping bags in the backseat. “What’d you get?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Let’s go.”

Laurel forced a smile, her tan skin wrinkling around the eyes. “Don’t worry. I got you something.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Laurel flicked on the dome light, grabbed one of the bags, and reached into it. “Do you like it?” she said, almost squeaking with mock enjoyment, as she held up a long-sleeved button-up shirt with navy blue stripes. (Something up.)

Richie gripped the right cuff and massaged the fabric. “Where’d you get this?” he said, releasing the cuff.

She lowered the shirt so her face loomed above the collar, and said, “Aren’t you gonna thank me?”

“For what?” Richie said. “I didn’t ask for nothing.”

“That’s why they call it a surprise,” Laurel said. She tried folding the shirt but gave up with a huff and handed it to Richie. They drove off.

He decided not to question her further. Being trapped in a car and arguing with Laurel was never fun. Richie reached into the glove-box and grabbed a CD by his emcee, the homegrown rapper Black Ice. The man may have gotten shot and killed outside his downtown studio, but he lived on, speaking from the grave and directly to Richie’s soul, though Richie never would’ve worded it like that, the term soul, like all things related to religion, not being a part of his vocabulary. Rock-it-Rod, the city’s premier bootlegger who sold his wares out of the trunk of his car on the west side, slowed the CDs down, so that the words came at the listener in a low staccato. Richie slipped the CD in and the bass immediately kicked on with a prolonged boom-a, boom-a, boom-a, sending Richie into what he’d once heard called while locked-up in W.T. Edwards as “premium sound mode”:

When I get there, it ain’t time to love,

Ain’t time to hug, girl you dealin’ with a thug.

The businesses along Fowler Avenue all had their lights off. A few people holding large brown to-go bags were standing outside of Carrabba’s Italian Grill, chatting underneath the restaurant’s unlit sign. A couple of cars shared the road with Laurel’s Acura, buzzing by in the otherwise still night.

When they reached 56th Street, passing an empty park stocked with a wood jungle gym, Laurel suddenly sped up and took a hard right, then just as suddenly pressed on the brake pedal, as if she’d temporarily lost control and was trying to regain it. “Sorry,” she

said. "I got confused."

"You having problems with your daddy again?" Richie said, his heart rate slowing now that it appeared as if she was no longer confused.

"I'm just tired," Laurel said.

"Don't seem like it."

They passed a strip mall shaded in oak trees that housed a handful of specialty shops: Old Towne Deli, Don Carlo's Bistro, Annabelle's Furniture. The parking lot was nearly empty and sparsely lit and there were no people. Fucking boring.

"I'm mean, it ain't like you had class," he continued.

"Don't interrogate me."

"Interrogate? You don't even know what that word's about. That words for cops and shit. It ain't for you and me. You ain't no cop."

"No, I'm not." She sounded weary, and Richie searched for a reason for her behavior that rested on his shoulders. He'd done nothing, so far as could remember, and the mystery increased his frustration.

New song, just as slow:

Bumpin', bumpin', bumpin'!

Keep them bitches bumpin'!

Heads full of nothin'!

All you bitches frontin'!

The bass rattled the doors, the windows. "I can't think with that crap on," Laurel said, pressing "stop" on the CD player. "It's maddening."

Richie let this pass, too, though this time he had to fight the urge to say something

back. They turned onto a two-lane side street called Whiteway Drive, the main artery leading into their neighborhood. Everything about it screamed clean to Richie. The bright green tennis courts that dominated the first block of the street were well lit, despite that there were no players, and surrounded by palmettos. Further down were rows and rows of houses, all decorated with flowerbeds, trimmed hedges, and moss-draped trees. Even the road itself—lines clearly marked, the pavement smooth and black—smacked of perfection.

The silence finally got to Richie. “What’s up with you?”

She didn’t look at him. “I’ve got a headache.”

“I thought you was tired.”

“Whatever.”

“Where you at?” He lit a cigarette. “You all happy and shit one minute, making crazy bad turns the next. You thinking on something.”

“Stop it.”

“It’s your daddy, ain’t it?”

“It’s not my family that’s the problem. Not mine.”

Richie exhaled smoke out the window, and watched it get sucked behind them and into the night. “Speak, girl.” They passed the golf course, a rolling green sanctuary during the day, a hilly smear now, at night. Sprinklers clicked back and forth over it, dousing it in recycled water that Richie could smell from the car. It was the only unclean thing around. He chunked his cigarette and rolled up the window. Laurel still had said nothing, and Richie grew even more frustrated. “I ain’t playing this game all night. I’m really not.”

“You don’t want to know.” Laurel still would not look at him. “It’s not worth it.”

“That supposed to shut me up.” Richie grew hot. “Spit it.”

“I don’t even know if it’s possible. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Spit it.”

“It’s really probably nothing.”

Richie slapped the dashboard, startling Laurel. That’s right: I’m serious.

Finally, she looked at him. “Robert called me.” She paused. “He said he was out.”

A fist clinched in Richie’s stomach and it rolled up and through him. The mini-hills of the golf course rolled along as they drove down a curvy, tree-lined street. The sprinklers clicked on. “That ain’t possible. He got five years for that shit.”

“It wasn’t collect. He just called and got straight through.”

“You would’ve hung up if it was collect, just like all them other times.”

“Just like those other times, yup.”

“You sure it was him? It could’ve been some other motherfucker, a cellie or some shit. Somebody who owed him and wasn’t afraid to take the risk.”

“It was him. I know the voice. It’s just like yours.”

The fist clinched tighter inside him, only now it was in his chest, moving into his throat. He lit another cigarette and rolled down the window, allowing the smell of the sewer water back into the car. He kept his lighter going and studied the flame—and then he felt the burn on his scalp. The lighter went back in his pocket, and he tried not to itch. “He could’ve got a cell phone inside, he could’ve got that.”

“Yeah, yeah that could be it, right?” They passed under a streetlight and Richie caught a glimpse of Laurel’s big blue eyes burrowing into him. She kept shifting her

gaze between the curving road and Richie. "I need you to tell me he's not out. I need you to tell me there's no way he's out already, and that there's nothing to worry about."

He still held the flame in his minds-eye, and this vision fed into the burn now growing on his scalp. "He ain't out. And even if he is, it ain't nothing to worry about."

The road straightened out and the golf course vanished, though the smell lingered a few moments longer. Richie's side of town, Forest Hills, didn't jibe with the place where he now lived. In Forest Hills, the roads were cracked instead of freshly paved, and there were none of the little perks, such as the underground tunnel for golf carts he and Laurel were now driving over. But it did have a golf course and, just like Temple Terrace, many more white faces than black or brown ones. The way the kids grew up was the only real difference, and, to Richie's mind, the one that mattered. Forest Hills churned out juvenile delinquents who turned into adult criminals at a phenomenal rate, as if a factory sat at the edge of town, shipping a new one out every time an old one got locked up, shot, or, in rare cases, moved away. He and his cousin had grown up steeped in the wisdom of the older crowd, and had led both down the same path for a time that ultimately held different ends for the cousins—Robert to state prison, Richie to Temple Terrace. Can't be out already.

A blue Honda Accord sat in the half-moon driveway of the two-story, wood-and-brick house. Richie liked the front porch, especially the rocking chairs, but every time Laurel pulled up to her parents' house, it was the driveway he thought about. Because of its shape, there was no need to throw the car in reverse if you wanted to go back out on the street. All you had to do was breeze past the Honda and you were gone. It was why Richie got the urge to yank the wheel and steer Laurel's car back onto the road and away

from this strange house every time he arrived here. It was too easy to follow it back out onto the street for him not to feel that way. Finding a final destination was the hard part, and, ultimately, what kept him at Laurel's parents' house the whole time his cousin had been away. Don't even have no car.

Laurel parked and looked at him. Though the air conditioning had been shut off, Richie could still feel it. The sensation helped relieve his scalp. "You like your shirt still?" she said.

"It's all right. I mean, what the hell?"

"So you don't want it. So I went all the way to the mall and you don't want it. I could take it back. I could."

"Look at all that shit you bought. Ain't like you just went there for me."

"You're such an ingrate. Really. If you knew what I went through to find that shir."

"I said I would take. What do I care?"

"You don't care, do you?"

"God damn it."

"I was all alone in there. I had to listen to him and his shit-stained rant all alone and take it, just take it." She struggled to open the door, but when she did she forced it open so quick she almost fell out, before slamming it shut. She threw open the back door and climbed into the backseat, grabbing all of the bags. The crinkling of the plastic bags unnerved Richie. He felt it on his scalp. She stomped off without a word and disappeared inside the house. Go ahead, be mad.

Richie, new shirt in-hand, meandered into the house and immediately heard pans clanging and other cooking sounds. He tried to steady himself as he walked past the

dining room and its long table and china cabinets and into the kitchen. All of the cabinets, drawers and pantry doors were made of maple. The tile was salmon and the wallpaper featured violet ducks waddling in a line to nowhere. Large pots, skillets, drains, and ladles hung from a rack above the salmon island where a row of flowery plates sat. More ducks waddled on the base of the island.

Mrs. Metti, wearing a navy blue apron splattered with flour just under her hand-sized breasts, carefully placed two battered chicken legs into an oil-filled skillet. They sizzled and popped loudly, and Richie suddenly got the feeling that it was he who was frying. He tossed his new shirt over his shoulder, edged up against the island, and tried to shake the thought. He was thirsty but didn't want to dive into the refrigerator and make a scene. While he'd been living with Laurel's parents for a year, he still couldn't find a comfort zone within which to do something as simple as pour a glass of water when her parents were around, so he stood there and floundered silently, Laurel's earlier revelation about his cousin flailing in the back of his mind.

Mrs. Metti still hadn't seen him. She set two more chicken legs in the skillet, then turned around with a start. She clutched her chest and forced a smile. "You startled me." She relaxed. "I didn't realize you two were home."

Shoulda told her I was here. "Just walked in," Richie said just above a whisper.

Mrs. Metti moved toward him and pointed to the rack. The chicken continued to sizzle and pop. "I need that pot up there," she said, lowering her arm.

Richie caught himself staring at her thin neck. "Oh." He sidestepped out of her way, his gaze shifting downward. She wore a pair of tight-fitting jeans that accentuated her slim legs, but he didn't study them long, for fear she might catch him. No telling what

she might think if he stared too long, especially with her closed-door habits.

Mrs. Metti retrieved a pot from the rack and filled it with water and set it on the stove.

“I take it Laurel’s upstairs, then?”

“Yeah,” Richie said, the volume still turned down. His throat suddenly went dry, and, despite his relative comfort standing here by the island, away from her, he felt compelled to finally get some water. The cupboards were above the stove, where Mrs. Metti stood. Wish she’d move. Slowly, he went toward them, opened the proper one, and snagged a glass. He retreated. Now that he was a safe distance away from Mrs. Metti again, he sped up, retrieving a pitcher of water from the refrigerator without her even turning to inquire. That’s right. “Did you tutor today?” he asked, as he finished filling his glass.

The water in the pot boiled, and Mrs. Metti scooped up a handful of sliced potatoes from a cutting board and dumped them into it. “Yes, that sweet little Chinese girl came over and wanted me to help her dissect this dear book. Oh, what was the name of it?” She rapped her knuckles on the counter. “The Little Prince,” she continued, snapping her fingers in remembrance. “Lovely book. Just lovely. I used to read it to Laurel when she was a girl.”

Education. It dangled in front of all the boys in Forest Hills, not as a promise of prosperity, but as something to be avoided. Prosperity lay elsewhere, in more immediate places. School served two purposes for Richie and his cousin: getting girls and dealing drugs. Other than that, there was nothing a classroom could offer them but time, and thus money, wasted. This house filled with books, bought and paid for by Laurel’s dad, whose picture was published in the pages of glossy legal magazines with captions like,

“Stan Metti heads one of the largest criminal defense firms in the Southeast,” all hit a false note for Richie. If Robert was truly out, he’d be more than disappointed. Fuck him.

“And what about you?” Mrs. Metti asked, dropping more potatoes in the pot. “Did Terry say anything about your raise yet?”

If he knew where to go, the man on the run could drop this life and scam back to the world where he had all the knowledge needed to survive. He’d left hating that world, and now it might be coming back to him. He really out already?

“Yeah, Terry finally came through with it,” Richie said.

“Most of us start out humble and work our way up. Stan and I are living proof of that. Terry will do right by you. He and Stan go back a long way, you know.”

The phone rang. Mrs. Metti wiped her hand on her apron and answered the phone. Steam rose from the pot of potatoes, and Mrs. Metti put the lid on it. The kitchen smelled of heat. Richie’s mother made great fried chicken, too. During family gatherings, she and her sister, Sheila, Robert’s mother, would cook together, before Sheila’s sickness overtook her mind and relegated her to a life of cigarettes and re-runs and pills.

Mrs. Metti retreated around the corner with the phone. Now was his opportunity. Richie jetted towards the refrigerator, threw it open, poured another glass of water, and darted back to the island. He took a gulp and could feel the water deep in his stomach, cold and refreshing but a little uncomfortable. Mrs. Metti came back into the kitchen, hung up the phone, and turned the chicken legs over. Oil popped and a wisp of smoke rose.

“Stan’s not coming home for supper,” Mrs. Metti said, staring at the frying chicken, her voice uninflected. “Ya’ll better go get ready. Should be done in about twenty

minutes.”

“All right,” Richie said, setting his glass down on the island, relieved to have been dismissed. So often, he couldn’t find a graceful way to extract himself from these one-on-one situations with her. This was a gift.

The frying chicken followed Richie to the top of the staircase. Before lumping into Laurel’s bedroom, he sat down on the hardwood steps and took off his swampy work boots. He still could not think of the bedroom as his. He walked in, the white carpet massaging his feet, relaxing him, wooing him to repair the damage between them. Laurel lay on the bed staring up at the whirring ceiling fan, her cell sandwiched between her shoulder and cheek. Stuffed animals surrounded her: frogs, bears, turtles. Laurel lay there, staring, silent. Richie figured she was listening to one of her sorority sisters talk about her boyfriend troubles or whatever, and decided to take a shower instead of talking it out with her.

Naked, he stood in the bathroom, his work clothes piled on the white tile, steam from the shower swarming over him. His mom once told him steam would soothe the burn. It continued pulsing in the usual spot, right where his hair was thinnest. Later, he realized she’d lied, that the steam soothed nothing, but he still engaged in the ritual out of habit. Of course, his mother had lied about other things, like why she and Richie’s father had changed the locks when he got back home from juvenile hall; about why she let his brother stay; about never leaving Forest Hills. Now his parents lived in Orlando in suburb just like Temple Terrace. Traitors.

The mirror slowly began to fog, and Richie’s head began to flare up even more. He stared at himself in the fogged mirror and examined his face to avoid thinking about the

burn. It was warped by his overdrawn chin and crooked nose, the result of three fights in as many years, and his lips were so red his skin appeared an almost sickly white. He lightly touched the burn, fingering it, searching for the source. Best to leave it alone.

He stepped into the shower and felt some relief on his scalp from the hot water. He squirted some dandruff shampoo into his hand and rubbed it about on the burn. Now he felt relief. Next, he lathered shaving cream on his chest and arms, something he'd been doing since his baseball days back in junior high and high school, before he dropped out. Keeping his skin smooth made him feel more agile, alert. While he shaved, he thought about Naomi (as Black Ice said, "I gots me a main bitch plus a side dish."), her hands pressed flat against his hairless chest, her warm breath against his cheek, moving up and down, moaning and moaning and coming and coming.

Laurel sat Indian-style on the carpet, her cell cradled in her hands before her as if it were a living thing. "I want you to listen to this." Without looking, she handed the cell to Richie who was finishing drying off. "You tell me what it means."

"What you want me to listen to?"

"My voicemail."

Richie crossed the room and hung his towel on the back of the desk chair. He was naked. Not once did he look away from Laurel. "Why you got your head down like that?" She raised her head and in her eyes Richie saw something both wild and dead. It was a look he'd seen before. She'd been half-naked and ready for anything then. He felt disgusted and horny, one all the more so for the other. He listened to the voicemail, and he heard his cousin, Robert, buried in a bad signal. There was static punctuated by an incoherent rambling that sounded as if were purposely obscured. He trying to be scary.

There was only one intelligible statement: "I'm gonna rape you both to death." A long exhale followed and the message ended.

"When you get this?" Richie asked.

Laurel stood and came to him. "When we got home, I came up stairs and lay on the bed. The phone rang and I didn't recognize the number, but I knew it was him." She paused. The wild-dead look remained in her eyes. "I've been listening to it since we got home. I'm addicted to it."

Richie realized she wanted him to hurt her, so he grabbed her hair and pulled it back and spit in her face. She trembled and he grew hard. He forced her to her knees and she let out a weak yelp, then she pounced on his cock, sucking fiercely while he grabbed a fistful of hair with his other hand, which allowed him to force her head back and forth with greater speed. Both her hands were pressed firm against his thighs, and he closed his eyes, channeling the burn away from his scalp and into his fists, where he tricked himself into thinking these were instruments he could use to control anything.

CHAPTER 2

The burn was gone. Laurel lay naked on the bed, cuddling a frog with an over-sized tongue she called “Boo.” A bulletin board devoted to “Good Times with the Girls” hung above her head. All the girls in the photos posted on the board wore whooo party faces, whether shot in Ybor City, Key West, or Clearwater Beach. Richie had on a pair of cargo pants and nothing else, and he sat at the foot of the bed, looking at the photos, wanting them to remind him of good times but they didn’t. What came to him instead was the image of Laurel’s lips wrapped around his cock and her eyes, closed hard against the pain of taking him deeper than she could. She love it dirty.

“I guess I’d better get dressed,” Laurel said, placing the frog back among the other animals and going over to her tall white dresser. “Dinner’s probably ready.”

Richie sat down at the computer desk across from the bed. “We got to confirm this shit. There got to be a way to find out whether he out on this here.”

Laurel slipped on a pair of pink short-shorts and a matching tank-top. “I don’t know where to look.”

“Don’t you wanna know?”

“He’s just fucking with us. You said that already. You said he was trying to scare us. There’s no way he’s out. Daddy would know.”

“News flash: Your daddy don’t know everything. Besides, if he did hear something,

don't you think he would've said something to your mom when he called and said he wouldn't be coming home?"

"He's not having dinner here again?"

Richie shook his head. "Nope."

"That bitch."

"Focus." Richie swiveled on the chair and faced her and grabbed her hand. She was still distracted. He pointed at the computer. "Where do we go on this here?"

"I can't believe him."

"Focus."

"On what?" She was focused on him, and she began to tremble. "You said he wasn't out. That's what you said."

"Stop this shit and focus."

"That's what you said."

"That's what you wanted to hear."

"Move," she said, pushing his shoulder. "You're too slow."

Richie didn't move. "I can use the computer."

"You don't even have an email address." She waved him off in the same manner Johnny had earlier that evening. (Sick of that shit.) "Move."

It almost felt real when he imagined the computer crashing through the window and smashing open on the driveway below. The image satisfied him a little, but not enough to erase the fact that she was right: he didn't know anything about computers. Richie got up and Laurel went to work, typing and clicking. He wasn't sure what kind of knowledge he was witnessing—computer skills or a woman who knew where to find an answer. He

peered over her shoulder and saw on the top of the screen “Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office” written in forest green next to the gold sheriff’s star with the state of Florida imbedded in the center.

“You knew that shit was there, didn’t you?” Richie said.

“Everybody has a website.” She studied the screen for what felt like a long time, then clicked twice on the mouse, and leaned in. She was still trembling.

“What’s on there? What you got?” She clicked again but said nothing, and Richie’s chest ballooned with pressure. “C’mon now.”

She settled back as if relieved, but she was still trembling. “And there it is.”

The pressure remained in Richie’s chest. They didn’t expect to hear from Robert for at least another two years, and yet, when Laurel pointed at the screen to where it said “released from custody,” Richie wasn’t surprised. That’s how it goes. What did surprise him was the sting of vomit at the back of his throat upon seeing Robert’s mug shot. Richie had extracted from his mind all traces of his cousin over the last year, and observing a face that so closely resembled his sparked a terrible phantom of recognition. He swallowed the vomit and stared. Though he wore a crew cut, you could tell Robert’s dirty blonde hair was thinning in the back, and his pale skin sharply contrasted his red lips. The bags under his eyes stood as evidence of the long night of viciousness that led to his arrest, as did his yellow, sunken eyes. In the eyes Richie saw his family and his enemy. According to the site, he’d been out for two days. And he already calling. This serious.

“I can’t look at this any more,” Laurel said, turning away from the screen.

Richie ignored her and studied the arrest chart below Robert’s mug shot. Under the

“charges” column, there were a list of five felonies and descriptions of the charges in coded language. One code stood out: “ASSLT D/WEP.” It meant assault with a deadly weapon, and Richie knew it because he, too, had been charged with that same crime once. Mine was dropped.

Laurel turned off the monitor. “Stop looking at that. It makes me sick.”

“What for? There might be something we ain’t seen. Answers.”

“I’ve studied it already.”

“How? We just got on.”

“I know that site. I’ve been on it before. It doesn’t tell you anything. Nada.”

“When was the last time you was on it?”

Laurel stood up and stepped away from him and folded her arms. “I go on all the time. OK? I’m always scared.”

His chest tightened and the pressure moved up and began to work on his scalp. Don’t start again. Be cool. “Since when? Since he went away?”

“Yeah. Daddy told me about the site. He said I would always know that Robert was in there that way. It was supposed to keep me calm.”

“Did you go on it today?”

“This morning.”

“So you knew this whole time he was out? You knew it before I went to work and didn’t say shit.”

“I didn’t think it was a good idea to tell you. I thought it would interrupt things.”

Richie remembered the kiss on his cheek this morning, and in the saliva residue left behind found nothing to make her suspect. She slick. “What else you know?”

She unfolded her arms and used them to punctuate her pleas. "I'm sorry. I am. I didn't know he would call. I hate him for this. God."

"You didn't even want to tell me in the car. You wasn't gonna say shit. I would a had to beat it outa you."

"But you didn't, did you?"

He hit the computer chair and it almost fell over. The sting on his hand made him feel better, kept the sting on the scalp at bay.

"Let's just call that detective."

"Who? St. Pierre? Man, his dick so hard for me he could fuck for days, stupid. No way."

"Then let's tell Daddy. He'll know what to do. He has connections."

"That don't mean a motherfucking thing as far this here is concerned. This ain't for cops or lawyers."

She folded her arms again. "It's for cousins, right? Is that what you're gonna say?"

Yes, she knew him. Richie rubbed his scalp. Then hit the wall. Then leaned against it. The fan whirled above but he felt no relief. "You keep this shit under your hat."

"He belongs in prison. He belongs with some big black guy raping and beating him all the time. That's what the police can do for me."

He laughed. "You think he escaped, huh? Is that it? Him being out don't fit with Daddy's justice? Get with the fucking program. It's called parole. The police can't do shit."

"I'm gonna go help Mom. Come down when you're ready to act normal." She tried to walk out but he grabbed her.

“Under your fucking hat.”

“Fine. But just so you know, the internet is world wide.” She pulled loose and left without closing the door.

World wide? Richie grabbed a white T-shirt from the dresser and put it on. If Mrs. Metti weren't home, he would've held Laurel here until he knew she knew he meant what he said, that this was his cousin, his problem. The police doubtlessly still wanted Richie on dope charges, and there was no way he was going near a uniform again. She would understand that whether she agreed with it or not. She would understand that if anybody could find Robert it was Richie, not the police, and certainly not Mr. Metti. His law degree was not a starting point to a search of this kind.

Downstairs, Laurel set the table, while Mrs. Metti clambered around the stove, putting the final touches on the food. The kitchen had always been too big for a three-person family, the stove resting forty feet from the table. Its size seemed like a waste to Richie. Mrs. Metti's movements were hurried, an almost forgetful rush of turnarounds and pickups and drops. Richie shuffled past Mrs. Metti and sat down at the table. Laurel practically dropped a plate on the table in front of Richie, put a knife and fork on it and topped it off with a cloth napkin. “You can serve yourself.”

Richie motioned with his head to Mrs. Metti's back, and said in a whisper, “Don't do this now.” He placed the fork and knife on one side of the plate, and set the napkin on the other.

“There's nothing to it,” Laurel said, sitting down next to him.

With Mrs. Metti looming just beyond them, Richie's first instinct was to drop it. But he couldn't. World Wide. “You always mix everything up. Peas in the potatoes, corn on

the steak. You don't never keep shit separate."

Mrs. Metti continued with the final touches.

"Everything gets mixed up when you carry the plate from the island to the table,"

Laurel said. "It's called gravity." She traced the outer rim of her glass with her finger.

"Don't show your bullshit education off to me. Remember, I know you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

For the first time since Richie arrived in the kitchen, Mrs. Metti acknowledged his and Laurel's presence by turning towards them. "Whew," she said, rubbing the back of her hand across her forehead. "Dinner's ready."

Laurel shoved her chair back and stood up with her plate. Mrs. Metti came over to the table and retrieved her plate. Richie tensed as she did so, gripping his plate with both hands as if it were a lead weight he was preparing to lift. When to serve? She cracked a smile. Go away.

Since Laurel abandoned her usual duty of serving him, Richie studied her and Mrs. Metti as they served themselves, the ritual inevitably unnerving him. Can't see what they doing with the chicken? After Mrs. Metti and Laurel finished, Richie walked over to the island and tried to recall their serving techniques. He carefully placed a spoonful of peas onto his plate, and then eased the ladle back into the pot. He moved on to the mashed potatoes, again, carefully dropping an even portion onto his plate—the same order as the women—so as not to mix the peas with the mashed potatoes. Across the kitchen, Mrs. Metti and Laurel waited for him. They weren't studying him, but they weren't ignoring him, either. When he thought they weren't looking, he grabbed two chicken legs and, in his hurry, accidentally tipped the plate and slid them into the mashed potatoes. He felt

the pressure in his chest expand, and tried to ignore it as he edged into his seat at the table.

Mrs. Metti was seated to the right of Laurel. She smiled again and nodded at Richie, then folded her hands, closed her eyes, and bowed her head. Richie pushed the chicken leg, caked on one side with mashed potatoes, onto the empty side of his plate. "Lord, thank you for the many blessings this family has received from You," Mrs. Metti said. "We also thank you for all the blessings we will receive. In turbulent times and in good times, we always look to You for guidance, and You always show us the way. May your all-loving light continue to shine upon this family. Amen."

When Mrs. Metti said "turbulent times," Richie peaked at Laurel, nervous it might guilt her into saying something about Robert. Her eyes remained closed. Under your hat. Richie had never felt the touch of God, and he had never prayed, even when he allowed the only god he ever knew, his father, to beat him.

"Where's Daddy?" Laurel said, breaking the silence.

Richie's chest tightened. He held his drumstick over the plate, waiting to see if she would say anything about Robert. Mrs. Metti worked a strip of chicken away from the bone with her knife and fork. Can't use fingers? Richie considered dropping the chicken.

"Mom," Laurel said.

Mrs. Metti bit into a sliver of chicken dangling from her fork.

"Mom."

"He's working."

"Why didn't you answer me the first time?"

“I guess I didn’t hear you, sweetheart.”

Laurel shook her head and picked up her knife and fork and performed the same cutting ritual as her mother. Richie followed her lead, returning the drumstick to the plate, and then trying to cut a piece off. Despite the how small the piece was, Richie could still taste the Tabasco sauce and milk Mrs. Metti had cooked the chicken with. It reminded Richie of his mother, and of a time long ago.

Laurel set her knife and fork down as if she were finished eating, and said, “I can’t take this. Mom, you’re sitting right next to me. You heard what I said. You know where he is, what he’s doing.”

Mrs. Metti stuck her fork into the mashed potatoes and held a gob of it up and examined it. “Consistency is all wrong. I knew I didn’t put enough cream in the potatoes.”

“Stop it, Mom.”

Mrs. Metti set the fork back on the plate. “I spend a lot of time preparing meals, and when I don’t get it right, I get a little disappointed. No amount of effort can make up for disappointment.”

“You know he’s not working. How much more of a clue do you need?”

All the commotion forced Richie’s gaze further towards the plate. He noticed tiny cracks stretching up from the center, looping the flowers’ petals, a web of imperfections.

“Without the cream, it’s just not right,” Mrs. Metti said, rising, plate in hand. She carried it over to the island and set it down and removed her apron. “I’m sorry. I should’ve paid more attention to the details. Even if it’s only one thing that isn’t right, I can’t eat. Been like that since I was a little girl.”

“This is ridiculous,” Laurel said. “This is a joke of mammoth proportions.”

“Leave the dishes up here,” Mrs. Metti said. “I’ll clean up later.”

“You can’t clean anything,” Laurel said. Mrs. Metti kept walking and, soon, they could hear her thumping up the staircase and closing the door to her room. “Can you believe that?”

All Richie’s discomfort left with Mrs. Metti. “Why you gotta do that when I’m here? How many times do I gotta tell you?” He felt free, and picked up the drumstick with his fingers and bit down.

“He’s getting more and more blatant about it. It gets worse everyday. I’m just pointing it out.”

Richie dropped the cleaned bone on the plate, and said, chewing, “In front of me, though.”

“You need to get used to things. You should be used to them now. And don’t talk with your mouthful.”

Richie opened his mouth and showed her his food. “Get used to what? All this fancy shit? All this clean shit? How I’m supposed to get used to that?”

“God, you act like you’re from the ghetto or something. Your dad’s a friggin’ engineer. He drives a brand new Maxima. That’s not—” she put two finger quotes in the air— “gangsta.”

He swallowed and closed his eyes. The darkness didn’t send him off to another world as he had hoped. Laurel knew where he came from, how he’d been to jail, how he’d sold dope with his cousin while living with his insane Aunt Sheila. She said that just to anger him. He wasn’t pretending to be anything. I work at a fucking health food store. White

stars shot out and burst against the night sky of his eyelids, and suddenly he saw his cousin's face glowing on the horizon. Can't believe he out.

"So you're not going to say anything?" Laurel said. "You're just gonna go upstairs and listen to your buddy Black Lice, or Ice, or whatever his name is."

"Don't talk about shit you don't know about," Richie said, opening his eyes. His cousin's face still loomed on the horizon.

"I know about rap. Excuse me, hip-hop." The finger quotes again. "I also know you haven't done much since you've been here."

"What do you want me to do, Miss College Girl?"

"How about some planning, gangsta?"

"Don't say that word again," Richie said, gritting his teeth in an effort to control his volume.

"Then don't tell me what I can and can't say in my house."

"Your house? You mean your daddy's house, right?"

"It's more mine than yours." Laurel snatched her plate up, and rounded the table, brushing right past Richie. (Keep testing.)

"Excuse me, but I come out my pocket every month," he said turning around in order to face her. "Me. Straight cash. Straight to the man of the house. One man to another. Your college shit ain't paying shit. It's costing, it ain't paying. Don't they teach you that?"

Laurel opened the dishwasher and shoved her plate in. "It's called an investment. A long-term investment. That means it'll pay off later."

"You sure know a lot tonight. What about what I know?"

“Like I said, it’s world wide. Daddy’s gonna know he’s out, and he’s gonna know what to do.” She closed the dishwasher. “Not like you.”

The face on the horizon laughed. Richie stood and marched over to her and snatched her arm and motioned with his head in the direction of the stairs. “Get up there.”

“You’re hurting me. Let go.”

He gritted his teeth again. “Go upstairs.”

“Let go.”

“Go upstairs and sit on your bed and fucking wait.”

Laurel stared at him for a moment, then left without looking back, as Richie followed her. Damn right. Once in the bedroom, Laurel plunked down on the foot of the bed, half on the mattress, half off, as if she planned to dash out of the room. The fan whirled overhead, stirring her hair at its brunette ends. Richie softly shut the door and twisted the knob back into place, yanking the eyeball out of his enemy’s head. A vague plan had begun to take shape in his mind, both for Laurel and his cousin. He was almost pleased with himself. “Lift up your shirt.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“Lift it up.”

Whirr, whirr, whirr.

Laurel pulled up her tank-top, so that the bottom of her breasts were visible. A thick, three-inch long scar stretched across her upper abdomen. “Happy?” She withdrew as he approached. “I don’t wanna do this right now.”

Richie studied her, allowing all his energy to flow into his hands, the instruments with which he could control anything. He traced the scar on her stomach, and she began to

tremble again. "I remember this just as well as you do."

"What's your point?" she whispered.

"I remember being helpless, tied up with them cops. Had me laid out on the ground like I did something."

"I don't remember."

"I couldn't see what was happening. Just lights and noise. That was it."

"I'm glad I don't remember."

"Me, too." He re-traced the scar, and felt his power in his finger.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Robert."

"Shhh. That don't matter now. What matters now is what we do next."

Whirr, whirr, whirr.

She slid away from him farther up the bed and grabbed the frog. He wanted to curse her for being childish but stayed calm. "The reason why I couldn't see you that night was because of that Detective St. Pierre. He cuffed me and took me to the station. He wanted to know all about Robert, about the drugs, everything. All I wanted to do was go by that hospital and see you, and he wouldn't let me, because he's a fucking pig. He gets paid to ruin lives. That's what they do."

"I want Robert to suffer."

Richie sat on the edge of the bed. He didn't want to crowd her and make her uncomfortable just as he was getting her to understand that there was no other way to handle this. "Me, too."

"But Daddy can do this. He can call someone. They can figure out a way to put him back in. It's what they do for a living."

“And what happens to me, then? The past comes flying back and your daddy looks at me and thinks, This motherfucker done fucked up too much. He got to go. And where do I go? Back to Forest Hills and all that old bullshit. I don’t want that, do you?”

“No.”

“Then, why can’t you understand that I got to be the one to do this—for both of us? I know where to look, I know who to ask. I can get this thing done. I can make him suffer.”

“How? You can’t put him back in jail.”

He crawled up the bed and took her in his arms. “I can do worse.” It was then that Richie finally admitted to himself that he had no idea what he would do if he found Robert—if he could find him. The whole drama burned like one giant circle of fire. There was no end.

Whirr, whirr, whirr.

CHAPTER 3

At midnight, the antique grandfather clock downstairs in the living room chimed, its bells reverberating throughout the house. Richie sat at the foot of the bed in the dark, watching Laurel sleep in a quasi-fetal position, wishing the bells would stop. He watched Laurel sleep sometimes, when doubt crowded his mind, trying to pierce that mask of dream-induced solitude in the hopes that a definite answer as to whether she could be trusted would emerge. He wanted a hot brand on her forehead to appear and proclaim the truth behind those closed lids. A fucking sign. Can't read her. Tonight, he felt especially unsure, despite that he'd made progress in convincing her to let him handle Robert. But it was too important for him to feel certain. Gotta stay alert. He touched his scalp lightly, searching for bumps and flakes and other signs of the burn. Seems all right. The fan continued to spin overhead. The only light, though faint, came from the floodlight outside window, which over-looked the driveway and, father on, the cul-de-sac. The blanket Laurel slept under moved almost imperceptibly up and down. Even in sleep, he now knew she was alive with fear.

I'm gonna rape you both to death. What did that mean? How did Robert get paroled so early? Where was he? Richie rubbed his face. Robert's long exhale after he'd made that strange but horrifying threat replaced the clock bells, which had stopped. Richie suddenly wanted them back. He did not like hearing and re-hearing his cousin's breath.

According to Richie's mother, she and her sister had decided to give their respective sons similar names in order to link them with more than just shared genetic characteristics, no matter their difference in age. To the mothers' delight, their boys entered Forest Hills five days apart. This connection wore on Richie now as he watched Laurel sleep, as he longed for the day when he wouldn't think of his and Robert's blood ties. It'd make shit easier.

It would also make it easier if he could guarantee that Laurel wouldn't run to her father, but there was no way to do so. Maybe if he could find out how Robert got out so quickly, Richie could buy her trust by showing results. Maybe Robert was just biding his time until his mother was released from prison, and was just having a little fun at Richie and Laurel's expense to kill time. Maybe Richie could tell Laurel that. He took a deep breath. This house had sealed off something inherent to Richie, though he couldn't say what it was. He cursed himself for being too weak to stay in Forest Hills, a feeling all the more burdensome because he had no other choice. What would my boys say now?

Richie pulled out his iPod from the nightstand, and crept out of the room. He could barely see the staircase in the darkness. Even though he had on sandals and not his work boots, which thumped loudly on the wood stairs, Richie nevertheless confronted the steps uneasily. That the antique clock created more noise than he ever could didn't cross Richie's mind. Walking around the sleeping house bothered him more than anything else. The dark reminded him that he didn't know where he was going.

The first step reacted to his weight by creaking. Hold it. Easy. He continued down, only now it wasn't the creaking that bothered him, it was the slap of his flip-flops. Shouldn't have worn them. Despite the slapping and the shudders of anxiety it sent

through him, Richie made it to the bottom. Before heading out back, he looked up to see if anybody had awoken, but there was nothing there. He was safe.

Sweat had partially glued his iPod to his hand, so he wiped his hand and iPod on his shirt, as he rounded a corner, passed through the kitchen, and slid open the patio door and walked out into the thick night air. He placed inserted the earpieces and pressed play.

Black Ice:

Home boys was-sup!

Home girls was-sup!

When we step up in the party you hear: buck, buck, buck!

The menacing beat punctuated by the burst of machine gun fire rang in his ears. Richie walked over to a lawn chair by the pool and flopped down. The two lights on either end of the rectangular pool were on, and Richie could see the tips of the mini-palms that lined it. Beyond them were more palms and the wooden fence. He looked closer, and spotted a frog floating in the middle of the pool. He didn't even think of checking to see if it were alive. The bass was so heavy that it almost drowned out Black Ice's lyrics. But his voice couldn't be killed. Richie leaned back, closed his eyes, and felt the lyrics. Raw.

Went to my first funeral at age 15.

Young nigga shot by a crazy-ass dope fiend.

Didn't cry one bit 'cause I was hard.

Now I shed a tear every night to keep the bond.

One night two years ago, Richie and Robert were sitting in their bedroom at Aunt Sheila's apartment. As usual, Robert was sniffing blow, and Richie was drinking from a

bottle of Popov Vodka. They decided to get some air. Aunt Sheila was asleep on the couch in the living room, a cigarette burning in her hand. An episode of The Golden Girls was on the TV. Robert stopped to put his mother's cigarette out, and then the two cousins walked out into the night and headed for the apartment complex's pool. It was surrounded by a chain-link fence, and was once further secured by a locked gate, but that had been busted open years ago. Green-brown algae covered the bottom of the pool. Graffiti covered the bathroom doors. Nobody used it anymore, which is why Richie and Robert used it as a place to meet their customers and relax.

The cousins sat on a pair of sun-bleached lawn chairs. Robert, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, began jabbering about Laurel. Over the past few months, as his use of blow increased, Richie noticed that his cousin had begun to crack, that he was no longer thinking rationally, and that, ultimately, he could bring them both down. Scary shit.

"She don't understand," Robert said, running his finger through his newly buzzed head. "This here ain't no game. She can't just throw some money in and saddle up. Dumb bitch."

Richie took a long swig of Popov. "Then let her know what's up. But I gotta be honest. She just being a pain in the ass, you know. Just looking for attention. It ain't really nothing to sweat. Besides, you never know. We might need her money some day."

Robert's skin had a sickly hue to it. There were dark circles under his eyes, cracks in his lips. All the time he spent in-doors, sleeping, coming out only at night to peddle dope, had taken its toll. Bad days.

"We don't need her money." Robert put his hand on Richie's shoulder. "Don't let

her make you think we do. That's just her trying to manipulate us. We fine."

"For now, but this shit here can change in a minute. Someone gets busted or something, it all comes down. We need to keep our options open. She around anyway, might was well make use of her."

Robert snatched his hand from Richie's shoulder. "She mine to use, not yours. And I don't want her all in my business. You don't know what she up to. Her daddy's a lawyer, man, you don't know who he knows or what he's about. What the fuck."

"You better slow down with that powder. It's got you way out of whack."

"I'm fine. You're the one that needs to slow down, to think. I see everything, all the angles, all the plays. Where are you?" His knee began bouncing up and down. "I say what goes with her. You and BB got your little thing going on now. Fine. But Laurel's mine to tell what's what. You hear me?" He stood up and tilted his head back, releasing a long, wicked breath. (Can still feel it.) "I can't stay here." Robert flicked his cigarette into the pool, and sprinted through the busted gate and it to the parking lot. Soon, he became a white blur, part of the heat of the Tampa night.

Richie didn't move. The humidity pressed down on his skin, the Popov on his eyelids. He took another swig and winced. He felt his body fill with the liquor's sting and he silently thanked it for the courage it gave him to admit that he wanted his cousin's girlfriend, and he didn't know why. All he knew was that his cousin didn't deserve her.

Even now, two years later, the thought sparked a sense of regret in Richie, and, to avoid it, he walked over to the pool to see if the frog was alive. He picked up the screen and reached out into the water and scooped it up. Its arms and legs dangled and glistened. Its stomach was bloated. It was dead. Richie chucked it into the mini-palms,

and returned to the lawn chair and closed his eyes.

The next Black Ice song was a mellow jam:

When I got locked up

I told my moms keep your head up.

These days wish I did things different,

I woulda fought hard to keep my ass outa prison.

A faint noise, like the opening and closing of a world, echoed through the song, disturbing Richie's trance. He opened his eyes and pressed "stop" on the iPod and turned around to find Mr. Metti easing into one of the chairs at the patio table. He nodded at Richie and lit what looked like a cigarette. But it wasn't tobacco, it was weed. Mr. Metti's tie hung loosely around his neck. Two clumps of silver hair hung over his forehead, while the rest of it was held in place by pomade. His hair glistened just like the frog. The joint's cherry exposed the lower half of Mr. Metti's face—his bulbous nose, thin lips and butt chin.

"What're you doing up so late?" Mr. Metti said, in between puffs on the joint.

"Don't you have to work in the morning?"

His voice sent a chill over Richie's arms. Goddamn goose bumps. He pulled the headphones down around his neck. "Just relaxing. Actually, I was just about to go in."

Mr. Metti pointed to the chair across the table from him. "Come have a seat."

Richie didn't want to respond, let alone move.

"C'mon, have a seat, Richie." Mr. Metti waved the joint back and forth, the cherry spreading out in a hallucinatory fan.

"All right," Richie said. He stood up and walked over to the chair, sitting down with

in a manner which suggested the chair would break if he didn't exercise caution.

Mr. Metti held the joint out across the table. "Want some?"

"No, thanks. We got random tests at the store."

"Old Terry doesn't want any fooling around, huh? Can't say I blame him. You see," he continued, dropping his elbow onto the glass tabletop, the joint held out before him. "This is one of the many benefits of self-employment."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"It's no guess, son." ("Son"—don't use that word.) "It's simply the way things work. You have a vision, a goal, and you conquer it. That's what the game of life is all about. More than that, you play by the rules, even when you're breaking them. Take the law. There are ways around statutes that aren't exactly ethical, but you do what you do for your client and for your reputation. So long as you win, of course. Perception doesn't matter if you win." He took tugged on the joint and exhaled right into Richie's face. "That's being tough, son. And you and your little pals over in Forest Hills don't know what tough is. It's what's got you to where you are today. And who can you blame? Your parents because they weren't there? The people you were around? Your cousin? Huh-uh. You gotta man up and be something."

Richie shifted in his chair. He wanted to puke. "So what you saying?"

"I'm saying you don't know what tough is. You understand? I'm saying you haven't the slightest fucking clue what it is. You equate tough with crazy, with your cousin going off on a rampage cutting people and shooting people and beating people up. But that's nothing. Because when you do that, you lose. You always lose. That's why he's in prison."

For a moment, Richie thought that Mr. Metti was upset because he'd found out Robert was out. But now that Richie realized that wasn't the case, he became even more nervous. What he want?

"It's time for a little heart to heart. And I don't mean my wife's kind of talk, either. She has a frail constitution," he said, motioning with the joint towards the sliding glass door. Arm re-settled on the tabletop.

"Which reminds me: what did she cook for dinner?"

"Chicken."

"Fried?"

"Yeah."

"That woman's gonna kill me one way or another."

Don't know whether to laugh. Keep it quiet.

"Anyway, we need to come to an understanding here." Bent down and stubbed the joint out on the concrete. "It's time we see what your victory yelp is going to be." Sat back up, rested his forearms on the chair arms, and settled back. "Do you catch my meaning?"

Can't say "yes." How to say "no?" Another gulp. Goose bumps still there.

"Kinda."

Took a deep breath. "Whenever I take a new attorney on, I ask them two things. Their qualifications don't matter. Who they know doesn't matter. If they can't satisfactorily answer these two questions, I can't use them." He held up two thin fingers, his cufflink—a gold rim surrounding a square cut of onyx—sparked briefly in the moonlight before being over-taken by the shadows. "Two simple things let me know

everything I need to know about that person's performance capabilities." The two fingers remained up for a few more seconds then he returned his hand to the chair arm. "The first question I ask them is this: What type of life do you offer the world?" Stopped, cupped his hand around his ear. "Did you hear that? Emphasis on what they offer. Notice, I don't give a good goddamn about what they want, it's what they offer. And not the firm. The world, son. The world." The two fingers again. "Number two. I ask them what kind of man exists in modern society. What role should he play? You see?"

Richie opened his mouth to respond, though he had barely begun to inhale, when Mr. Metti went broke the silence. Breathe out slowly.

"These questions indicate everything you need to know about a man's ambition. I'll not pose them to you." Leaned into the moonlight again, his inverted triangle of a face exposed, his bloodshot eyes bearing down on Richie. "Instead, I'll ask you something more fitting of someone in your situation." (Situation? What the fuck he mean?) "How long are you going to shoot for mediocrity? Where does the middle of the rode stop for you, son?" (Stop sayin' son.)

Richie clasped his hands together. Sweating now. "I'm not sure I know what you mean." Shrugged. "Terry gave me my raise today."

"Ah...." He settled back, arms crossed: the patriarch. "That's what I talking about. Ambition must emerge, or you must find another place to rest your head. Life is about having options. Options come with a set-up. And a set-up should be accompanied by ambition so potential can be reached. Line your pockets, son."

Confusion dropped on Richie with the chill of the goose bumps forming on his arms. The struggle continued. "I'm sorry." Gulp. "But I still ain't—I mean—I'm still not

sure what you're gettin' at."

Mr. Metti rose, his figure not towering or imposing physically—skinny and short. "Develop the internal mechanism of self-motivation. Cultivate your will." He smiled, rounded the table, and stopped right next to Richie. (Where to go? Freeze. Can't look up.) "I have faith in you because I love my daughter. You'll figure it out." The sliding glass door opened and Mr. Metti, like his weed smoke, disappeared. Poof.

Frustrated, Richie pushed his sweaty palms together until his biceps rose, his face snarled and wrinkled around the tightly squeezed mouth. What's he want? Mr. Metti's words, strung together as if in some ancient tongue, baffled Richie. He sensed an immediacy, perhaps even an ultimatum in the lawyer's tone, but what exactly the speech meant eluded Richie. Squeezed the palms together—harder—until his head felt as if it would explode. Wasn't even breathing. The half-moon hung in the night sky, surrounded by a few white sparks, sending Richie off into thoughts of running, of leaving everything and everyone like his cousin did the night he couldn't take anymore. The night everything changed. Escape. No—tough it out. Deep in the sky, hanging above Temple Terrace, sat a freedom Richie had never found in his life. He spit on the ground and walked into the house, quietly shutting the glass door behind him.

The stairs again: heel, toe, heel—easy—toe. When he reached the top of the staircase, he glanced to his right and saw light seeping out from underneath the Mettis' bedroom door. A faint exchange reached him, though he couldn't make out the words. Once in his bedroom, Richie stopped at the foot of the bed and stared down at Laurel, her faint breathing erupting into a snort every so often. The blankets had all been pushed off the bed, hanging now half-on the mattress, half-on the carpet. Laurel's smooth body still

lay curled up in the fetal position, the light from the window highlighting her in form, the darkness hiding the details. The fan-spun overhead—whir, whir, whir—sending down cool breathes of air onto Richie's scalp. And then it erupted. A spark of irritation, small, then exploding in the usual spot, sent Richie into a flurry of scratching. Not now. Can't sleep. Her eyes shut off to the itching madness, Laurel slept on, comfortable and clean while he dug his nails into the crown, furiously trying to rid himself of the itch.

It fuckin' burns.

CHAPTER 4

Naomi's breath spread out against the shaking mirror in a violent shock of white moisture. Grunts and groans. The mirror shook, threatening to topple over with Richie's every thrust, despite the fact that Naomi's face was pressed firmly against the mirror by his hand—a mobile and weak prop. Don't care if it falls. Sunlight came through the Venetian blinds guarding the window on the opposite wall, leaving a shadowed pattern of white on the two naked bodies, the one hunched over the dresser, the other bearing down. While still holding her face against the wobbling mirror, Richie reached up with his other hand and snatched Naomi by the hair, yanking her head back. She answered with a prolonged moan. The burning had kept Richie awake the entire night, his nails running back and forth on the scalp sending flakes of skin onto the bed, waking Laurel up three different times as he sat up, lay down, flipped and rolled. It finally cooled off just before his alarm buzzed at 8, an hour before he had to go and shelve bottles of organic juice, lug crates of organic apples, or unload trucks full of wheat bran. Releasing energy. Angry hate fuckin'.

The session ended in a sweaty jumble on the carpet amidst scattered piles of dirty clothes, both Richie and Naomi breathing heavily, the mirror remaining in place, despite the couple's best efforts. Worn out. Sparsely decorated with posters of Justin Timberlake, 50 Cent, and, Black Ice, gang signs flexed in the air, Tampa Bay glistening

in the background, the room was otherwise bare, save for the scattered heaps of clothes, fast food bags, and a bent picture of Naomi's mom on the nightstand, frameless. Same crooked smile. Small teeth. Shirtless, Black Ice stood against the backdrop of the polluted water body that gave Tampa its name—its place—a statuesque figure, muscular, a massive tattoo running horizontally across his stomach reading "T-Town Killa." Despite the low profile of the Tampa Buccaneers baseball cap's bill, his dark hazel eyes still beamed out, hiding anger, exuding pain. Hard.

Richie traced the outline of a parabolic scar running across Naomi's chin, a leftover from a group of Puerto Rican girls who gave the then 14-year-old Naomi a pounding that Richie broke up with a few smacks and curses. Even the females handle business in Forest Hills. Naomi's black hair dangled in a clump on the left side of her head, further evidence of a rough encounter, though with an enemy of an entirely different sort.

"Who you wanna see?" Naomi said, in between breaths.

There came the response, the reason Richie came here in the first place. Need info. He rubbed her tan cheeks with his knuckles. Smooth. Wide eyes. "I ain't sure yet."

She blinked rapidly, twitching her head a few times. An involuntary tick, developed in the womb. It had been a problem for her in Forest Hills, leading to many a fight, though most of the beatings stopped once she began dating Richie in junior high. "What about Donovan?"

The old stomping grounds: Naomi knew Forest Hills. Lucky enough to escape with only a scar, Naomi's mother had moved her out of the neighborhood—with its counterfeit golf course—to New Tampa, another blessed area of town, clean and full of development. Brand spankin' new. On the way to Naomi's, Richie had almost hit a deer

along one of the winding, backwoods roads leading to her mother's condo. The deer had stared dumbly at him while he honked and cursed its ignorance, upset at the delay because he only had a limited amount of time before work beckoned him back. Get one hour, take a little more. The pines rose up along this newly paved roadway, concealing all sorts of wildlife, but the deer made the most trouble for anxious drivers like Richie, popping out of the decapitated forest to harass harried drivers, forcing them to stop quickly or risk destroying their cars. Stupid animals. At odds moments, Richie would sneak off from work, taking advantage of Terry's fear in order to see this girl from the past, this girl who could understand the complexities of a life removed from Forest Hills, but especially a life inside it. Today, however, she offered something more than her body. She offered the pulse of Forest Hills, the key to finding Robert. More than just a quicky.

"Donavon," Richie said, continuing to outline the scar on her cheek. "I ain't heard that name in a minute."

Naomi twitched again, scratching her mousy nose immediately after the shudder as if to cover up her condition. "I ain't sure what he's up to these days, but I could call Cammy and see."

Down ass chick. "Yeah, do that." He stood up, leaving Naomi sprawled on the carpet, naked. Retrieved his uniform from the unmade bed.

"I still can't get over this job thing," she said, pulling at the clump in her hair.

He slid on his navy blue pants, wrinkled around the waist from Naomi's clutching and grabbing, ruining Laurel's ironing job preformed only four hours earlier. Steam, baby. "You should be. I been there two years now."

Humph. Still pulling at the clump. "And you've been with her that long now too. What's her name again?"

Richie smacked his lips and furrowed his brow. "Don't start that shit."

She propped herself up on her elbows. Nice tits. Big nipples. Good for sucking. "Start what shit?"

Pulled his shirt over his shaved torso. "You know the deal, girl. Don't go trippin' on me."

Naomi lay back down and turned her head, going back to the hair clump. "Look what you did," she said, the tangled mess held out on her palm. "I can't get it out."

Switchin' subjects. Know she's jealous. Richie finished tucking his shirt in, zipped up, sat on the edge of the bed and began putting on his boots. "You think Donavon knows anything?"

"Goddamn it," she said, wincing in pain as she partly loosed the tangle. "I'm gonna have to cut this shit off."

He laced up his boots, stood, and took one long step over to where she lay. Hovered over her. "C'mon now, Naomi. What's the deal? You think he knows where Rob's at or not?"

Stopped fussing with the clump. "I know he's still dealin'. And you know with all those charges Rob's facing that he can't get a job. A equals B equals C."

Squinted. "Donovan's been slanging to Rob?"

"It's possible." She stopped attempting to untangle the clump, and raised her arms, motioning for Richie to come to her.

"I gotta go back to work."

“Come here,” she said, her voice taking on a slightly lighter tone.

Richie crouched down and leaned in towards her. “This what you want?”

She smiled. Puckered her lips, making a kissing sound.

“You best not tell Donovan I’m coming,” Richie said, ignoring the signal.

No more playtime. “Why? What’re you worried about?”

Richie’s eyebrows came together, wrinkling the skin in between. Pointed his finger.

“Look here. I ain’t scared a shit. Got it? I just don’t want him knowin’ I’m comin’.”

Different wide eyes, now. “Okay, okay. I never said you were scared. Shit. You don’t want me to call him, I won’t call him.” She pulled herself off the carpet, rounded the foot of the bed, and picked up a pair of boxers from the floor. “You don’t need to get an attitude. I just figured you’d want to make sure he was home before you drove all the way out there.” She slipped the boxers on. Smooth legs. No scars.

“I’m out,” Richie said.

Hands on her hips. “That’s all you’re gonna say? ‘I’m out.’” (Don’t be a smart ass.)

Richie reached out and cupped his hands on the sides of Naomi’s head. Gently. “I’m sorry, girl. You know things is crazy right now.” Stroked her hair, coaxing. “Just keep up with me. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“You can’t keep doin’ this to me” Naomi said in a near whisper.

Richie massaged her temples, the way he did when they first hooked up back in junior high. “Just keep up with me.”

Naomi bent her head and leaned on Richie’s chest. “I know. You got responsibilities.”

Another stroke. Works every time. “I really gotta get back to the store.” Kissed her

forehead. “I’ll call.”

Then came the rapid blinking, the flick of the head followed by a shudder, and Naomi turned around, her back to Richie. (Can’t hide it.) “Of course you will.” Pause. (So simple handlin’ these broads.) “When you need something.” (Maybe not. She’s from Forest Hills.)

Richie snorted. If that’s how you want it... “Tell your moms I said what’s up. I’ll call.”

Driving in Laurel’s car, hands gripped tightly on the steering wheel, the A.C. cranked, pumping out fresh coolness, Richie’s thoughts drifted back to last night—to Mr. Metti’s riddle. The main road-connecting New Tampa with the rest of the city—Bruce B. Downs Boulevard—needed to be expanded from its current two lanes flowing in opposite directions. Growth: the skeletal frames of new strip malls, the piles of dirt scooped up, removed, rerouted by bulldozers, the signs flapping in the wind along the walls surrounding new apartment complexes colored in pastel shades of pink, green, and blue announcing “Move-In Specials” had brought with them more cars, more movement, more people. Crowded. Richie swerved in between the Lexuses and BMW’s, past the chain restaurants lining both sides of the street—which also dominated a large portion of Temple Terrace—though the buildings’ designs, with their curved roofs and brightly colored patio furniture and glowing signs, complimented the new age vibe that reinforced the area’s freshness. He drove past gated neighborhoods with names like Hunter’s Green and Tampa Palms, past felled trees and vast expanses of flattened earth, past long tracks of sidewalk where mothers pushed their babies in strollers and joggers sweated under the burning sun, past a new outburst of creation, the last the city of Tampa could hold.

Burstin' at the seams with fake shit. With so much being offered by the city, with so much more surrounding him, inviting him, Richie had begun to feel that escape—gotta get movin'—had finally come to fruition. Something's gotta give. New places equaled new experience, and a young man in his prime needed just that, needed just what Temple Terrace and Forest Hills couldn't offer him. The clean and the old had left his mind, his forward-looking view for the moment. Naomi sat on the backburner for now, but she represented an option. A way out of the riddles and rhymes and rub-a-dub-dubs of Mr. Metti's pot-induced speeches, the petty complaints of Laurel, and Mrs. Metti's blindness. In New Tampa, the signs read more than "Move-in Specials"; they read "Freedom."

Richie sparked a cigarette—honk honk at the Cadillac—and smirked. The last time he went to jail, freedom meant returning to the world he knew, and now freedom meant traveling farther away from it than even Temple Terrace offered. Keep pushing, trucking, going until it all goes away. Things change.

* * *

Though he didn't realize it at the time, the event that would lead to the most profound change in Richie's life started with a beating and a van ride. Along with 15 or so other teens of varying age and size, male and female, Richie had been shackled at the feet and the wrists, which were then linked to the other prisoners so that they formed a ragged line of slumped delinquents. The group hobbled out into the humid night and down a flight of stairs perched outside the Juvenile Assessment Center's plain headquarters surrounded by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire and into an awaiting van, heading to W.T. Edwards—"Dub", to the young prisoners. Kiddie jail. Handled it at 15. Handled it at 17. Wasn't shit. On the van ride over, Richie had been unable to sleep like his

companions, who leaned against the barred windows, the seat backs in front of them, and even each other, filling the van with the dull hum of breathing. Instead, Richie studied his hands, the cracked and bruised knuckles—the blood on his elbow. He slid his tongue along his bottom lip, busted from the fist of an angry cop who had tried to pull him off the store clerk he'd been pummeling with kicks to every part of his body. Busted the cop's dick. Couldn't handle it.

After the group arrived at W.T. Edwards—barely visible in the night; isolated from the main road and the streetlights—two Corrections Officers had emerged from a door by a delivery ramp like the one at “Health Nuts Food and Beverage” and led the group out of the van, through a dimly lit, yellow-painted hallway that smelled of ammonia, and into a room containing three long rows of benches. The COs had separated the girls, taking them into another room, while they ordered the boys to sit on the benches. Offered the boys sandwiches wrapped in tightly sealed plastic—cardboard cheese, partly frozen ham—and then, one by one, poured a copper-colored shampoo in their palms, told them to strip naked, and rub it in their pubic hair while a CO looked on. Richie remembered standing eye to eye with the CO Javorn, a black man with a large round head and pockmarked cheeks, while the man watched as Richie rubbed the pungent shampoo on the hairs above his penis. Liked that didn't you? Sick bastard.

Closely monitored by the CO's, the boys had marched single file down the hallway and into another room lighted only by a modest lamp sitting on the counter of a guardroom sealed off by a dense glass reinforced by wire mesh. This room opened up into a massive square, a series of plastic chairs outlining the square behind which the faint cracks of the doors to the cells could barely be made out in the darkness. On the

floor sat dozens of mats of the type kindergarteners take naps on, small white pillows at one end, rolled gray blankets on the other. The boys all shuffled to open mats, lay down and went to sleep. Richie stayed awake, listening to the others breathe, and trying to make out the damage done to his hands in the faint light offered by the guardroom's lamp. Blood had rushed to the front of his forehead, infusing his eyes with red lines, the concentration, the adrenaline, and the anger all compounded by the thin mat and pillow—could feel the concrete floor all over. Tough.

At 6 am sharp, roughly two and a half hours after the boys had went to sleep, they awake to the sound of the CO Javorn yelling, "Get up. C'mon now, get up!"

Richie had waited until the other boys began crawling off the mats, their frizzled hair glowing dimly in the light, sizing them up, attempting to spot potential enemies. Young bucks. They had all been handed a toothbrush with a plastic clamp around the bristles, a travel-sized tube of toothpaste, and a plastic comb. They brushed their teeth, combed their hair, and washed their faces in the dark, then shuffled back into the dorm room, their bagged eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, the corners of their lips dappled white with dried spit. Next had came uniform distribution. They all received different colors depending on age, Richie being given a gray V-neck short-sleeved shirt and a pair of matching pants—rough on the skin, like dried paper—and a pair of scuffed white Velcro shoes, a far cry from Richie's Air Jordan's which, along with his Tommy Hilffiger Polo and Levi Silver Tab jeans, he had been forced to drop into a plastic bag bearing his name written out in a black magic marker.

Chained and back on the van: crammed full of chatty pre-teens and teens, all on the way to the courthouse for their respective arraignments. The sun had shone brightly, the

heat of the Florida summer bearing down on and through the barred windows, the AC serving only to cool the CO's sitting up front with the driver, chatting away like their prisoners. Richie had sat next to a tall black kid whose two front teeth were capped in gold and engraved with the initials "BB." The boy, clad in the same gray uniform as Richie, stared out the window, humming a tune by Black Ice.

"You singing 'Soldiers'?" Richie had asked the boy, whom he later found out went by the name Bee-bee.

"Fuck you care?" The boy said, turning his attention to Richie. His face had a triangular shape, the chin narrow, forehead wide, nose bulbous. Eyes narrowed, trying to look fierce.

Drama already poppin' off. "Best watch your mouth, partner."

Bee-bee had smacked his lips. "Where you from?"

"Where you from?"

"Look at you, white boy." (Watch it now.) He cracked a smile. "Robles Park."

(Friendly talk?) "Forest Hills," Richie said.

"You listen to Black Ice?" Bee-bee had asked, his tone switching to a higher, less menacing pitch. (Can't back down. That's how you win 'em over in Dub.)

"Hell yeah." (It's cool.)

Bee-bee nodded his head. "What you in here for?"

Richie sized him up. Don't wanna give too much away. "Battery. What about you?"

"Intent to distribute."

"Rocks?"

"What else."

They both turned away, Richie looking up and down the aisles at the boys dressed in various monochromatic shades, Bee-bee glancing out at the wide streets and buildings of downtown Tampa. The staccato of beeps and the red flash of brakes flanked the van on both sides. Palm trees and hibiscuses rose up out of the median separating the opposing lanes of traffic, part of the Mayor's new revitalization of the downtown area in the hopes of attracting more businesses and tourists. The addition of street signs that took the shape of scrolls, and street lamps that curled at the top so that they formed a candy-cane hook, all contributed to the old world historic effect the Mayor's development project at the time focused on. The bay rested somewhere in the distance behind a high rise hotel and a three-story parking garage.

The courthouse dominated Twigg Street not only because the building took up half the block with its gray blandness, but also because, as always, a throng of people hovered out front, chatting on cell phones, smoking cigarettes and pacing back and forth just below the steps leading to the entrance. While Richie had envied the freedom of movement of the people outside the courthouse, he nevertheless knew that some of the chatters and smokers and pacers wouldn't re-emerge from the courthouse again. The judges would revoke their bonds, hand out sentences, collect on warrants and leave them with only one option: lock-up. Enjoy it while it lasts. But when the CO's had unloaded the van, and led the uniformed and chained boys into the courthouse, past the curious gazes of people entering and leaving the building, he did feel a kind of pride—a chest out sensation—that had stripped away his nervousness. We the real deal.

A funny thing happened as the boys waited for the elevator in the lobby: when the doors dinged open, a group of female inmates, mostly black, dressed in county oranges,

their faces weathered and chipped and cracked, lit up with the strangest smiles, bent and toothy upon seeing the boys.

“Oh, shit,” one woman had said. “Look at the lil’ babies.”

The women cackled showing more gum, more teeth.

Some of the boys began to curse and hiss under their breath at the women, but Richie, along with Bee-Bee, just smiled.

“Crazy-ass broads,” Richie said, out of the side of his mouth to Bee-Bee who stood behind him.

Bee-Bee tilted his head towards a particularly gnarled woman, her greased black hair shot out at the ends in needle pins. “Ain’t that your momma?”

“Oh, you got jokes?” Richie said as the boys were corralled into the wide elevator designed especially for the transport of prisoners.

“Shut up, white boy,” the CO Javorn had said to Richie so all the boys stuffed into the elevator could hear—lettin’ his power be known—his pockmarks even more pronounced beneath the yellow lights inside the cramped lift. “This ain’t fun time.”

The clinking snake of chained boys emerged on the second floor to a hallway filled with parents—the poor ones dressed in cheap pant suits and wrinkled Polos tucked into stonewashed jeans; the wealthier ones sporting shiny suits and pearl necklaces. A row of connected chairs of the kind that sat in W.T. Edwards itself filled the middle of the drab hall. The COs ordered the parents—some crying, some waving—not to approach their shackled sons. Richie hadn’t seen anyone and didn’t expect to: his mother and father had told him that, should he ever go to jail again, he would be on his own. But, Richie had expected to see someone else, someone who should’ve been there: his cousin and, maybe,

if she could get herself together enough to get in the car, his aunt. Neither had made it.

The beige tiles on the floor of the large bathroom—a filthy holding cell more than anything—cracked with black mildew, had greeted the boys with a foul stench. A toilet with no seat sat to the right of the door. The CO's had released the boys from their cuffs with strict orders not to “fuck around” while they each awaited their arraignment. Pride tinged with bitterness reared its head in Richie—the pride coming from the fact that he had had no representation, parental or otherwise; I'm the real deal, homey; the bitterness coming from the fact that the reason he had found himself in this bathroom, with its stale odor of waste, hadn't shown up; got a traitor for a cuz? His empty stomach had gurgled from this bitterness and no food, making him even more uncomfortable than the bathroom and the continued chatter, especially by the younger inmates, had made him.

“What you gonna plead?” Bee-Bee asked, running his tongue along his two gold fronts.

Richie had hugged his knees to his chest and avoided resting his back against the wall, the coagulated mess along the walls being too much for him to bear. “I dunno know.” A particularly nasty bit of mildew rested in between his feet, fanning out in a blackish ooze. “Maybe No Lo, maybe guilty. Ain't got no lawyer. What about you?”

“Can't say yet.”

“Best figure it out,” Richie said, shifting his attention from the mildew to Bee-Bee with lifted eyebrows. “You gotta own up or fight.”

Bee-Bee dropped his head. “Shit. Racist ass motherfuckin' judges ain't finna see this thing my way.”

Richie shrugged. “They ain't 'bout to see it my way neither.”

Bee-Bee smacked his lips. "But you ain't got to face what I face. I'm black, dig? Them cracker-ass judges don't give a damn about what I got to say. Even if I did have me a lawyer, what good he goin' to do besides take my money." Shook his head.

"I guess you should own up, then."

Bee-Bee pressed his lips together. "Well," he took in a deep breath and let it out with a woosh, "I'm sho' 'nough guilty."

They both laughed, their joke kept between them by the echoing banter of the other boys.

Javorn stepped into the bathroom and a hush swarmed over the boys. (He was the big dawg.) "Roland Carter."

"Here we go," Bee-Bee said, standing up.

"How you get Bee-Bee from Roland Carter?" Richie whispered.

Smiled, the gold fronts shining. "Cause I don't own no .45. I only gots a bee-bee gun."

Richie smirked. "Sounds like a health hazard to me."

"Ain't it, though?"

Javorn stepped through the entrance. "C'mon. We ain't got all day," he said to Bee-Bee, who stepped over the other boys and disappeared into the hallway.

When Richie's turn to present himself before the judge had come, he didn't bother attempting to hope that he might be released. He entered the drably decorated courtroom, the state's representatives seated at a long table to his right, his public defender—a pale young woman who appeared to be no more than 28 with wide green eyes and a small mouth—on his left with his head up and his hands clasped together behind his back.

Shows respect. Don't mean it. The judge, his silver hair parted neatly, sat above them all, a pile of paperwork stacked to the right of his gold nameplate, which read Judge Martinez. Without looking at Richie, he had grabbed a few papers off the stack and held them before him, pulling his spectacles down his nose and squinting.

"You're a two-timer, Mr. Thorton?" The judge had said, his voice retaining a hint of the Hispanic heritage indicated by his last name. He still hadn't bothered to cast his gaze at the young man whose freedom he held in his power. (Punk didn't even care.)

The public defender had leaned in towards Richie, her small mouth half an inch away from his ear and whispered: "Just tell him what you feel." (Bitch didn't care neither.)

"Yes, your honor," Richie had said, his voice quivering.

The judge had set the paper work down, and removed his glasses. "Didn't you learn anything from your last experience, son?"

Richie opened his mouth to respond, but he couldn't say anything. The words hadn't been there. Abandoned by his family—cuz didn't even bother to show—the system—punk ass judge don't know the situation—and, worst of all, himself—can't say nothin'.

The judge waved him off. Inevitability: "You are hereby remanded to custody for 48 days." No gavel. No crowd gasping in shock and awe. Just Javorn snatching him by his arm and leading him back to the foul bathroom, where he would wait until all of the other boys had seen the Judge, and head back to W.T. Edwards, tired and hungry. Wasn't no way out.

* * *

The delivery ramp at the back of "Health Nuts Food and Beverage" simmered dully under the midday sun. Richie sat in Laurel's car, smoking a cigarette, the windows up,

the A.C. on full blast. The smoke whipped and whirled with the gusts of artificial wind, forming around his face, partially masking him in gray. Don't wanna go back in. He had two crates full of free-range chickens—whatever that meant—to put into the display cases at the deli, a whole shipment of organic cottage cheese—no hormones!—to stock, and the entire warehouse to sweep. Johnny better help.

He shut off the ignition and opened the car door, the smoke whisking out in a haphazard column of gray. The leather seat curled around his ass, and he didn't want to leave—fit perfectly. If only he could take a quick nap in the car: Terry don't need nothin' right now. Naomi's breathing, the way she moaned when he yanked back her hair, echoed in his ears, calling to him, urging him to dump this life, this free-range organic and cleanly swept existence and plow ahead to something new. Forest Hills called to him now, and he had a sudden vision of him and Naomi relaxing on a bed in an apartment just off Bearass Avenue, watching Black Ice music videos on BET, smoking a blunt, and laughing because they didn't want to do anything else — be anywhere else. He climbed out of the car, shut the door, and walked towards the back door by the delivery ramp and rang the bell. I'm back.

CHAPTER 5

“Health Nuts Food and Beverage” bustled with the traffic of shoppers busily careening down aisles, stopping, searching, picking up and placing items in their carts then moving on, the wheels on some carts shimmying and squeaking, the lights overhanging them all beaming with the greens and blues and reds and yellows and all the others colors of the products glowing beneath them, the bodies of the customers shifting in a mishmash of movements so that, when you stepped back to study them, really study them from the break-room on the second floor with its long glass window stretching across the store directly above the front entrance divided by rectangular panes which provided a Big Brother view of the entire place, you couldn’t help but think everyone equaled no one and vice versa. Fuckin’ busy. Luck didn’t factor into the rest of the day at work for Richie. After he had unloaded both crates of free-range chickens into the freezer, his hands red and numb from the repetition of lifting, dumping, lifting, dumping the cold poultry and he without proper gloves—had to use latex ones—the new guy having snatched his pair while Richie gave it to Naomi. And with the chickens in their place, dumbly resting with their legs facing the customers, their round backs plump and covered in yellow plastic, frost decorating the outside, in their aisle, in their cooler along with the other meats, he had to go to the new guy—aisle 10; dairy; god damn cottage cheese like the blue hairs’ legs—and train him on how to keep track of what was stocked

and when, and when it should be restocked, and what hadn't been stocked, and what would be stocked. Terry's system. Not that Richie ever did it. Complicated. Just pimped the system.

The new guy, a short caramel complected kid with muscular and veined arms, stood in the dairy aisle, the coolers humming away, scratching his baldhead and staring at the assortment of cow-bred products. Probably just turned 18. Shit. A slim woman with headphones on stopped to his right, put her hand on her chin, then opened a cooler door and pulled out a box of butter which she placed in her cart full of tortillas, beans, an array of vegetables, and moved on out of sight. Richie walked over to him and noticed that the kid hadn't even put on the gloves. They rested on the top of the stack of frosted cardboard boxes containing cottage cheese, one folded over the other.

"Sup," Richie said to the kid, whose uniform of navy blue pants and gray polo shirt were neatly pressed, sharp crease lines running up and down the legs and along the center of the shirt sleeves.

"I'm just tryin' to figure out where we goin' to put all this," he said, removing his hand from the top of his head and gesturing at the boxes stacked in rows of eight on the cart.

"They'll fit. Trust me." Richie removed his gloves, doctor-style, so as not to touch whatever unknown foulness left on them by the frozen chickens. Dead birds.

"I guess." For the first time, the kid actually faced Richie. He had a wide nose, big hazel eyes and a smattering of white dots covering his forehead. The flaw in his pigment distracted from the rest of his features, drawing Richie's eyes to the forehead, rather than the rest of his face. Funny-looking square.

“First thing you gotta do,” Richie said, picking up one of the gloves off the box and sliding it on, “is you gotta pull all the old stuff out. Then, you slide in the new stuff so that it’s in the back. After that, you line the front with the old stuff. That way—” A 30 something couple wearing flip-flops and shades walked by. Richie held his tongue until they were out of earshot. “That way, the customers see the old dates before they see the new ones. It helps get out the old product before anyone dips into the new.” He smiled at his explanation of the wherefores and whys of the art of stocking as he slid the other glove onto his right hand. The cloth nestled against his skin, warmed him. Fuck latex.

The kid glared at Richie, his wide eyes narrowing. “Hey, man.” Pointed down. “Them’s mine.”

“What’s yours?”

Continued to point. “Them gloves.”

“Why don’t you just get a pair from the back, while I get started here.” Ain’t givin’ these up.

“Naw, homey. I brought them out. You had them plastic ones.”

Richie smirked. “Just go to the back and get a new pair, man. It ain’t a big deal.”

The kid stepped forward, his index finger still aimed at Richie’s gloved hands. “I want those.” (Is he a retard or something?)

“Well, you ain’t getting ‘em back.” The crown started to burn. Flare.

The kid cocked his head to the side. “What’s fair is fair, right? I brought ‘em out. I get ‘em. I wouldn’t take your gloves from you.”

Skull sparked up. Burning. Richie remembered the first time his scalp had acted up while rounding out the third day of his 21-day sentence at W.T. Edwards. The boys sat

around in a circle in the large dorm room, completely naked, waiting their turn to enter the showers located in the far corner next to the guard's pod sealed off by the dense reinforced glass. When Richie's turn came to enter the shower, he stood under a bubbling nozzle that squirted and spit and hissed water down in lukewarm globs. The other boys' showerheads seemed to work fine, but not his. The room had misted over with steam, a sterile smell of body odor and soap. Richie had reached for the soap-dish, but noticed that the white bar was decorated with curly black hairs. This had been the third time in as many days that he had refused to properly wash himself due to the abundance of pubic hair lodged in the bar. Fuckin' filthy. As soon as he placed his head under the water, which rained down in thick bubbles that burst uncomfortably on his skull, the burn had come. At first he thought the water was causing it, then, when he pulled out from underneath the showerhead, he realized it was something else. Something deeper. Something buried in his skin.

The kid still had his hand out, only it no longer pointed, but instead, sat open, waiting for Richie to place the gloves in them. "I'll start here, all right? Just lemme get my gloves back, dawg." The kid pressed his lips together out of frustration.

Scalp burned. Richie lifted his hand up, his fingers curled as if to begin scratching. Then, he dropped his hand down where it slapped against his thigh. "These my gloves. You can get your own in the back." Tore open a box. "Period."

Stepped closer. "I ain't finna ask for them gloves again." Held out his palm. "Hand 'em over."

Flare. Wanted to scratch. Wanted to tear into his skull the way he just tore into the box. Turned to the kid. "Get your hand away from me."

Eyes widened. “You gonna give me the gloves?”

Faced the kid, chest to chest. An old man wearing plaid pants shuffled by, his cart squeaking with annoying regularity. Waited till he moved a little further on. “Fuck no.”

All available check-out personnel to the front, please. All available check-out personnel to the front. The nasal voice ended with a static fuzz and a click when the intercom shut off.

The kid eyed Richie up and down. “Let’s take it to the back, then, homey.”

Leaned in. “You don’t want that.”

“You scared?”

“C’m on.” Richie spun around and marched down the aisle, half-hoping the kid would remain behind and forget about the gloves. Don’t wanna get fired. But the kid stuck to Richie’s heels, and, when Richie passed by the deli, a line of customers with green slips in their hands forming in front of the rounded glass case full of specialty meats and cheeses—now serving A-10—he glanced over his shoulder and saw the kid’s furrowed brow and pursed lips and narrowed eyes just before he pushed through the gray doors leading to the warehouse. It’s on.

George, a lanky guy who worked in the bakery, stood in front of the trash compacter, tossing in buckets laced with crusted frosting, bags half-full of grain, and loaves of moldy bread. The machine chomped and chewed in a wheezing and spurting of gears, while George stood guard, his white hat brim tilted upwards revealing curls of moist bangs, his hands resting in the pockets of his apron front. Richie came through the double doors, crossed the room and stopped in front of George, who, startled, pulled his hands out of the apron pockets.

“You better not say shit,” Richie said, his voice low.

“What’re you talking about?” George said.

At that moment, the kid came through the gray double doors.

“This,” Richie said. He took quick, deliberate steps toward the kid who made a motion with his head, as if he wanted to go to another room.

The kid lifted his hands in order to set-up to throw a punch, but Richie leapt forward, caught hold of his forearms, yanked him downward so that his back bent awkwardly to the left, and pulled the kid’s shirt over his head. Can’t see shit, now. Then came the attack, beginning with a series of blows to the circular lump poking out underneath the shirt. Punches, solid, straight, thumped on the kid’s head. He moved backwards, still trying to get his head out from the shirt. Richie grabbed a hold of the kid’s shirt collar, the veins in his hand protruding, his knuckles red from clocking the kid on the skull, and pulled up so that the shirt further concealed his head, the shirt up so high now that the kid’s belly was exposed. Got him. With one hand clutching the collar, Richie sent a sharp uppercut, catching the kid at the top of his nose. Blood filled the inside of the shirt. Damage. Richie stepped back, his heart pounding, knees shaking from the adrenaline. That old feeling.

A gurgling: the bubbles of blood forming around the nostrils with breaths, in, out, in out. An urge to continue pummeling the kid welled up in Richie, shot through his quivering knees—not fear, energy. The bakery guy George stood by the trash compacter, his face in repose, hands at his sides, back arched slightly as always, watching, silent. Richie’s face: snarled, wrinkles formed in between the sandy-yellow brows, nostrils open, lips pursed, eyes burning, watching. The kid pulled the shirt from over his head to

reveal a stream of blood sliding out of his nostrils, down and across his lips, shaping into an insignificant, but noticeable puddle on his shirt collar. Couldn't help it: Richie charged forward, the kid only having time to lift up his hands to his stomach, before Richie shoved him backwards on the cement floor. Glared at the kid. Bloody. 'Nough said.

"God damn it, Richie." Johnny came rumbling onto the scene from around the corner where he had either been slacking off, blaming it on his newly hurt back, or taking inventory, another menial task that he could perform on account of his back. (Should've used the hand-truck.) "What's going on?" Huff and puff and huff and puff. (Slow down, big man.)

The kid propped himself up on his elbows and patted his nose with the back of his hand. "Your boy gotta serious motherfuckin' problem," he said. "He got a real big problem, now."

Richie clenched his fists and stepped forward. "What? You ain't had enough yet?"

Johnny held out his meaty arm and halted Richie. "Knock it off before Terry comes in here."

"Get your hands off me, man," Richie said.

Johnny dropped his arm and leaned into Richie. Intense. "Hey, I'm tryin' to help you," he hissed. "So shut your trap."

Richie stared at him a moment longer—let him know I'm serious—then huffed and backed off. Don't wanna get in trouble.

Johnny re-focused his attention back on the kid. "I suggest you get your ass up and head to the back. Get cleaned up."

The kid lumbered to his feet. Wiped his nose again. “What about him?” Pointed at Richie.

“If you wanna keep this gig, I suggest you get ‘round that corner and clean up.”

Johnny stuck a finger gun in the direction of where he’d just come from.

The kid hesitated for a moment, glared one last time at Richie who raised his hands—want some more?—before spitting a white red glob on the ground. “I’ll see you later,” he said as he rounded the corner.

“Bet,” Richie said to the kid’s back.

“Don’t push it, son,” Johnny said to Richie. (Man, you pushin’.) He turned his attention to George. “And just what’re you doin’?”

George wiped his hands on his apron. Eyes darted about.

“Well?” Johnny said, holding his hands palms up.

“I was...I was just watchin’ the fight.”

Johnny shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. “What fight?”

George’s eyes darted from Johnny to Richie, then back to Johnny. “Ummm...”

“C’mon, George,” Johnny said, placing his hands on his hips. “I know you boys over in the bakery aren’t that friggin’ slow.”

George nodded his head. “The fight. I get it. I get it now.”

“Apparently not. You’re still saying ‘fight.’”

George lifted the brim of his hat up, further revealing his sweaty bangs. “There wasn’t no fight. I didn’t see nothing.” Pulled the brim back down. “Something like that?”

“Yeah. Just like that.”

George bobbed his head up and down, then shuffled out through the double doors Richie had come in through.

Richie glared at Johnny. Time to get things straight. "You need to watch yourself. We cool. But don't put your hands on me again." Marinate on that.

Johnny snorted. "My back hurts. When you're at the top, it don't matter if you got an ache or not. You see?" Pause. "Remember what I told you yesterday? About the top? When you're at the bottom, it holds no weight." Wiggled his shoulders back and forth. "Swaggerin' around like some hot shot. Pushin' people away. That's what they do at the top. Can't do it when you're at the bottom."

Fucking gibberish. "You got a point, or what?" Richie said.

"Maybe."

Fuck you old man. Lucky you the boss. "You don't know me."

Johnny shook his head. "Best get back to the dairy aisle. Finish what you started." Back to Richie, lumbered around the corner. Gone.

The monotonous shelving: stacking, re-stacking shifting, the cold air pummeling Richie's face, exposed arms, sending goose bumps and shivers across his upper body, the red and white tubs of cottage cheese blurring his vision with their sameness. At least these the right gloves. Every now and then, a shopper would interrupt Richie's flow, his attempt to bang this job out as quickly as possible, and he'd grit his teeth—move out the way—but hold his tongue. After Richie had managed to get about half-way through the boxes stacked on the cart, Terry strutted over to him, a half-grin plastered to his face. Same old look.

"How's it comin' along over here?" he asked. Red hair flat. Perfectly gelled.

Richie shoved a tub deep into the middle shelf of the cooler. "Got about 15, maybe 20 more minutes 'fore it's done."

Terry nodded. "Listen," he said, running his hand down his yellow and blue checkered tie. Spit it out, slick. "I spoke with Jamal—"

Shoved in another tub. "Who?"

"You know—Jamal—the new guy."

Tilted his head back—bright lights above—fake-straining to recall. "Oh, right." Back to the tubs.

Terry pulled at his belt then said, "He says he doesn't want to work with you, but he wouldn't tell me why. Do you have any ideas about that?"

Richie faced Terry, shrugged, and picked up another tub.

Terry sucked in his bottom lip. "You know, Richie. It's of primary concern to me that the staff get along as well as possible." Fake wide smile. Ham it up. Tryin' to ease the tension. "Now I'm no communist. I don't believe everyone everywhere is going to join hands and sing 'We are the World.' But, in a business, if one part of the machine breaks down, the whole machine breaks down. Get what I'm saying?" Think I'm stupid?

Richie shot a glance at Terry, then returned to stacking. The freezer's keepin' things under control. Cool air. Relax. "I got you." Shoved in another tub; not too hard. "But I ain't the one who's got a problem. I'll work with anybody in this store."

Terry fiddled with his belt buckle. "I didn't say you wouldn't, Richie. All I'm saying is, you've got to make more of an effort to accommodate your fellow workers. You've gotta be a part of the team."

What about bangin' your employees? "Okay. I'll try." Chew on it.

"That's all I'm asking here." Patted Richie on the shoulder. "Say 'hi' to Mettis for me, would ya?"

Richie nodded. Instincts: he could swing the tub of cottage cheese he had gripped in his hand, the cold shooting up his forearm, and smash Terry in the face, leaving him bloodied and cracked with only a plastic container and a little technique. Busted. Then he'd have to leave—punk-ass Terry'd definitely press charges—and move on to a new life, a new world, like his cousin had done. Comes with its own problems, though. Life on the run ain't pretty. Opened the cooler door—cold air blasted him—sighed, and shoved in another tub. Back to the grind.

Half-visible over the horizon, the orange sun dangled, filtering light through the trees that dotted the property on which "Health Nuts Food and Beverage" sat, spreading beams across the shadowed, steadily emptying parking lot, the cars of customers and employees heading towards the onslaught of rush hour traffic on Fowler Avenue. Richie stood under the awning, watching the mass exodus, a cigarette dangling out the side of his mouth, the smoke streaming in front of his right eyeball, clouding his vision of Temple Terrace. The smell of exhaust and mid-afternoon heat—less of an odor, and more of a searing rush that assaulted the nostrils—caused him to suck harder on his cigarette, compounding his feeling of indecisiveness—holla at Laurel now? Or just show up after leaving Donovan's? Whisk: the automatic doors behind him slid open, then slid shut. The kid—what's that bitch's name? Jamal?—strutted through, paused when he saw Richie, stared at him for a moment—nose a little flattened; crusted blood; want more?—then continued his strut, his chest poking out a bit more. Still tryin', huh? Sucked on his

cigarette, blew out a cloud, returned to the parking lot, the sun, the decision.

The rattle of bass, beginning with a faint thump, grew louder and louder as the blue Ford Tempo putting it out cruised through the parking lot on its way, apparently to the front of the store. Jamal, who had positioned himself on the other side of a column so as to avoid Richie, stepped out into the street. Got your boys now. Don't get brave. One last inhale: deep, soothing. Blow out. Thick stream of silver. The Tempo had tinted windows, dark, impossible to penetrate: don't know how many are in there. Jamal, his strut more pronounced now, opened the front passenger's door, the rattle of the bass sounding out more clearly, the faint sound of a looped guitar riff joining in with the boom, and leaned into the car. His lips moved, but the boom drowned out the words. Jamal shot a grimace at Richie—oh, you mean muggin' now?—then re-focused his attention on whoever was in the car. Richie dropped his cigarette butt on the ground, stomped it out—can't call Laurel now—and decided to wait. The bass continued. Boom, boom, boom. Jamal's conversation continued, this time punctuated with a few semi-animated gestures. Boom, boom, boom.

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The last time Richie had battled more than one person all by himself, he'd been driving his cousin's Honda Civic along Tampa's nighttime streets toward "Maxi's," a corner store just up the street from the Forest Hills golf course. White cones of overhanging light had exposed the car to onlookers every few dozen feet, while the bass of Black Ice's voice kicked out in concert with a hard beat, pounding through, around, and over Richie. Heavy with emotion, the rapper's delivery pulsed through the speakers, mixing in with the bass—the thumpity thump, thump—put out by the two twelves sealed

off in the trunk.

You punk niggas can't fade me.

I got my nine and my glock cocked ba-by!

Driving along Richie couldn't help but feel a pride as rugged as the song spit out by his hometown's own rapper. Black Ice comes with the real. This pride had, along with his sloppy drunk cousin drove him to this point.

The way Richie had looked at the situation, smashing Brad Wangle's face against the windshield of his '96 Camaro had been an act of family loyalty. It be's like that, man. Robert needed back up and Richie, beyond anything else in this oozing eggshell of a world, could provide a stiff-arm, a hard-knuckled crack to the grill. That's how it is in Forest Hills.

A lesson in street manners had been called for that muggy Florida night—the night Richie's shirt clung to his skin. The night Robert said to him after knocking back three more shots of Jager: "You ready to roll?"

Maxi's parking lot had been deserted by paying customers a few hours before Richie pulled up along the side of the store, across from the gray "Deluxe Car Wash" positioned at the rear of the store. He had eased out of his cousin's Honda Civic—the rims breathing clean—and propped up against the door, taking a long drag from his cigarette, the orange glow highlighting his mouth and nose. At that time in his life, the prep work needed to amp himself up for a fight didn't take long. It was always dirty time, kid.

The store and carwash sat beneath the whitish glow of the streetlights hanging to the side of Fowler Avenue. Cars swooshed pass intermittently, rushing, moving onto something else somewhere else, oblivious to the world Richie moved in, the world that

demanding he place himself in these situations. Had no choice. The clerk—a mildly retarded man, Richie found out later—had been standing behind the counter, thumbing his earlobe. A bright splash of light shot out from inside the store—another contribution to Richie’s eventual arrest—so all interested parties could watch the squat clerk pick at his ear, the sprigs of wiry hairs dotting his face standing in stark contrast to his pale face.

Richie turned and leaned into the car: gotta love a drunk. Head dangling, eyes semi-shut, he remembered thinking his cousin’s head dangled about on his skinny neck like a dizzy giraffe’s.

“Wake the fuck up,” Richie said, smoke leaking out of his mouth and nose. “We here.”

His cousin had only shifted, letting loose a mild slip of drool that snaked down his shirt, before he said, “He ain’t ‘bout shit.”

Right as his cousin mumbled out “shit,” a pair of headlights lit them up.

Go time.

“C’mon, fool,” Richie said. All he received in return was the bobbing head, the tuft of messy black hair plastered downward at a sloping angle so that Robert’s eyes were covered. Unprepared. Family should be prepared to back family but that can’t happen when family is passed out drunk. Richie spat on the sporadic diamond glow asphalt.

Then came the shutting of doors, the grumbling of pre-fight oaths. Richie balled up his fists and stepped forward, attempting to see past the headlights and find his opponents. There were only two silhouettes standing on either side of the car by the hood, their faces, and more importantly, their builds masked by the headlights streaming out from behind them. He peered into the car again: his cousin’s head had shifted, further

masking his face.

“What’s up, bitch?” With raised arms, the silhouette across from him called out.

Can’t punk out. Fuck it. Go.

The head lights shut off, leaving only the light inside the store and the white cones beaming down from the streetlights on the side of Fowler. The boy across from Richie stepped forward: Richie smirked. That motherfucker was a day late and a dollar short with that: all height and no size. Robert, it had appeared to Richie, didn’t need back up, he needed an example. Someone to beat down so anyone else who had a problem with the amount of weed he had started moving through Forest Hills could see that it was a problem not worth having. This guy had made a prime candidate for just that, what with his sinking chest and needle-pin legs. Should’ve kept his fuckin’ mouth shut.

Richie focused on this one—the one directly across from him—and titled his head to the side the way he’d seen dogs do before they started barking. “You Brad?”

“Who the fuck are you?” The boy standing diagonally from him had cut in front of the car and stopped next to the other boy across from Richie. He stood there, hands folded across his chest, resting on top of his pudgy stomach, his small face scrunched up around the bottom of the nose and mouth.

“Don’t worry about me,” the skinny one said. (Though neither boy ever told Richie their names that night, he later learned that the skinny one was Brad.) Richie decided it was best to make a go of it by pouncing on Brad, since he would be the easiest to drop, instead of waiting for one of them to spark it. And the surge—that familiar rush of tingling madness—jumped through his body, beginning in the knees, barreling past the stomach, ending in his fists.

The first punch landed on the Brad's nose and sent him flying back against the hood of his car. The other one lunged, swinging a wide hook at Richie's face. Dodged it. With Brad still reeling from the pain and sudden rush of blood caused by Richie's blow, Richie decided he could let the short one have it. He closed in on the boy, yanking his shirt over his head—that's how Jamal got handled—then stung him with a jab to the chin bone, causing the boy to crumble straight to the asphalt. 'Nough said.

Then a tingle—starry, weak—welled up on his neck. He flipped around to find Brad gearing up to take another shot when Richie yanked the kid forward, spun him around, and drove him face first into the windshield. Again and again and again.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey!" The deep nasal burst came from the clerk. He had run out into the parking lot and grabbed Richie by the shoulders, trying desperately to pull him off Brad. "You gonna kill him."

Richie let go of Brad who slid off the hood and smacked to the concrete. He grabbed at the clerk's throat. The clerk stumbled backwards, holding his open hands out in front of him. Richie pursued. The clerk's lower lip folded over, revealing a pink gum cut through with a spider web of blue veins. (The clerk's blue veins, more than anything else, stuck in Richie's mind.) And then the glass doors to the station stopped the chase before it even got started, the clerk backing into them, falling on the ground. Half in the store and half out, the clerk struggled about, trying to stand back up. Richie lifted a size 12 Nike Air Max—them shits costed a 120—just above his face, and dropped the heel on the side of the clerk's face. A thump—hollow, raw. That rush pulsed through Richie, took over, didn't let go, and he sent a another kick, toe first, into the clerk's ribs. Squealed: with each kick. Bled: with the second drop of the heel on the face. And Richie

felt nothing but the surge.

Then the cops on his back, bull-dogging him to the ground in a clatter of directions to one another—grab his fuckin’ arm; get his leg—with Richie swinging his arms, snatching uniforms, gouging eyes. Didn’t do no good. All he had to show for his effort, for his struggle, for his loyalty was a busted lip and a new charge added to the list. Three people had dropped that night for a purpose Richie had no direct involvement in save for the blood circulating through his veins, feeding the surge that led him to W.T. Edwards. Cuz just slept.

* * *

Outside “Health Nuts,” beneath the sun dipping behind the trees outlining the parking lot, Jamal continued speaking with whoever was in the car. Hands shoved deep in his pockets, Richie stepped forward and tilted his head, staring directly at Jamal. The bass coming from inside the Ford continued to rattle in the trunk. Boom, boom, boom. What you waitin’ for? Jamal eyed Richie one final time, spit on the ground, then hopped inside the Ford. Smart move, homey. The car rolled by slowly. Richie caught his reflection in the dark tint of the Ford’s profile: his elbows bent, hands concealed in his pockets, his neck thick, his face a light blur against the black windows. Boom, boom, boom. The car continued on past the front of the store, joining the line of cars awaiting their turn to enter the rush of traffic on Fowler Ave. That’s what I thought.

Whisk: the automatic doors to the store slid open. Johnny came out, took quick notice of Richie, then fumbled around in his pocket until he found his keys. They hung on a large silver ring, at least 15 of them, dangling and clanging and banging together in a shiny mess of metal.

Without looking at Richie, Johnny said, “Your old lady’s on the horn inside. Use the phone in the office behind the front desk.”

“What you got all them keys for?” Richie said.

Johnny shifted his attention from the vast expanse of the neatly-lined parking lot to Richie. “Cause I got responsibilities. I own things.” Wiggled his keys so that they made a sloppy chime. “Each one of these gets me into some place important. Then I lock it up so I can come back and find everything just how I left it.” Stopped wiggling the keys and walked out from under the awning. His neon sat at the far end of the parking lot under a row of young oaks. “See you tomorrow.”

Inside, the store sat naked beneath the checkerboard of lights. Dead: the hum of shoppers, the creaking of wobbly cart wheels, the constant movement gone for the evening. In an office lit only by a small influx of the checkered lights from the store proper, behind the front counter where cartons of cigarettes, snuff, dip, lighters and cigars were stacked in neat rows, stood Richie next to a bare desk, his back against a plain white wall, battling with Laurel.

“I’ll only be like one, maybe two hours,” he said.

“Okay. Fine,” Laurel said. “That’s fine. Like I said. I just wanna know what you’ll be doing—in my car.”

Shouldn’t have taken the call. Fuckin’ Johnny. Naomi wouldn’t never ask questions. “It ain’t nothing. Why you sweatin’ me?”

Laurel released a huff into the receiver. “I’m worried.”

“About what?”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you about Rob,” she said, her voice at once raising and

becoming distant.

Richie dropped his head back against the wall. "Don't start with that. It ain't about him. I ain't stressin' that fool. He'll get his." Double talk: lettin' her think it could be me handlin' it or her daddy.

"What's that supposed to mean?" The voice came back with more immediacy.

Richie bit down on his lower lip. Control yourself. Massage it. "All right, all right. What if it did have something to do with Rob?"

Silence. Steady breathing. "I guess it would depend on what it was you planned on doing. Are you just trying to find him?"

Richie pulled the phone away from his ear and held it to his chest. What to say? What to say...got it. Lifted the phone back up. "Remember how I told you I could find him?"

"Yeah..."

He craned his neck towards the doorway: empty. "Well, what if I was to tell you that I had someone I could talk to about it? What if I was to tell you that I might be able to find out where Rob's stayin'?"

"I'd still be worried," Laurel said in a soft patter, her voice trailing off. She scared. Use it.

"Don't worry, baby." Easy now. "The main concern I got is that you don't worry. You been through enough drama already." Nice.

A tortured silence crept in. Richie pictured Laurel running out of her room and across the hall to her parents' bedroom, banging on the door, yelling for her daddy, telling him everything. It could all come crashing down if he didn't smooth the creases, iron the

wrinkles.

“So what’s your plan?” Laurel said.

Be careful. Richie pulled himself off the wall and began pacing back and forth in the cramped office, moving in between the shadows and light offered by the front of the store. “I got a good idea where Rob might be. I mean, I know someone who might know. Might, that is.” Let “might” settle.

“And? If you find him? Are you gonna go after him?”

He continued to pace. Shadow, light, shadow light, his harried steps stretching the cord of the phone, pulling it from side to side. Tensing it. “No, I’m a do exactly what I told you I was gonna do last night. Remember?”

“I don’t believe you.” Quick with it.

The cord continued to move from side to side, the curls looking more like question marks than zeros. “Look at it from my perspective. With everything you and your family have done for me, why would I go and fuck it up by going after him when alls I gotta do is get on the horn to Mackey?”

Another silence. Could go either way. “Tell me something, Richie. When was the last time you called the cops for anything?”

His pacing had grown so eager, so quick that Richie barely had time to glance over at the desk before the phone’s base slid off and crashed on the floor. Richie stood by the wall, the phone in his hand, the cord dangling lifelessly, detached from the base. Dead line: silence.

CHAPTER 6

Rolling toward the other side of Tampa, the side now both alien and familiar to him, the side that taught him everything and nothing all at once, Richie tried not to think about the burn beginning to flare up on his scalp, a burn that increased in small increments as he drove closer to Forest Hills. Trip better be worth it. A blue night, helped along by a quarter moon, had descended upon the city. The sky broke out into puffy fans of purple clouds, which threatened rain. Bearass Avenue changed when Richie crossed Fletcher Avenue. In his rearview mirror, as he passed a chipped and cracked burger joint that closed down some time ago, the University of South Florida turned from a sprawling plot of palm trees and grass and coeds and buildings of glass and white and green and gold, to a speck. It became a spot where, in the vague lurching of his desire, Laurel roamed about with other privileged kids who knew of things Forest Hills hadn't taught Richie, things he wanted to know.

Laurel's comments last night, her mocking of him and his background, stung Richie anew: burned on the scalp. With the university in the distance, Bearass Avenue was now undergoing its gradual shift. A pawnshop—gold jewelry, lawn equipment, handguns!—sat deep off to the side of the street, its large parking lot filled with people who had no doubt come for the two-dollar-a-plate barbeque special the management served up every other evening. A large black man, clad in a white apron that rolled in a circle from the

push of his belly, manned the smoking, rust-colored grill. Big ass grin. Richie thought of Laurel's face when she said "gangsta," the flair of her finger quotes working on his scalp as if she were in the car, digging her nails into his head. She act like she don't know. Act like her life is the same. Just because Richie's father made a healthy living, drove a nice car—your dad's a friggin' engineer—didn't mean that her world of education and cleanliness meant anything to him. Bunch of bullshit.

Soon, Forest Hills would rise up before him beneath the blue night, amidst the distant thunder, and prove that his life existed in an entirely different dimension. Richie turned the car off from Bearass and onto a side street, driving past small wooded plots of land that bums used as their home, crusted over with empty bean cans, filthy rags, and makeshift campfires, the rot of life on the streets permeating the dried leaves that crunched beneath their feet. That's real life.

This route, though it would take him longer to get to Forest Hills, awakened within him the primal that he needed for his trip to see Donovan. The ramshackle apartment buildings, colored in bright teals and neon blues, no more than three stories in height, acted as visual cues that Richie had not only seen this side of life, but lived in it. That's how it was. That's how it still is. The cracked pavement, vibrating the wheel and, in turn, his entire body cushioned in the leather seat, helped him to forget about the burn on his scalp. Laurel's commentary the previous night had meant nothing: He could literally see that now. Boys huddled on corners—the street lights shining down on them—standing, smoking menthol cigarettes and cheap, wood-tipped cigars staring intently at every passing car, including Richie's—no Laurel's—Dodge Viper. Catchin' looks. The applause of thunder grew louder. Groups of charcoal clouds floated into Richie's

forward gaze, hovering above the apartment buildings. Richie turned onto another side street and continued his purposely circuitous route to Forest Hills.

Laurel reemerged in his thoughts, only last night's words were replaced by this evening's phone disconnection: she probably thought he hung up on her. A nervous flutter jumped into his stomach momentarily, but soon died out. She ain't gonna say shit. Don't wanna see a cracker get locked up. Sure, he had her car. Sure, she wasn't happy about it. But when Richie considered her options—as no doubt she had done during their telephone conversation and, in all likelihood, continued to do at this very moment—he knew that drastic action, however tempting, wouldn't receive a follow through. Got her on lock.

Dilapidated shot-gun houses cropped up along either side of the street, the lawns threaded with weeds and dirt, not thick St. Augustine like what the Mettis' had in the front of their house. People, mostly black, hung out on the small front porches wearing white T-shirts and flip-flops, the women smoking long cigarettes, the men puffing on Black and Mild cigars. Occasionally, as Richie approached the stop light at the end of the street, he'd spot a shimmering blanket of cracked glass lit momentarily by the orange streetlights resting in the gutter. Seeing the inhabitants of the neighborhoods smoking made him want to smoke. He pulled out a Marlboro and fired it up. Thunder cracked—growing closer. He rolled down the window and blew out a stream of silver, the wet air creeping into the car, relaxing him the way the leather grip of the car seat usually did. This time that wasn't enough. Need the realness back.

Black Ice—Black Lice or whoever, as Laurel had called him; don't know shit—came to him, not through the speakers, but through him:

On my block ain't nothing' but garbage,

No pizza delivery, no college...

He stopped at the red light, cars zipping past with a whoosh and a blur of reflected light, but he couldn't hear or see any of it. Feelin' trapped. Trapped by the words, the music, the flavor of the rhythms that pulsed through his system everyday when he was a kid and everyday now.

* * *

On Richie's 48th and last day in W.T. Edwards, he faced his last arm wrestling challenger, Bee-bee. Both of the boys had each beaten 30 different challengers a piece over a week, and, in yet another coincidence, both of the boys were to be released that day. They sat across from one another at a fold out card table in the middle of the square dorm room, the other inmates seated anxiously in the chairs outlining the square. Even though Richie wanted nothing more than to win the B-2 pod's arm wrestling championship, a lingering sense of loyalty dogged him. Don't wanna wup Bee-bee. That's my homey. The two had been close since the day they entered W.T. Edwards with a 48 day sentence handed down to them on the same day by the same judge. Indeed, Bee-bee had been Richie's only friend in W.T. Edwards—the only person Richie wanted to be friends with.

"This it for you, dawg," Richie said, stretching and cracking his knuckles. "This all me."

Bee-bee smiled, revealing his two gold caps. "I ain't seein' it, homey."

"You'd better start," Richie said, leaning forward. "I ain't going out like a chump on my last day." Don't really mean that.

“Shit, I’m from Robles Park. Better recognize.”

“And I’m from Forest Hills.” Pointed at Bee-bee. “You’d better recognize.”

Bee-bee cracked up laughing and said, “This it for you, white boy. This Custard’s last stand.” He started laughing even harder, drawing the attention of the other boys.

The CO Javorn emerged from one of the cells lining the back wall, and slammed the door shut behind him. A scream came from inside the cell, followed by another, then another, then another. Aaack! Aaaack! Aaack! The other four CO’s who, up until that point had been huddled together by the watch area, turned toward Javorn. Always gotta ask the big man for permission. Another scream came, followed by a loud thud: Pedro, a small Puerto Rican boy, had begun banging his head on the cell window. Crazy motherfucker didn’t know when to quit. Pedro had stayed in trouble with both the COs and the other inmates since he entered W.T. Edwards. Even when medicated, Pedro often still didn’t stay calm. He simply didn’t know how to obey the COs and, even worse, the other boys. After a while, Javorn grew tired of administering regulation justice, and allowed the boys to deal with Pedro as they pleased. This usually happened during shower time when the COs could feign ignorance. It worked like this: Pedro would enter a stall and stand underneath the same busted showerhead that sent down a single blast of steadily rushing hot water. He’d try to wash himself, then the first soap bar would smack his naked body. Then another bar, then another until Pedro ducked into the corner, screaming. Cowering: his wet skin glistening underneath the lights. The boys would hurl soap bars at him, moving closer and closer until Javorn whistled, which usually happened after Pedro had endured at least a ten minute pelting. Pedro endured the same routine everyday, never once trying to avoid the showers, let alone the soap

bars. Boy must've liked it.

Pedro had stopped banging his head on the cell window and started screaming again. Aaak! Aaak! Aaak!.

"Somebody shut that fuckin' spic up," said Brian, a pseudo-skinhead with a permanent black eye seated near Pedro's cell. Better watch that kinda talk.

Jose, a fat Dominican who had once smacked Brian in the face with his tray at lunch, stood up and said, "Who the fuck you callin' a spic?"

Bee-bee had stopped laughing. He shook his head and said to Richie, "Man, we ain't never gonna get to do this."

"Don't I know it," Richie said, leaning back.

Javorn glared at Jose. "You wanna go on lock-down, Jose? That what you want?"

Jose sat back down, mumbling under his breath.

Javorn then turned his attention to Brian. "You, get up, and come here."

"What I do?" Brian said.

Another CO, Henry wandered over to Brian from the watch area. Richie hated Henry: He regarded the man as a weak hillbilly from North Florida who couldn't—and never would—command the kind of respect Javorn did because of his weakness. Fuckin' chump. Henry stood over Brian and flashed a near toothless smile. "Best do what the man says."

Brian smacked his lips and stood in front of Javorn. Aaak! Aaak! Aaak! Tense: The inmates began shifting in their seats, putting their hands over their ears, flipping birds in the direction of Pedro's cell. Them fools ready to blow. Richie folded his arms across his chest and whispered to Bee-bee: "This look like trouble, dawg."

Bee-bee released a sigh. "If this shit gets hectic, you know the judge finna give us 24 more days."

"At least," Richie said.

Javorn fiddled with his keys, finally settling on one, sticking it in the key hole. But he didn't turn it. "Since you so bad ass, skinhead," he said to Brian, his voice calm and even. "You shut him up."

"What you mean?" Brian said. "You're not putting me in there with him?"

The boys began laughing.

"All ya'll shut the fuck up," Javorn said to the inmates. Then he turned to the COs by the watchtower. "Get your inmates under controls."

The COs fanned out across the room, giving warnings, grabbing boys by the ears—they like to embarrass your ass—and engaging in other displays of power.

Javorn turned the key and unlocked the cell. Pedro stopped screaming and came to the cell window. "Yo, yo, yo, CO," he said, his voice echoing off the cell walls. "Yo, yo, yo, let me out. Yo, yo, yo." He was so close his breath moistened the glass in brief shocks of white.

"He's all yours," Javorn said to Brian. Opened the door, grabbed Brian by the shirt collar and shoved him into Pedro. Slammed it shut. Aaak! Aaak! Aaak!

Silence: Then the rush. An onslaught of thumps and cries, the boys slamming into the cell door, their gray uniforms blurring past the window. Blood left on the window. Smeared. The inmates sat still. Richie and Bee-bee sat still. Gotta watch what you say. The tussle stopped. Silence: an eerie flood of nothing. Then a knock. Javorn unlocked and opened the cell door. Brian's lip had a mighty slash across it. Fresh blood stained

his shirt in droplets. Javorn motioned with his head for Brian to have a seat, then walked to the center of the room and stood next to Richie, his face frozen, nothing.

“Ya’ll ready to do this?” Javorn said to Richie and Bee-bee.

“Yeah,” Richie said. Bee-bee nodded. Can’t wait to get up outa here.

“All right then,” Javorn said. “Lock hands.”

Richie extended his arm across the table and clasped Bee-bee’s hand. They stared at one another, their eyes exhibiting a dispassionate hollowness—a kind of wearied obligation to duty. Javorn wrapped his fingers around the boys’ hands, creating a mishmash of black and white skin and knuckles. Don’t touch me. A tension shot through Richie’s muscles, which caused Bee-bee to tighten his grip. Richie closed his eyes: agitated white stars spread out against a black canvas flipping on and off, off and on.

“On three,” Javorn said. (Tightened my grip. Embracing the pressure.)

“One...two...three...”

Release: Javorn let go of their hands and moved back. Veins popped. Planes of muscles shifted. With the tension in his arm came a sincere desire in Richie to win the battle, to push out and down all the claustrophobic paranoia that welled-up within him at night when, alone in his cell, he’d go to sleep listening to his cellmate masturbating—a rhythmic flesh slapping he wanted to stamp out by strangling the boy to death. Never did it. Didn’t want more time. Boiling: Richie strained, grunting from time to time while Bee-bee gritted his teeth, dropped his head and pushed Richie’s arm closer to the table. Not having it. With his hand only inches away from the table, Richie made one final surge, summoning everything that had built up within him. Then the inmates’ quiet got to

him. They ain't rowdy now. During all his previous battles, the inmates had been actively involved, yelling and pumping their fists like fans at a Buccaneers game. Pedro sat or, rather, lay in his cell, bleeding, possibly nursing a serious injury and the inmates and COs knew—everyone except the rest of the world, the rest of Tampa, which existed outside these walls and the high barbed wire fence that separated W.T. Edwards from the real world. For a moment, this hurt Richie, and all the effort—the motherfucking heat—slipped from him just long enough for Bee-bee to regain control of the battle.

Ain't gonna happen.

Richie bared down hard, his grunt morphing into a powerful cry that sent Bee-bee's hand crashing to the table. Over, homie. Both boys breathed heavily, their chests pumping with each suck in, each blow out. The inmates' hush continued to hang in the air.

Bee-bee nodded to Richie, smirked and whispered, "You one tough ass cracker."

These moments Laurel would never understand with her petty mocking, her insulated life of receive, receive, receive. Girl don't know shit. Richie felt he had a powerful experiential presence of mind that he clung to tightly, that imbued his entire being from the way he walked—gotta have a strut, kid—to the way he spoke—the gift of gab's the only gift. But, looking around the dorm, each inmate sat, motionless, sapped of any clue as to what they were thinking or feeling because the win wasn't theirs. Javorn had made sure that somebody won between Brian and Pedro, which rendered the winner of the battle between Richie and Bee-bee meaningless. Late at night, when the lights had been shut off, when the COs had switched shifts, the silence, the motionlessness would awaken with horrific results: blood would stain the pillowcases. Takes 'em longer to hear when

you're locked down.

"All right now," Javorn said to Richie and Bee-bee, "ya'll fold this here table up and throw it in the closet." (Back to the routine. Basics.)

Just as Richie and Bee-bee stood a voice called out, "Richard Thorton..."

Richie turned around to find the only white CO, Steve, standing at the doorway. He worked the night shift so, technically, he hadn't punched the clock, yet. "C'mon," he said to Richie. "Time's up."

Two beautiful words: Javorn barked at another inmate to help Bee-bee with the table, the COs began dividing the rest, lining them up in front of their respective cells—all expect for the one Pedro occupied.

"I'll holla," Bee-bee said to Richie.

"Oh, for sure," Richie said, holding out his palm. They slapped each other's hand. "Today's your day, too. Don't forget it."

"Fold up that table now, Bee-bee," Javorn said, his pock-marked cheeks suddenly revealing themselves to Richie for all their ghastliness. "You ain't out yet."

Richie strode past the lines of gray uniforms bunched together in front of one window doors—fuckin' slaughterhouse—and out of the room. The unlocking of doors, the squeak of soles across the tiles, the muffled adjustments: Aaak! Aaak! Aaak! Shit don't change.

* * *

The sky had darkened, hiding the quarter moon and the purple rain clouds: if rain were destined to fall, Richie would never see it coming. After he had passed the cemetery where his great grandfather, the ex-bootlegger lay beneath the soil—moms

swears the bad comes from him—and after he passed the convenience store where he used to meet potheads looking for an after school blunt—that spot still belongs to me—

Richie drove around a long bend near the Forest Hills golf course, and pulled into the two-track dirt driveway of Donavon's house. A single flood light was on near the front door. The light back-lit a dead oak tree so that it appeared as an outline of lifeless branches arching downward in front of Laurel's car. A few leaves sifted lightly in the night wind. Just before he knocked on the front door, Richie had almost turned back, got in the car, and sped off before he dug any deeper into Robert's whereabouts. While Richie wanted to hurt his cousin—to make him feel all the pain he'd felt going through this ordeal—he also wanted it wrapped up cleanly. And a confrontation, especially between he and Robert, wouldn't end in a make-up hug. Can't back down now.

Donavon answered the door—still got his hair shaved—and nodded at Richie without saying a word. Knew I'd be here. Fucking Naomi. Donavon's head had always been large—used to call his punk-ass “Big Head”—but it seemed even larger to Richie now. Donavon's pointed chin made Richie think of a hot air balloon basket because the jaw-line became increasingly larger as you traced it up the side of his face so that, once you reached the top of his head, it looked like, well, a giant hot air balloon. Shoulda never shaved his head. Richie followed Donavon, whose Fila slippers smacked rhythmically on the tile, through the bare living room and into the kitchen where a cage holding three pit bull puppies yelped and bit at the iron grille work. Want out that cage. A steady thump of bass came from the hallway. Richie thought he heard a girl giggle.

After opening the refrigerator, Donavon finally broke the silence between the two and said, “Wanna beer?”

Richie said he did and sat down at the kitchen table, which, as far as he could tell, was the only furniture in the house. In the old days, Donavon and Cammy—who was doing a 5 year bid for probation violations—had brand new everything: black leather couch, matching love seat and recliner, post-modern lighting fixtures, the works. Now, it seemed, it had all disappeared.

“Where’s all your furniture at?” Richie asked.

Donavon handed him a beer, then walked over to the sliding glass door next to the table. Another flood light hung from the roof, shining down on the concrete slab that passed for a back porch, barely illuminating the edge of what appeared to Richie to be a near-empty pool. Used to have water. None of the old patio furniture—the umbrella, Tiki lamps, lounge chairs—existed anymore. Shit ain’t the same. They slippin’.

“That’s what you came here to talk about?” Donavon said, still looking out the door. (Cuttin’ to the chase, huh?) “My furniture?”

Richie took a swig of his beer and said, “Naw.” A female moan came down the hall. Somebody’s fucking. Who else here?

Donavon eyes darted toward the hallway, then re-focused on Richie (what he hiding?). Took a seat diagonal from Richie and said, “Naomi called.” Pounded his beer in one gulp. Slammed it on the table. (Watch it.)

Richie nodded. “So where he at, then?”

Donavon slid his tongue across his front teeth. “You know, I gotta be honest with you, Richie.” Pause. Breathed in. Out. “I don’t like what I’ve been hearing about you these days, man.”

Richie glanced down the hall. Took another sip of beer. “Oh, yeah?” Richie

imagined a dark cloud forming in Donavon's eyes, glazing over the pupils, shrouding his friend from so many years ago in a fierce storm. Can see the rain comin'.

"I remember when you used to hang out there in front of the corner store, getting high, sellin' sacs all day long." Smirked. "You used to have everybody on your shit. Money used to practically hang out of your ears, man. Then you—" snapped his fingers—"up and vanished."

Best stop playing games. "Where's Rob?"

"I don't see why you're so interested in him," Donavon said. "You didn't seem that interested when you did what you did." Donavon the talker. No matter what kind of drugs were circulating through his system, no matter how many days he'd been up, no matter how people were in the house, Donavon always had a book with him. Though he dropped out of school like everybody else at 16, he still liked to read. To Richie, these works seemed like ancient relics far removed from the here and now, far removed from the hustle and struggle of existence in Forest Hills. He could always tell when Donavon wanted to show off his learnedness from the dead—to Richie—vernacular spilling from his mouth in rapid succession. Donavon pulled a button-sized baggie half-full of coke from his jeans pocket. Dipped a key into it, and snorted a little up his left nostril, then his right. He put it back into his pocket without offering any to Richie. One of the puppies yelped.

"What book you reading now?" Richie asked, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms across his chest. "What's in your head to make you talk to me like that?"

Donavon scratched his nose. "It's disappeared, my man. It's been swallowed up. All the loyalty, the friendship, it's all finished. As you noticed, I don't even have any

fuckin' furniture."

The girl in one of the backrooms released a long moan that carried just above the thump thump of bass. This time Donavon's whole head turned toward the noise. He fidgeted with his shirt collar.

Richie took note. "Who back there?"

Donavon gulped hard and said, "I think it's time for you to leave now."

Richie rose to his feet so quickly that the chair tipped backwards and bounced on the tile. The puppies erupted in a chorus of high-pitched chatter. "Them books ain't gonna save you right now. Who back there?"

A droplet of sweat slid down the side of Donavon's face. "This has nothing to do with books. With words. This has to do with action." Gulped again. "And I know you don't wanna hear, but it has to do with your actions," he said, pointing at Richie. (Blow got you feeling brave.)

Richie darted around the side of the table and stood directly over Donavon. "What you talking about? My actions?"

Donavon stared straight ahead. "I can't help you. And finding your cousin definitely won't help you."

The crown of Richie's head flared up slightly, and he had a terrible urge to scratch the itch, which he resisted by clenching his fists. "Is Rob in one of them rooms?"

"What difference would it make? How would it change the circumstances?"

Richie's lower jaw quivered with rage. The burn flared more. Burned, motherfucker. "You been dealing to him and you been hiding him and your dumb ass knew I was coming and you still got him here." Breathing became more rapid. Chest heaved up and

down. “Do you wanna die?” Fists tightened.

Donavon looked up at Richie who now saw no storm there, just a vague emptiness that seemed to promise something beyond a mere response. “Would it shock you to know that you’re white? That you’re not Black Ice, that, for all intents and purposes, you’ve killed your cousin. Destroyed him.”

All over the kitchen table, tiny cracks, hairline incisions, suddenly became noticeable to Richie. The newspaper covering the bottom of the dog cage was wet—probably piss; filthy mutts; filthy owners—and reeked of mildew. Turning, Richie surveyed the bare living room: black smudges streaked the carpet, and an explosion of holes graced the walls. Animals. They all animals.

His hand shaking, Donavon tried to steady himself enough to place the key topped with cocaine up to his nostril, but failed. Powder fanned out across the table. Donavon dropped his fist down with a bang.

“The motions of grace; the hardness of the heart; external circumstances,” he mumbled. (Droopy eyes. Pathetic.)

“Fuck you say to me?” Richie asked. “What was that gibberish?” Caught the mess of cocaine spread out on the table. Gotta keep it in the bag, or in your nose. Sloppy.

Donavon shook his head. (Another female moan. Thump, thump, thump.) “It doesn’t matter. You wouldn’t understand.”

Richie’s scalp burned, and he lashed out, accidentally kicking the puppies’ cage. An eruption of yelps, barks, whiny grunts shot through Richie, cluttering his mind to the point where he wanted to tear off his ears, and run screaming and bleeding. He shut his eyes. “Where’s Robert?!”

Felt a movement: a rush towards him, from him, a set-up? When he opened his eyes again, Donavon lay unconscious on the cage, his big head dangling half-way off to the side. The puppies clamored in all directions, their little claws scraping the bars, their wet snouts peaking out through the holes. Yelp, yelp, yelp. Blood drip-dropped from Donavon's nose onto the newspaper, occasionally falling onto one of the puppies. A door in the hallway opened: bass and lonely strings collapsed on Richie. Robert? Phantom—ghost blending past and present. Leave me alone, motherfucker! The ghost faded back into the room. Richie barreled down the hallway, threw open the door, startling a girl of no more than 16 as she dressed. Bass, strings, and silky rhyme-slinging attacked him—loudly. A blur in the corner of his eye...Robert?

Even as Richie's breathing returned to normal, and the burn of his scalp died down, and Forest Hills disappeared in his rearview mirror, Richie still couldn't decide if he'd done the right thing. If, in fact, the pursuit of Robert mattered at all. Playing catch-up with a phantom didn't appeal to Richie—police officers did that. The A.C. cooled him, and he leaned the seat back even farther, silently thanking a God that may or may not exist that the blur wasn't Robert. The university appeared before him, shrouded in night's dark cloak shot through with yellow light, and, for the first time, the sight of Temple Terrace comforted him. As did the thought that Robert, for all intents and purposes, may not even exist. Fuckin' ghost.

CHAPTER 7

What began as a comforting thought soon morphed into one of dread, and Richie's skull lit up anew. No peace. Mr. Metti's black BMW sat in the winding driveway, underneath an oak. The entire house glowed with white light beaming from every window, as if a photographer had requested to shoot it at night for a real estate brochure. But the light in and of itself didn't frighten Richie as much as what it signified—especially the light in the dining room. It meant a formal dinner, a formal dinner with all three of the Mettis. A showdown of sorts always took place at the dinner table on the rare occasions when Mr. Metti actually came home in time, and the mere thought of it sent anxious shockwaves through Richie's system. During the actual meal, the static buzzing between each person, both underneath and on the surface, made it so that he could barely chew his food, let alone digest it. Indeed, what bothered him more than anything about these incidents was the fact that they reminded him of his father's moods during family gatherings, which usually manifested themselves in violent outbursts, outbursts that revolved around baseball. ("You gotta swing the bat. Grip the thing and let her rip!") And that's exactly what Richie felt like doing when Mr. Metti joined them for dinner: pulling chunks of hair matted with blood from each of their heads, slamming them face first onto the table so that their noses burst like cold pipes, and leaving, leaving, leaving. Escape, motherfucker.

Richie noticed his hand shaking. He reached for his head, and then thought better of it. Scratching only makes shit worse. Perhaps he could run off with Naomi, perhaps he could leave Laurel and her family behind, with their sprawling house, with their petty bickering. But in the end he knew he couldn't; with no money, Richie depended almost completely on the Mettis. Trapped, man. His hand continued to shake. The incessant yelping of Donavon's puppies erupted in his head, and he suddenly found himself gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles began turning white. Rip it off. Rip it all off. A vein in his neck quivered. He gritted his teeth, sliding them back and forth in a grinding outgrowth of rage. The pit bull puppies yelping echoed fiercely in his mind, echoing a name he didn't want to hear. Not ten minutes ago, on his way back from Donavon's, he'd felt relaxed, comforted even. The fact that he hadn't found Robert in the back room left him with a deep sensation of relief that had all but disappeared in a matter of minutes. Now those caged puppies cried out Robert's name through bared fangs. Heat leapt through his body, moving from his knuckles to his skull. How would he conquer these feelings? How would he find Robert? What would he do if confronted, if cornered? Would it end everything he'd worked for? He screeched in a rattled wave of pain, hoping—no praying—that it would drown out the sound of the puppies. The puppies that sounded his cousin's name.

Yelp, yelp, yelp!

* * *

When Richie stepped into the hot day upon his release from W.T. Edwards, he saw no one. A CO had handed him the plastic bag containing his clothes with a grunt, then, opened the door at the end of the hallway, the creaking signifying Richie's official

release. See you when I see you. He'd dressed in a bathroom in the main office area, and pushed through the front door a free man. Now outside, the humidity already caused his shirt to begin to stick to his body. No breeze, no clouds, just white sun and a vast expanse of concrete surrounded by a barbed-wire fence spread out before him. Where the fuck are they? He wandered out toward a cluster of palm trees near the fence, and stopped underneath them, enjoying what little shade they offered. He sat down in a plot of crispy brown grass. Nothing stirred except the light shimmering off the concrete.

The first time Richie emerged from W.T. Edwards at 14, his mother came to get him. His father, for good reasons, had refused: Richie swore he would batter the old man again. Exactly twenty-one days earlier Richie had been charged with pitching the final innings of the Hillsborough County Little League Championships. He'd cruised all the way to the end, striking out every player until the ninth inning, when a skinny Puerto Rican kid got lucky and almost hit a home run. The kid ended up with a triple. With two outs and one runner on, Richie's father began calling from the bleachers—above and beyond all the ambient noise erupting in the park that day—for Richie to “take it all the way. All the way!” Richie's stomach began to gurgle. Panic set in. Did his father want him to bean the kid? Did his father really want him to hurt this Puerto Rican in front of everybody? As Richie puzzled over this, he saw from the corner of his eye his father stand up, his face the color of pigskin, and yell, “Show that batter what kinda damage you can do!”

That's indeed what his father wanted him to do: crack the kid, put him out of play. Richie wiped his brow, checked the runner at third, and slung a 75mph fastball right at the batter's head. A tiny cloud of orange dust puffed into the air when the kid hit the

ground. Even now, the only thing Richie recalled about what occurred next comes to him not in pictures, not in the film reel of memory, but in sounds: of the stomp of feet on the bleachers, of a woman's shrill cries, of his father's open palm against his face. That last sound then gave way to the sound of bone on teeth as Richie pummeled his father with wild jabs to the mouth. It all culminated in that moment: all the late afternoon work-outs his father made him endure after he'd returned from practice, all the dinner table taunts about developing "some semblance of skill in life before you lose out," and all the pressure, the extreme exertion weighted on the young Richie's conscious experience, gave way to blood that day. Blood in front of everyone. His reputation in Forest Hills had begun.

Richie shielded his face from the sun's white-hot glare, and tipped his head back against a tree. His mother's soft angular face, with its careful make-up job, hiding the web of wrinkles from the gaze of others at a distance, would not be greeting him. Instead, her sister—pale skin, erratic eyes, frizzy red hair—would. But in a way, this image relieved Richie. While his aunt spent the vast majority of her time lying on the couch smoking Benson and Hedges menthols and watching "Golden Girls" re-runs, she knew how to relate. She knew the terror of being an outsider, of going against the grain, as did her son, Robert. Still, sitting on the dead grass, underneath a near-dead group of palms, waiting for his ride, Richie couldn't help but feel some bitterness at both of them. After all, he'd fought for his cousin, went to jail for his cousin, and during his entire stay in jail, hadn't received one phone call, one letter, one sign that his blood appreciated what he'd done. Respect my shit. Chump better recognize. It's like Bee-bee once told him: "When you go to jail, you might as well be dead. 'Cause ain't none of your niggas gonna

move a muscle for your ass. It's just how it is."

A crawling sensation, beginning at Richie's legs and moving up to his thighs, caused him to stand up. At first he thought the extreme anxiety at being alone out here, wondering whether someone would pick him up, had manifested itself physically, but when he looked down, he saw that his shoes, socks, and legs were covered in red ants. He began jumping around, slapping at his legs, and wiping huge clumps of roiling redness. And he suffered the consequences. They bit into him. Wicked bumps immediately formed on his legs. They fucking ambushed me. Following his 10 minute-long battle with the ants, he composed himself just enough to look down at the base of the palm he'd leaned up against. Two gray piles of dirt overrun with ants, so many that they almost appeared to be one ethereal body, moved in a chaotic mass. He'd destroyed their home.

Still picking ants from his socks, Richie heard the squeak of breaks and the rumbling of an engine. His cousin's hatchback pulled to a stop, and Robert got out. Two long-haired heads sat stoically inside: one in front, the other in back. Fuckin' Laurel. The ant bites seared Richie's flesh. Robert, who'd yet to fall into the black madness of coke addiction and all of the physical disintegration that accompanies it, bounded over to Richie, a toothy grin plastered across his face. At that point, a fearful rage, sparked by the ant bites, shot through Richie, but Robert's smile, coupled with some vague connection Richie made between his own body shape and that of Robert's, slowed it. Family, kid.

"You doing the hokie pokie or something, cuz?" said Robert, all smiles.

Richie approached. "Fucking ants."

The two embraced. Along with Robert's body heat, the size of his back and the effort he had to make to wrap his arms around it comforted Richie. Good to be home.

Robert whispered in Richie's ear, "We gotta get something goin'." (Hot breath. Tingles. Already makin' moves.)

After pulling back, Richie looked him in the eye, and said, "What you mean?"

Robert let go, smacked his lips. "Man, old Prowler got knocked off. And his connect slipped out. It's dry as fucking bone right now, cuz."

Bee-bee's gold fronts popped into Richie's mind. "I made a connect. We can roll with it a day or two."

Smiled. "I knew you'd have something. You been in there long enough to make some friends."

"Long enough is right."

Aunt Sheila sat in the front seat, smoking. She smiled at Richie, and said, "You look fit as a fiddle."

Richie leaned in through the window and kissed her cheek. Rough skin. "You gonna cook for me?"

She laugh-hacked. "Don't count on it." Took a long drag, and tossed it on the ground.

When Richie sat down in back, Laurel barely even looked at him. It seemed as if she'd moved even closer to the door. Still, Richie couldn't help staring at her tan thigh. Ain't seen no female in a minute, kid. He rebuked himself the moment she pulled her Daisy-Dukes down in an attempt to cover her thigh. Never liked me. The car rumbled off. While Richie and Laurel never once glanced at each other, let alone spoke, he and

Robert and his aunt chattered the entire trip. They discussed Richie's plans ("Gonna get me a construction job"), the troubles Aunt Sheila had with her back ("It feels like a fat man's sitting on it"), and Robert's fascination with monkeys ("They use tools, like branches and shit, to eat termites, man!"). Never once did the subject of Richie's incarceration come up. While he didn't want to discuss it, he did long for an acknowledgement of his devotion to family, of his sacrifice.

In between conversations, while the pregnant pauses hung in the air like Aunt Sheila's cigarette smoke, Richie would steal glances at Laurel. For her part, Laurel acted as if she didn't notice. Richie watched her eyes following the bright splashing buzz of motorists zooming past, the sun beating down on the windshields and reflecting in great shocks of white, hoping to draw her attention. They'd always had an adversarial relationship, with it culminating at one point in a vicious shouting match, ending with Richie standing over her as she lie helplessly on Robert's bed. She'd called him ignorant, and he'd charged her so suddenly that she dropped to the bed in fear. "I'll tell Robert if you hit me," she'd said. Richie smirked, and replied, "Moo, moo, moo, fat face." Then he walked off and smoked a joint in the woods across from the apartment. Didn't know how close she came to getting whupped. Now he thought that, maybe, if she insulted him again, he'd try another tactic, one less brutal and intimidating. Maybe he'd even try to win her over, show her that he was capable of compassion. Then W.T. Edwards flashed back into his mind. The COs, the fights, his bunkmate's furious masturbation, and he knew then that whatever compassion he had no longer existed—not in a pure sense.

The Forest Hills golf course soon appeared, and all of the anxiety that had welled-up in Richie while considering his relationship with Laurel, faded back into his mind, lost in

a vertiginous collapse of all things unknowable. Time to hustle. Everything looked the same: the bark on the trees, the patches of brown in the yards, the rust on the metal fences—everything. Shit don't change. Aunt Shelia opened the front door to the apartment, dropped her purse on the dining room table, and plopped down on the couch. She lit a cigarette, and flicked on the television. Robert stood in the middle of the room, as Richie and Laurel walked toward the bedroom, careful to maintain distance between each other.

“Richie just got home. He's out. Free as bird and shit.” Robert said. “Ain't you gonna cook something?”

Without turning away from the television, she said, “You know better than that.” Tapped cigarette ash on the carpet. “Now go to your room.” Cackled.

“Your nasty, ma. Nasty.”

“And I birthed you right out of my pussy.” Now she faced him, while still channel surfing. Auto commercials, old folks in wheel chairs, and the saintly glow of life insurance flicked by. “So what does that make you?” More cackling.

Robert shook his head and stomped off, grabbing Laurel by the elbow and practically dragging her down the hallway. Once in Robert's bedroom—clothes scattered everywhere, an ashtray on the nightstand, on the dresser, on the floor, the stale odor of foulness lingering like death—Laurel yanked her arm away. Richie spread out on the bed, and stared at the swirls of yellow cigarette and marijuana residue on the ceiling.

“Do you think my arm's some kind of handle?” It was the most Laurel had said all afternoon. “Do you think I'm a door?”

“I wouldn't have to handle you if you knew when to leave,” Robert said.

“Handle me? Handle me?” Hands on hips. “Spell handle?”

Robert slapped the entertainment center. Dust puffed into the air. “I can spell slap.”

“Oh, now you’re gonna hit me?” She stepped closer. (Brave-ass female.) “Why don’t you do that? Why don’t you take out all your anger on me? Why don’t you take out all your anger on the one person who does cook for you?”

Then it came: Robert gripped her shoulders, shook her back and forth, and slung Laurel on top of Richie. Once she landed, right on his leg, the pain of her forehead smacking his shinbone dissipated as soon as she lifted her head, the ends of her hair delicately tingling the point of impact. Richie’s body tensed in a weird euphoria—not of emotion, not of soul, but of feminine touch. A feminine touch that had a clandestine element to it: I ain’t supposed to want her touch. The quick dismissal: It don’t mean nothing. Just ain’t been close to no girl in a minute. Been locked up. Laurel struggled to her feet, nearly falling off the foot of the bed. Her face was red.

With the tension, this strange elation, still coursing through him, Richie stood. “I ain’t been out but thirty minutes and ya’ll already fighting? Already throwing drama in my life? This your idea of a welcome mat?”

Robert spit on the carpet. “Let’s go check out this puppy,” he said to Richie.

“Puppy?” Richie didn’t know how to react; he didn’t know how to settle, to deal with this strange dynamic diplomatically. How could he live in such an environment?

“What about me?” Laurel asked, incredulous.

“I thought you didn’t like dogs,” Robert said. “I thought they licked too much.”

“I still want to go.”

“Well, you can’t. Me and Richie’s got grown man business to discuss.”

“What puppy?” Richie said to his cousin.

Laurel rolled her eyes. “Grown man business,” she said, mocking. “What kind of man-business do you have to handle? Come on. Tell me. I’m dying to hear this one.”

Robert lit a cigarette and leaned back against the dresser. He smiled. “The kind that you wouldn’t understand.”

“You may bang around like pots and pans,” Laurel said, “but that’s all it is. Noise. Big clatter-bang noise.”

After exhaling a large plume of smoke, Robert turned to his cousin, and asked, “You ready?”

The smoke drifted, it seemed to Richie, toward the half-open blinds, as if it too wanted to leave. Without looking at either of them, Richie left the room. The heat was still heavy outside. Little tan insects swirled in tight-cyclones over the grass beyond the parking lot, soundlessly turning. They never seemed to go anywhere; they just turned and turned. Inexplicably, it made Richie sad. Then angry. He momentarily forgot himself and stared directly at the sun, then winced and closed his eyes. White flashes sparked against the black curtains of his eyelids, and the sight of something he’d created comforted him.

“What the fuck you smiling at?” Robert’s voice had a distance to it that made Richie smile even wider. “Man, what the fuck you doing?” The distance remained. The flashes of white had become smaller, but they remained, bursting and sparkling, each design new. Robert slapped Richie’s arm twice, hard.

Driving along 56th Street, Richie still felt his cousin’s palm striking him. The feeling wouldn’t disappear, and it bothered him. Despite the hour, the sun still shone just as

bright as it had earlier, and the soaking heat still oppressed the senses, making Richie feel drowsy.

“So this kid’s got a little dog,” said Robert. “Some kind of—oh, I don’t know what the hell you call it. But it’s got a smushed up face, like someone took a shovel to it or something. Thing’s hardly got a nose. And it makes this weird snorting sound if you get him excited, and his nose—what nose he’s got, anyway—is always running. Snot everywhere.”

Richie tossed his cigarette out the window, and watched as the ash clung to the car. Humidity sucks in all. “What the hell do you want a dog like that for?”

Leaning back further in his seat, Robert said, “It’s not the dog we’re after.”

“We?” Richie said.

Robert faced him. “Yeah, man. We. As in we’ve got business to handle. As in we need money. As in we stick together.”

“Huh.”

“What are you huhin’ for? What part of this equation aren’t you getting?”

Watch it now, cuz. “What’s on your mind, man?”

They were driving directly into the sun now, prompting both of them to flip down the visors.

“I got a little cream puff for us to get over on.”

Richie lit another cigarette. “What kind of cream puff?”

“The best kind,” said Robert, smiling. “He stay by himself, keeps tons a cash around, and thinks I’m his fucking friend.” At this Robert burst into laughter. “He thinks I’m helping school him to the game and shit. Thinks I’m interested in his hustle.”

“How long you been staking him?”

“Oh, I don’t know. About three months now, I guess.” Robert reached out his hand, gesturing for Richie to pass him the cigarette. After taking a couple of quick drags, Robert handed the cigarette back and continued. “So what you think?”

The car’s stench hit Richie—a mixture of salt and rotten eggs—and he couldn’t believe he didn’t smell it earlier. “What the fuck’s that smell?”

“What smell?”

Richie pinched his nose, and rolled the window down all the way, letting in blast of hot air that overran the weak putters of cool air coming through the vents. “It smells like open ass in here.”

“Don’t act like I don’t know you. Don’t act like I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, and what am I doing?”

“Please...”

The car turned off into a narrow side street, on either side of which sat green duplexes. Some had potted plants by the front door, but most lacked any decoration. Robert stopped the car.

“What you stopping for?” Riche asked.

Robert leaned over the steering wheel and peered out to his right at one of the duplexes. “That’s his place right there.”

Richie looked over at the duplexes. “Which one? They all look the same to me.”

“Well, trust me. Inside, this one ain’t the same. The rest of these don’t offer nothing. But that one,” he said, pointing toward the windshield. “That one does.”

Without a word, Richie got out of the car. His cousin sat still, apparently surprised

that Richie had made his decision so quickly. Then he, too, hopped out. Mexican music wafted through an open window, along with the sound of a child whining. Fuckin' kids. They stopped in front of number 106.

"Just follow my lead," Robert said. Knocked on the door.

Richie felt his knees trembling as the adrenaline began working through his body. Visions of money stacks ceiling high, of people running at the sound of his fist thumping against skulls, of him and his cousin dominating the Tampa drug scene once again formed in his mind. The power that came along with illegal money appealed to Richie like no other thought, but a lingering doubt dampened his fantasy: Could Robert be trusted?

A thin kid, no more than 17 years old, answered the door. With the exception of a pair of cargo pants, he had nothing on. His thin chest stuck out in a jagged set of interconnected bones, almost causing Richie to bust out laughing. Cream puff is right. By the time Robert had introduced Richie, and all three had plopped down on a black futon facing a big screen TV featuring a basketball game, Richie knew this score wouldn't take more than five minutes. Once he witnessed Robert give the signal, he would pounce on this Quimby and eat him up.

"So how long were you in 'Dub for?" the kid asked Richie. He'd begun rolling a blunt on the glass coffee table in front of the couch. Marijuana seeds were sprinkled all over the table, and green stems picked from buds long ago were scattered about the dingy carpet.

"21 days," said Richie, watching as a short white guy landed a baseline jump shot on TV.

“Glad to be out, I bet,” said Quimby. “I know I would be, but then again, I don’t ever plan on going.”

Richie looked at the kid. His curly black hair hung over his ears in thick coils. “You don’t think so?”

“Naw,” Quimby said, dropping the crumbled up weed into the tobacco leaf. “I know what I’m doing.”

The cousins exchanged knowing glances.

“I got it all figured out, know what I’m saying?” Quimby began rolling up the tobacco leaf around the marijuana, so that it took on the shape of a thin cigar. “My dad, he’s a business man of sorts. But he always plays it safe. He never goes for the jackpots—the big money, which is why he and my mom live in the same goddamn house they always lived in. The same house my grandparents lived in. It’s fucking disgusting.”

Robert leaned back on the couch and crossed his arms. “You should be grateful your folks got a fucking house. I know plenty of motherfuckers whose folks don’t got a house—who’d love to have one, at any price. Know what I’m saying?”

Quimby shrugged. Right as he picked up the lighter and held it to the end of the blunt, a tiny dog quickly mounted the couch, crawled over Richie’s lap, and licked Quimby’s face.

“Awww, get the fuck outa here, King,” said Quimby. The dog, its tail wagging rapidly, didn’t budge. Quimby slapped it with the back of his hand right across its nose. The dog hit the glass table, and landed on the carpet with a yelp.

Robert bolted forward. “What’s that all about?” he yelled at Quimby.

Quimby shrugged. “Man, it’s my dog. It can take it. Shit, I smack that motherfucker

around all the time.”

“Really?”

Quimby lit the blunt and inhaled deeply. The aroma of marijuana spread rapidly through the room. “It’s just a dog. Just a dumb dog.”

The dog stared up at Robert, as if awaiting his response. Robert glanced at the dog, then at the coffee table, then at Richie. It’s on now. With a swiftness that almost equaled Richie’s, Robert pulled back and clocked Quimby right in the temple. A wheezing sound: The kid dropped to the floor soundlessly.

“Punk,” said Robert. “Dog beatin’ punk.”

“Served him right, I do have to say,” said Richie, standing up. “Where’s this shit at?”

Robert scooped up the dog, and patted its head. The tail began wagging again. “See, he likes me.” Big smile. “I knew this dog and me would get along. I knew it didn’t wanna be here no more.”

“Let’s get this shit for this fool wakes up, man,” said Richie.

Robert pet the dog a few more times before handing it off to Richie, who reluctantly took it. Once in the back, Robert began tossing Quimby’s bedroom apart, or so it seemed to Richie. Breaking glass, furniture flipping over: The noise of robbery. Quimby lay still on the carpet, his stomach moving in and out with each breath the only physical sign the had any life in him. Coulda been dead with that blow. The dog snorted, spraying snot on Richie’s forearm. “Fuck,” he mumbled, holding the dog out and away from his body. Soon, Robert returned with two folded up socks in one hand, and a duffle bag in the other.

“You scared of that dog or something?” he said.

“Take this motherfucker, man. He snotted all over me.”

Robert smirked and tossed the socks and bag on the couch. “Give him here. That’s my dog now.”

* * *

What Richie hated most about the Metti’s front door was the creaking. No matter how gently he opened it, he knew at least one creak would come. More often than not, the slower and more careful he was, the louder and longer the creaks. Can’t catch a break. He fumbled for the doorknob, his hand shaking, cursing at his own absurd fear under his breath. He attempted to slip the key in, but his hand was shaking too badly. Finally, he gripped his wrist with his other hand, and slowly turned the key in the lock—the opening pins firing in his ears like cannons. Damn that’s loud. Now came the big showdown between he and the creaking. Still gripping his wrist, Richie opened the door slowly...slowly...slowly ... until enough space existed for him to slip through. One deep breath...two deep breaths ... he eased into the house, quickly surveyed the foyer, spotted only a wedge of light peering from the kitchen, and began the process of shutting the door. A faint creak shot into the air just as the door closed, and that all too familiar burn erupted on his scalp. He turned back around, more out of instinct than actual curiosity, to see if anyone had heard him enter. Pots and pans clinking, the faint sound of water boiling, and a delirious feminine hum reached him—nothing more.

Gently up the stairs—prompting more scalp-irritation—and into Laurel’s room. Safe. The fan whirred, and Richie stood underneath it, pulling back the hairs on his head above the burn. Gotta cool down. While he stood in the center of the room, he considered

possible excuses for not joining the family for dinner.

“What are you doing?” Laurel stood in the doorway in her bathrobe, drying her hair.

Richie dropped his hands, scowled, and sat down on the bed. “Nothing.”

Laurel stopped drying her hair for a moment, then resumed. “Whatever you say.”

Began taking off his shoes. “What you mean by that?”

“Just what I said. Whatever.” Sat down in the chair near the computer. “Mom’s making steak.”

“I ain’t hungry.”

Turned on the computer, hopped on the Internet. “Got a bite to eat on your way home, huh?”

Placed his shoes under the bed. Took off his shirt. “How many times I gotta tell you? I don’t like it when you say shit like: Mom’s making a steak. She ain’t my mom. She ain’t everybody’s mom. It don’t make sense.”

“Where’d you eat?”

“When you say shit like that, it’s like you think the whole world’s got the same mom. You should say: My mom’s making a steak.” He stripped down to his boxers, and walked over to the dresser and opened a drawer.

She swiveled around in her chair and faced him. “You just said she wasn’t your mom—that I was supposed to say my mom.”

“You know what I mean,” he said pulling a shirt and shorts from the drawer.

“So,” she said, turning back to the computer, “where’d you eat?”

“Huh?”

“Where’d you eat? You were gone a long time. You come home, say you’re not

hungry. I just want to know where you ate. It's a simple question."

Richie glared at her back before sitting down on the bed. "I'm not in the mood for this."

"I wasn't in the mood to be hung up on. But you did it anyway. I wasn't in the mood for you to take my car, and not tell me where you were going. But you did it anyway."

"Don't get mad, OK? It ain't worth getting mad over."

"Who's mad? I'm not mad. I just wanna know where you ate." Shrugged her shoulders, typed on the computer. (Trying to play it off. Some fucking game.)

"Golden Corral." Slid on his shorts.

"It's not open this late."

"I didn't eat there 10 minutes ago. I ate there earlier."

"You must've eaten a lot."

"It's a buffet. You're allowed to eat a lot. I didn't eat shit all day at work. So I posted up in a chair, and ate until my big motherfuckin' belly was full. OK?"

She flipped off the computer, stood, and faced him. "You went looking for Robert, didn't you?"

Richie pulled his shirt over his head. "I don't wanna talk about it."

"Why?"

"Cause there ain't nothing to talk about, Laurel."

"That's not what you said earlier. You said you knew somebody, that you might be able to find out where he was, that you were going to call that detective and settle everything."

"Well, I didn't do none of that shit."

“You’re such a liar.” She crossed the room, bumping into Richie as she went to the drawer and fetched an outfit.

“Why you gotta bump into me?”

“Sorry.”

“You did that shit on purpose.” He walked up behind her. “Didn’t you?”

She flipped around and stepped back a little, startled to find him right there looming over her. “I know you didn’t eat, Richie. I know you went looking for him—in my car.” Brushed past him and into the walk-in closet, shutting the door.

“Is that what this is about? Your car.”

“You said you’d only be a couple of hours,” she called through the door. “Instead it took you till midnight.”

“It’s 9 o’clock. It ain’t midnight. Damn you exaggerate shit!”

She threw open the door and emerged in a pair of sweat pants and shirt. “That’s not the point.”

“Then what’s the point?”

After staring at him for a few more moments, the rage left her face, the wrinkles settling back into smoothness. She crept toward him, and sat gently by his side. “I was worried, and you don’t even care.”

“Worried?” Still pissed. Ain’t letting her get off that easy.

Exacerbated. “Yeah. I thought you might do something crazy.” Dropped her head on his shoulder and began to sob. (Damn she good.)

Now Richie caved, reaching his arms around her and pulling her tight. Kissed her on the forehead. “I didn’t do nothing. I drove around, smoking, listening to music, thinking

about shit. I was gonna call you, but I lost track of time and ... I don't know, things have just been weird lately." That should do it.

Suddenly, she began rubbing his cock and kissing his neck.

"I thought it was time for dinner," said Richie.

"Don't do that again," she said, dropping down to her knees and unbuttoning his shorts.

"What about dinner?"

"It can wait."

CHAPTER 8

In the days following the robbery of Quimby, Robert and Laurel had stopped arguing, and Richie had begun to formulate a plan. Aunt Shelia rarely left the couch, and rarely spoke to the boys, so long as they didn't come bounding into the apartment and interrupt her perpetual TV time. That she couldn't stand. One night the boys arrived home drunk, and entered the apartment talking loudly, laughing, and playfully shoving each other around, punching one another in the chest and arms. Oblivious to Aunt Shelia's presence, the cousins became so enraptured by the violent exchange that they smacked into the wall and knocked a cheap landscape painting onto the carpet, where the frame broke in two. Aunt Shelia rose from the couch and flicked a cigarette at Robert's face. Sparks flew into the air as the cigarette connected with his cheek. "I was in the middle of a program," she said. "A program that required concentration. That demanded my attention, and now all the effort I put into following their damned time-line disappeared. Poof!" The cousins never entered the apartment like that again.

When Richie first arrived at his cousin's and witnessed the vicious back and forth between Laurel and Robert, he immediately thought of fleeing, of moving on. Too much drama, kid. Then the couple dropped into a pocket of quietude, of groping and loving. They would cuddle on the bed while Richie played video games, whisper in each other's ear, and engage in other games Richie didn't understand—didn't want to understand.

Laurel stayed with them until late into the evening on school nights, returning home exactly at midnight every evening. On weekends, she brought a bag and stayed until midnight on Sunday. Whenever she would leave, Robert always walked her out to the car. Richie would spy on them holding one another, making out, and wonder about what drove them, what made them tick. He never knew. When he asked Laurel why she stayed over so much, she said, "There's nothing to do at my house." When he asked Robert why she stayed over so much, Robert said, "Her house too big." None of it made sense.

Soon both cousins began discussing money. They'd smoked most of the marijuana they'd stolen from Quimby, and spent most of the money on frivolities—booze, clothes, cigarettes—and they knew the time had come to develop a hustle. Gotta get on the grind. Most of their Forest Hills connections hadn't moved into a steady illicit business, the kind the cousins needed to make ends meet and have enough to blow on whatever, which meant a supplier—a balla, dawg—had to be found. That's when Richie brought up Bee-bee.

"I don't know about no ghetto nigger, man," said Robert one evening after Laurel had gone home. "I don't trust them."

Richie sat on a mushroom-shaped footrest in front of the TV playing a video game. "You think I'd go into business with just anyone? Think I'd put us at risk like that? C'mon now."

Robert flopped down on the bed behind Richie and lit a joint. "I wasn't saying that, it's just—well, you know how they is. You know how they act when they get around their boys, especially them dope boys."

“Have faith.”

“What’re you? A preacher?”

Richie set down the video game controller and turned around. Marijuana smoke drifted into the air. “This our only option, man. We need to make a move. You said so yourself when I got out of ‘Dub. It’s time to do this.”

“And you think this the cat to do it with, huh? A nig.”

“He good people, man, I’m telling you. Me and him, we was tight. He knows what I’m about. He knows not to try no bullshit.”

Robert blew a cloud out of his nostrils, and handed the joint to Richie. “All right then. Set it up.”

That ended their conference. The next day Richie phoned Bee-bee, and off the cousins went to College Hill. All of the projects in Tampa were painted in various shades of neon blue, and College Hill was no different. As they cruised down Nebraska Avenue, the engine of Robert’s car clattering as if it might fall out at any moment, Richie daydreamed about the possibilities of this new venture. Black Ice pumped out of the speakers, the cheap stereo speakers rattling from the bass overload.

The street code what I live by

Better watch out fore you get caught up in a drive-by

Never met my pops, never did say “bye-bye”

Every night I watch the ghetto bird do fly-bys

Swimming in gold coins, the kind pirates might have aboard their ship filled Richie’s imagination. The prospect of making money solely from dealing drugs appealed to him in ways he could barely explain—would probably never even try to explain. It all swirled

about inside him, like Black Ice's lyrics, like the anger he'd come home from W.T. Edwards with, like the pride he now felt at his ability to hook up a major deal, like the power he felt at being the only white boy capable of going to the ghetto to purchase drugs. Who else got that kinda muscle?

The turquoise buildings loomed in the distance. On the street corners young black men stood, carousing, keeping one eye on their friends, the other on cars coming through. They had a system—Richie could see that. He admired the ghetto's openness, how the rite of passage started with a spot on the corner, then moved into the buildings, then moved out of the ghetto, where all the true movers-and-shakers lived in lavishly furnished apartments from which they controlled the streets. Richied wanted to be them. Black Ice rapped slowly now over a syrupy beat that infused funk with bluegrass:

He said, "Young nigga slow down,
You go too much on the earth needs finishin'
Stop rolling with your boys pound for pound
And drop by your auntie's house and help with the dishes..."

A great beam of sunlight blasted from over the buildings and onto the windshield, prompting Robert to pull down the visor. Knife blades of light, where there previously had been none, cut across the streets, hiding the boys on the corner. They sat somewhere nearby.

"Damn, I can't see shit," Robert said, squinting.

"Sun musta been behind them ugly ass apartments."

"What street we supposed to turn on?"

"It should be comin' up right soon, but I don't see it—can't see it, anyway. Slow

down.”

“Are you crazy? I ain’t slowing down till we’re outside your boy’s place.”

“You scared?”

“This ain’t Forest Hills. This College Hill. I ain’t getting jacked by none of these niggers for shit.”

Shadows emerged from the light, and the cousins suddenly found that the boys from the corner had moved out into the street and surrounded the car. Screeeech. The car stopped. Unless he wanted to run one of them over, Robert had no choice but to stop. Robert turned the music off. Tap, tap, tap. Knuckles hit the windows; faces leered at them; laughter found its way inside. Richie’s head began to itch—the beginnings of an affliction. He scratched. Robert nervously looked around, before reaching his hand in between his seat and the center console. A knife handle poked out.

“Fuck you doing?” Riche asked, still scratching. Tap, tap, tap.

“I’m gonna stab one of these fuckers if they come in here.”

Tap, tap, tap. “Man, put that thing down. I got this.” Richie rolled down the window. Hands and no faces. “Any ya’ll know where Bee-bee’s stay at?”

A guy with dreads and an oval face stuck his head halfway into the car. “Who you?”

He smelled of marijuana mixed with salt. “I’m supposed to meet up with him. He knows I’m coming.”

“He knows I’m coming,” the guy mocked in a high voice. “Man, what you think this is, a motherfucking hotel?” Mad cackles erupted now, and more faces appeared in the windows, as if they wanted to confirm that there was indeed an actual human being in the car who could ask such a stupid question. “You think you at the Holiday Inn or

something, white boy? You wanna mint on your pillow, bitch?” The laughter came in a tidal wave of pitches and tones and levels of ferocity. “You want some clean sheets? You want me to tuck you in? You want some more towels? You want me to get them bags?”

And it went on and on like that. Laughing. Laughing. Ha, ha. Ha, ha. Richie’s scalp started to burn more fiercely. What the fuck’s that itching?

Robert whispered, “I’m a haul ass. I don’t care who I hit.”

“Hold up,” said Richie.

“Hold up for what, white boy?” The guy’s head was all the way in the car now, his nose almost touching Richie’s. “Hold what up?”

A loud bang—bone on glass—came from the other side of the car. The cousins turned toward the noise. Two gold teeth. Then the handle in between the seats, gripped in his cousin’s white-knuckled hand, lifting up, up, up...Richie put his hand on the knife handle and pushed it down, and smirked. Not because a jolt of happiness had rushed into him—the kind of happiness that comes from traumatic artificialities like drugs or car accidents—but of relief. Clad in a Tampa Bay Buccaneers shirt and a matching hat, and kneeling down not two inches away from the driver’s side window, was Bee-bee, gold teeth and all.

“Ya’ll white boys ain’t scared of a few Negros, is you?” Bee-bee asked, still smiling. “‘Cause if you are, you’re in the wrong neighborhood.”

Every piece of furniture in the apartment was black and outlined in gold and, where possible, had glass worked into the design. The coffee table, the dining room table, the lamps, the coasters, the couch—everything was of the same type. And clean. Fresh as

hell, kid. Richie wondered whether the rest of the turquoise buildings in this complex littered with trash, dilapidated cars, and wayward youths contained the same quality of furnishings. Bee-bee motioned for the cousins to sit on the couch—cold leather—then walked into the kitchen. The apartment smelled of strawberries, an odor that, for Richie, clashed with the paintings of fang-bearing white tigers and roaring lions hanging in the living room. Fucking ‘hood decorations.

“Here you go,” said Bee-bee, returning to the living room with a brick of marijuana. He handed it to Richie. “That’s that limb right there, boy.”

Richie opened the gallon-sized Zip-lock bag and stuck his nose in. Took a whiff. “Oooh, boy, you right about that.”

“Told you.”

Robert snatched the bag out of Richie’s hand and stuck his nose in. Took a whiff. “It’s all right.”

Bee-bee looked at Richie, confused. “All right? Just all right. I don’t think so, homey. That there fresh off the boat. You ain’t finna find that in the suburbs.”

“We don’t live in the suburbs,” said Robert.

“Well, wherever you live, you ain’t gonna find that,” said Bee-bee.

“Maybe.” Robert shut the bag.

Bee-bee pointed at Robert and said to Richie: “He cool, man?”

“Yeah I’m cool. Don’t I look cool? I’m cool.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, homey. I was talking to Richie.”

“Really?”

“Shut up, Robert,” said Richie. He’d been sitting on the couch, hoping his cousin

wouldn't make him assert authority. Didn't wanna check him. "This here my boy. He had my back in 'Dub."

"So?"

"So that's it." Richie stood, leaving his cousin to mull over the implications of his words—something he'd wanted to say since coming home anyway. Something he'd wanted his cousin to understand: that Richie went to jail for family, and family left him there to rot.

"What you looking to start up here with all this?" Bee-bee said to Richie. "If I'm gonna be grabbing this on the regular, I can come down on prices. But if this just a once-in-awhile thing, then you looking at 800 a pound. So my question is: Are ya'll serious? Are ya'll looking to move up? Keep steady?"

"No doubt." Richie said.

"All right then. We'll go 800 now, you start pushing, and I'll come down—quick. All these dope boys out here in the Hill, man, they can't make me rich. It's steady, but it ain't moving at the pace it needs to move—never will. They be jackin' ya'll white boys too much, scares most of 'em. They don't wanna come out, we can't come up."

"Well I ain't scared."

The two gold teeth shined. "I hope not."

Throughout the entire car ride home, neither cousin said a word. Richie couldn't help but notice the change in his cousin's demeanor. Robert couldn't stop talking when he scooped Richie up from W.T. Edwards. Now a pregnant silence stifled the air between the two. Shady dude, man. At the apartment, things didn't go much better. As usual, Aunt Sheila lay on the couch, puffing on a cigarette, watching the TV. While Richie

didn't mind her very much—after all, she didn't say much, didn't want much, expect cigarettes and a remote—he'd never really been close with her. They simply didn't have anything to say to each other. When Richie and Robert were kids, they'd be out back playing catch or wrestling around while Richie and Robert's mothers would hole up in the kitchen, drinking wine and yakking away. The cousins existed in their sphere, the sisters existed in theirs—nobody questioned it. Lines had been drawn. But rather than skate back into the room with Robert to begin plotting their mutual apotheosis in the marijuana business, Richie decided to sit and chat with Aunt Sheila. Robert stopped in the hall and stared at Richie for a moment, no doubt curious as to what his cousin was doing, but continued on into the bedroom. Go ahead and cry to Laurel, punk.

Aunt Sheila barely noticed Richie. A pair of police officers questioned a shirtless black man outside a shanty town not unlike College Hill. Suddenly, the officers pounced on the man, forcing him down onto the road face first. They kept screaming at him to “spit it out, buddy. Spit it out.”

“You like this?” Richie asked Aunt Sheila.

“What's not to like?” She tapped her cigarette in the ashtray. “It's all ghouls and boo.”

Richie studied her eyes. Red and glassy, her pupils rolling backward as if they'd never come back, never see straight and focused again. Fucking Xanax. “You all right?”

“Oh, oh, oh...they got it. They got it. Sneaky bastards.” Aunt Sheila's head jolted up, then fell back down. She put her cigarette out, and then changed the channel. “They always get them.” Turned to Richie. “Always.”

“Not always. Sometimes they get away with it.”

“Now you of all people, of all persons roaming about this earth, roaming and roaming, should know better than that.”

Richie fired up a cigarette. “Just gotta learn from your mistakes.”

“That easy, huh? Life just one big learning curve you’re moving up, knocking down obstacles, mounting this great big treadmill of years.”

Man, she done lost it. Crazy. “Everybody makes mistakes, Aunt Sheila. Just not everybody learns. Know what I’m saying?”

Aunt Sheila fired up a cigarette. “You and your cousin haven’t learned much. You’re still talking like a pair of niggers. Still talking that locked-down jive. Still thinking your gangsters—criminals.”

It took everything in his power at that moment not to flick his cigarette at her, not to tear her down, not to curse her ignorance. She don’t know, kid. The doorbell rang. Aunt Sheila didn’t move. Richie didn’t move. It rang again, then Laurel waltzed into the living room, a crooked smile spread across her face. “Sorry to barge in.”

“Never stopped you before,” Aunt Sheila said.

“Sorry,” Laurel said.

Aunt Sheila pointed her cigarette at Laurel. “How big is that fucking learning curve, Rich?”

Confused and slightly dejected, Laurel hustled back into Robert’s room. Richie sat on the chair, staring at his Aunt, running through all the things he’d remembered about her growing up. He couldn’t remember anything. And he didn’t care. He put out his cigarette and headed toward his cousin’s room, where he belonged.

* * *

A ham, encrusted in brown sugar, its pink juiciness almost sparkling in the candlelight, sat in the center of the table, and though Richie wanted nothing more than to tear off a giant slab of it and shove it into his stomach with a primal force, he hesitated. First, the thought of his penis in Laurel's mouth not ten minutes earlier and the ensuing explosion that forced her to rush to the bathroom and spit and gag so loudly that Mrs. Metti had mounted the stairs and tapped on the door to see "if you're coming on with something, sweetie" had filled Richie with a craven dread. He didn't want the Mettis to know what he and Laurel did behind closed doors. Second, and perhaps more importantly, he didn't know what to do. Should he serve himself? Should he wait? The last time he'd eaten dinner with the entire family in the dining room he'd had the benefit of Laurel taking it upon herself to serve him. This time, however, Laurel simply stared at the white table cloth, her back slightly hunched. He could barely bring himself to look at her. For his part, Mr. Metti, his suit perfectly pressed and crisp as if he'd just pulled it off the rack and not returned from a 10-hour day at the office, fixed a menacing stare at Richie. It unnerved him. What you want? The electric shock that snapped and popped between himself and Mr. Metti and Laurel tore at the center of his being, making him want to lift the table and drop it right on their heads.

Clad in her apron, Mrs. Metti strolled into the dining room bearing two covered dishes, and announced with pride: "Soup's on."

Without looking away from Richie, Mr. Metti said, "That saying exists somewhere in the stratosphere."

"Cynicism eats at the soul," Mrs. Metti said, sitting down. "That's what Papa used to say."

“He was a fucking attorney,” said Mr. Metti. “Where did he get off groaning about the deleterious effects of cynicism?”

“I tell you what, that ham sure was heavy. I couldn’t even lift it out of the freezer. I had to get the deli boy to come around the counter—which he did, dear thing—and drop it right smack in my cart.” She paused for a moment, her dim smile morphing into a scowl. “Now that I think about it, he may have dropped it too hard. He could have ruined it.”

Mr. Metti laughed. “I don’t even have the words. They escape me.”

“Well, we’ve got string bean casserole, carrots, mashed potatoes—Richie, I know you like that—and a little old Dutch apple pie. Soup’s on,” said Mrs. Metti.

“The goddamned stratosphere,” said Mr. Metti.

Richie noted that Laurel’s knee had begun bouncing up and down. She hadn’t spoken with him since she’d gotten out of the bathroom, at which point she’d rushed into the bedroom, changed her clothes, and bolted downstairs, leaving him to wander into the dining room alone. Last man standing, kid.

Mr. and Mrs. Metti began serving themselves, and what had at first frightened Richie no longer did—especially since Mr. Metti was no longer focused on Richie. The Mettis dropped food onto their plates with such intensity, especially Mr. Metti, that they barely seemed to notice anyone was at the table, let alone Richie. Comforted, Richie began serving himself. Laurel, her back still hunched, followed suit. He carefully placed each item on his plate so as to ensure that the mashed potatoes, for example, didn’t collide with the string bean casserole, and so that the casserole didn’t collide with the ham and so on and so forth. Although he wanted more of each serving, he couldn’t bring himself to

put so much on his plate that the ham overlapped the carrots. The very thought made him shiver with anxiety. As he carefully set the last bit of potatoes on his plate (he'd stacked them so high for fear they'd invade the other portions of his meal that they threatened to tip over), he felt something peculiar—so peculiar that he didn't recognize it: Somebody was staring at him. Damn, what I do wrong? He set the serving spoon back inside the dish containing the mashed potatoes, and turned in the direction where he felt the stare. For a moment, he was sure it was Mr. Metti. Crooked ass motherfucker just wants to give me shit. But when he looked up, he didn't see Mr. Metti, he saw Laurel. Fuck she want. He flipped his palms up in a gesture that said, "Can I help you?" Laurel responded by shaking her head at him, as if he were a child being scolded.

She whispered, "Buffet must not have been enough."

Richie didn't respond.

"Have you thought anymore about what we discussed, Richie?" Mr. Metti said in between bites of ham. "Found any options? Considered any options? Discovered new possibilities of being, of believing, of seeing?" He smirked at his own cleverness.

"What are you talking about, Dad?" Laurel said. "What options?"

"Honey, this is between your boyfriend and me. Frankly, it's none of your business."

Laurel set her fork down. "Then why are you bringing it up during dinner?"

Mr. Metti shrugged. "I guess I was just counting on you and your mother's ability to tune out what so obviously doesn't pertain to you."

"Oh, so what? It's a guys-only conversation. Something the women-folk wouldn't understand? Is that it?"

"This ham is awfully salty," said Mrs. Metti, grimacing. "Really, I swear. Those deli

people must think we're in the middle ages or something. They must think we don't have refrigerators—that they need to salt everything down in order to preserve it. Well, I like old timey things, but that right there is harmful to the heart.”

“Mom, are you listening to anything that's going on here? Your husband is basically saying that women are inferior.”

“That's not what I'm saying, sweetums,” Mr. Metti said, continuing to eat. “All I'm saying is that this conversation is between Richie and me. That's it. Right, Richie?”

Now everybody directed their attention to Richie. What I'm supposed to say now? He still held his knife and fork above the ham, as if he'd been frozen in time. His mind, out of sheer instinct, drifted off into an imaginary butcher shop. There he saw pigs squealing as they were lifted by oafish men wearing white aprons and white t-shirts and dropped onto a table. Once the blade came down on their necks, the squealing ceased.

Cling, cling, cling. Mr. Metti tapped a fork on his glass. “What say you, strapping lad?” Cling, cling, cling. “C'mon, what say you?”

Richie's eyes, for the first time during the meal, met Mr. Metti's. “I can kinda see where everybody's coming from, you know?” There, that sounded good.

Mr. Metti leaned back in his chair. “Oh, son, I know you don't believe that. I know, what with your background, that you're well aware of who belongs in what place and when, don't you now?”

“What are you talking about backgrounds for? What does that have to do with the price of tea in China?” Laurel said.

“If you're hoping to develop into a deadly polemicist, my dear, relying on clichés, I

can assure you, is not the route to take.”

“What’s the route to take, Dad? Your route? The route you took from Mom’s panties to Granddad’s good graces straight into his law firm, is that it?”

Mr. Metti glared at his daughter. “Do watch that, young lady. Do watch that.”

“Anybody want some apple pie?” Mrs. Metti said, a sick and twisted grin affixed to her face. “It’s Dutch.”

Now the awkward silence crept in. On the one hand, Richie was grateful for Mrs. Metti’s nonsensical interruption. It had certainly taken the attention away from him. On the other hand, a slight sadness at her behavior—at its pure inanity and strangeness—irked him, dampened his spirits a bit. He’d often marveled at how such a beautiful woman, even at 50, could remain with such an uncaring husband. Perhaps things had been different when they first became involved. Perhaps Mr. Metti had been the perfect gentleman. Indeed, if what Laurel said about her father’s move into big shot status was true, then Richie definitely felt sorry for Mrs. Metti. At the same time, he had to give it up to Mr. Metti, for he was more a hustler than Richie had ever expected. Man’s got skills.

“Getting back to the provenance of this whole exchange,” Mr. Metti said, “could you please tell me, Richie, if you’ve given any thought to what we discussed?”

During the silence, Richie had set his knife and fork down, but with no utensils in his hands, he felt more like a suspect being interrogated by detectives than a de facto member of the Metti family sitting down for a meal. “I ain’t too sure. I’ve been real busy today, plus I thought you was gonna give me more time.”

“Twenty-four hours isn’t enough time?”

“How much time did Granddad give you to finish law school, huh?” said Laurel. “An extra year?”

“I think you’re finished with your dinner, sugar foot. I think you can go upstairs now.” Mr. Metti took a sip from his glass. “Yes, you can go upstairs and stay there until I come up.”

“I’m not in high school anymore, Dad. You can’t just ground me whenever you want.”

“So long as I’m paying your tuition, your car insurance, your sorority dues, your room, your board, your books...am I missing anything? No, I think that about does it. So long as I’m paying for all of that, you will do what I say, when I say it, or you may find yourself another piggy bank.”

“I’m not Mom.”

“No, you most certainly are not.”

“C’mon, Richie, let’s go upstairs.”

To rate Richie’s anxiety at this point would be next to impossible. His palms sweat, his stomach churned, and his left eye had begun twitching furiously—so much so, in fact, that, at one point during Laurel and Mr. Metti’s exchange, he’d placed his hand over it in an attempt to stop the awful movement. Needless to say, he’d failed. Now, in the midst of dealing with all these physical reactions to stress, he had yet another trigger heaped onto him by his girlfriend. Laurel tugged at his shirt’s sleeve.

“Let’s go.”

“I said for you to go upstairs, darling,” said Mr. Metti. “Not Richie. He and I, you see, still have things to discuss—things that we would’ve already finished discussing if

you knew your place.”

“You can’t treat people like this,” said Laurel.

“Neither can you. I’ll see you upstairs.”

Without looking at Richie, Laurel stormed off up the stairs, her thumping just as loud at top as it was when she mounted the first step. Always gotta have the last something.

“I’ll get that apple pie,” said Mrs. Metti. She ducked into the kitchen.

Mr. Metti wiped his mouth with his napkin and dropped it onto his plate. “A man’s life is all about negotiation. Negotiating deals at the office, deals between friends, deals between family. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Richie.

“Right. A perfect example of my theory would be the arrangement that you and I have, yes? It’s a pretty sweet deal for you, I think. I also think I’ve been more than fair, patient even—not one of my primary virtues. So now, what I’m asking from you is for a little closure here. I need you to show me the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Richie stared at the half-eaten mound of mashed potatoes on his plate. “I’m not sure I know what you saying—what you’re saying.”

Mr. Metti took a deep breath, and slowly scooted back in his chair. The creaking of the legs against the tile reverberated in Richie’s consciousness. Mr. Metti then walked around the table and stood over Richie. Damn he tiny. The man’s physical size did not match the way he carried himself, something in Richie’s world that you either admired, feared, or laughed at. Richie did not think it comical.

“You’ll figure it out, son. You’ll figure it out soon.”

CHAPTER 9

With Mr. Metti gone upstairs, presumably to discipline Laurel for her slips of the tongue during dinner, Richie found himself seated at the table with Mrs. Metti, eating apple pie. The two barely looked in one another's direction, let alone made eye contact, a habit both had easily fallen into from the first day Richie moved into the Metti home. He rarely made any attempt to speak with Mrs. Metti, anyway, primarily because he had difficulty understanding what the appropriate response to observations like, "Boys have such a pinkish hue to their skins when they're babies. Really, I never understood why they were so pink. If I had a boy, I might've thought he had permanent sunburn. Laurel, of course, was white as snow, which eased my mind as far as whether she was sunburned or not was concerned. She was so white as a baby that if she had been burnt, I would've known it right away indeed." These kinds of statements confused Richie. He often wondered if other women spoke like this, but he could think of none who did, and so easily dismissed Mrs. Metti's conversation-starters as mere fluff.

The cling of his fork on his plate began to unnerve Richie, since, at a certain point, he'd noticed that Mrs. Metti had stopped eating her pie because the cling of her fork on her plate had ceased. Via his peripheral vision, Richie checked to see if Mrs. Metti had finished, or if perhaps something else had stopped her from eating. Mrs. Metti had only taken one or two bites from her pie, and was now simply staring at her plate. Richie

continued to focus on eating, but eventually he'd finished and was now confronted with what to do next: serve himself more pie, or walk into the kitchen and clean his dishes. He couldn't decide. Fuckin' women and their bird appetites.

Suddenly, Mrs. Metti lifted her head up and fixed her gaze on Richie. He didn't return the stare. "You like that pie?"

He nodded. "Yeah, yeah it was pretty tasty." Tasty, what fuck you say that for?

"I'd offer you more, but I want to save it for tomorrow. That little sweet Chinese girl is coming by for her piano lessons, and I think her momma doesn't give her much in the way of sugar. Little girls need sugar, in my opinion. What do you think?"

"Yeah, I agree."

"Of course you do. You can see the end result in my Laurel. You can see how sweet she is."

When Richie thought of Laurel the word "sweet" didn't come to mind, but he decided the safest route was to play along. "Yeah, she's always eating candy."

Mrs. Metti released a tiny gasp. "Oh, well, that's not good. She shouldn't be doing that. Why, her teeth are liable to drop right out of her mouth if she keeps that up. My daddy didn't have very good teeth, which means I don't have very good teeth, which of course means she doesn't have very good teeth." She stood and began collecting the dishes, stacking them on top of one another. "Laurel and I are going to have to have a talk about that sometime soon. I don't want her teeth rotting." She stopped collecting the plates, as if struck by a profound revelation. "Or her to get some kind of nasty gum disease. Come to think of it, maybe that's why I heard her hacking in the bathroom before dinner. Maybe the sugar is eating at her stomach lining."

Richie flashed back to his orgasm and the subsequent load of semen he shot into Laurel's mouth, causing her to run to the bathroom and spit it out. He almost smiled—the first time he would've done so all day. Mrs. Metti carried what dishes she could into the kitchen, leaving Richie to consider whether he should help. He decided against it. For one, he knew she would refuse his offer. And two, he had a strong urge to sit at the table and do nothing. The dinner had drained him of all energy, and while that upset him, his mind wandered too much out of fatigue for him to focus on his anger. Damn people gonna kill me, man. Naomi's mother never put that much pressure on him—never asked him inane questions or demanded things of him in the way the Mettis did. Yet Richie couldn't bring himself to even imagine a life with Naomi, let alone actually attempt one, though Lord knew she would be willing. No, despite the torturous exchanges and seemingly constant bickering, Richie had to admit that the Mettis offered him a certain amount of security. Their money and influence may one day come in handy. Indeed, as Richie focused on a chunk of apple pie that had fallen off his plate, he replayed the conversation he and Mr. Metti had had during dinner, and discovered something. He almost yelped with excitement. A new hustle, kid.

The cling of dishes and the rush of running water in the kitchen stopped, and Mrs. Metti returned to finish clearing the table. After she'd gathered the rest of the plates and bowls, she cautiously approached Richie, and asked for his plate. For a brief yet terrifying moment, Richie feared he might fart. His stomach had begun to churn with the oozing and squishing of digestion, and the liquid movement filled him with a sensation that he might rip a loud, putrid blast right in front of Mrs. Metti. With his eyes partially closed, Richie handed her his plate.

“Thanks, honey,” she said before turning and walking back into the kitchen.

Slowly Richie’s mind drifted away from his stomach and its possible betrayal, and back to Mr. Metti’s speech. Vague though it was, Richie considered not so much what he said, but what Laurel had said about Mr. Metti riding his father-in-law’s back into the firm. Perhaps, Mr. Metti would allow Richie to do something similar—perhaps find him some entry-level position while he went to college. Richie sat under the white-glowing chandelier as he mulled over the possibility, and imagined a future that didn’t involve stocking groceries or bagging drugs. And for the first time all day, he smiled.

* * *

The cousins had sold their first pound of marijuana within a week—a feat that even Bee-bee, with his firm belief in the “ability of white boys to smoke ‘til they lungs fall out they ass,” found praise-worthy. He gladly forked over another brick. And another, and another, and another until six months had past, and the cousins had moved straight into what their mutual friend, Donavon, labeled “baller status.” The cousins had moved from haunting the local high schools and selling their product to them directly (usually at a local convenience store near the Forest Hills cemetery where Richie’s bootlegger grandfather was buried), to establishing contacts with the tougher elements of the “jit crowd,” and using them as distributors—a safer and, ultimately, more lucrative arrangement. Actually, Bee-bee had given the cousins the idea to develop this system, and even Robert, who at first hated even the idea of dealing with a “ghetto nig,” could see that Bee-bee, at the very least, had a head for the drug game.

“Play time’s over, ya’ll. Been over,” Bee-bee said to the cousins. He lounged on his couch, smoking a blunt while Robert and Richie sat across from him on a pair of black

leather chairs. A teenage girl, no older than 15, sat next to him, a silly grin stuck to her wide almond face. "Now ya'll got to decide: Is this weed money the only money you need, or is we looking for a real come up?"

Richie took the blunt from Bee-bee and sucked on it, hard. He and Robert had on fresh Polo shirts, new diamond earrings, and Nike running shoes so clean they practically shined. They almost looked like twins. "What you talking about, man? We making good change. I ain't trying to fuck that up."

"Neither am I."

"Then what you trying to do," Robert said.

Bee-bee laughed and pointed a quasi-admonishing finger at Robert. "You always skeptical, homey. You always ready for war."

"Can't never be too careful."

"Can't never shut the fuck up, neither," Richie said, passing the blunt to his cousin.

"Yeah, you real funny."

"And I'm real serious," Bee-bee said. "Real serious about stepping this shit up to a whole new level."

"How's that?" Richie said.

Bee-bee eyed the cousins ceremoniously, then snapped his fingers and pointed to the kitchen. The girl rose, walked into the kitchen and returned with a backpack bearing Florida State University's logo stitched onto the front pocket: the profile of a cartoon Seminole warrior. He eyed the cousins again, then unzipped the bag and pulled out a Zip-lock bag filled with white powder.

Stoned and a little disoriented from the previous night spent hopping from keg party

to keg party, Richie at first didn't know what Bee-bee had pulled from the bag. Upon realizing it was cocaine, he lost all sense of communication. The words disappeared—a condition he regretted the moment Robert said: “You a wild ass nigger.” Oh, shit.

Bee-bee shot an angry look at the girl, as if to say: “Did I hear that right?” The girl, in turn, shot one at Richie, as if to say: “You think we niggers, too?” And Richie, stoned and stupid, merely bowed his head, the blood rushing to his eyes in a tingling waterfall that made him dizzy.

“Was that necessary?” Bee-bee asked Robert.

“Man ... you know I didn't ... you know, mean it—I didn't mean it like that,” Robert said.

“Mean it like that. Mean it like bat. Mean it like,” and here Bee-bee leveled a finger-pistol at Robert's head, “rat-a-tat-tat!”

“Man, now that ain't necessary,” Robert said.

Bee-bee stood. “You in my house, homey. You in my house. I pay for all this here. You ain't finna tell me what's necessary and what's not. Matter of fact, you ain't finna tell me a goddamn thing.”

Richie rubbed his eyes and attempted to take stock of the situation, but before he could, Robert had hopped up into Bee-bee's face and began mouthing off. They about to throw down.

“You gonna do something, white boy,” Bee-bee said to Robert.

“If you feeling froggy, leap,” Robert said.

“I'm waiting on you.”

“You don't want that.”

“Boy I’ll kill you.”

The girl on the couch stared at the angry young men, eagerly awaiting the fight, now almost a forgone conclusion. Richie stepped over the coffee table and scooped the brick of cocaine off the couch. “We’ll take it!”

Bee-bee, his eyes glaring with pre-fight wild, turned to Richie. “What?”

“We’ll flip this whole thing.”

Robert still stared down Bee-bee, one fist clenched, the other hand in his pocket. Reaching for that knife—dumb motherfucker.

“How you figure that?” Bee-bee said.

“Simple.”

“Ain’t nothing simple in the coke game.” Bee-bee re-focused his attention on Robert.

“You need to back your ass up.”

Richie knew he had to jump in fast. “Go on out to the car, man.”

“This motherfucker threatening my life,” Robert said.

“Go on out to the car, man.”

“You taking sides?”

“Go on out to the car, man.”

“So you taking sides? So you gonna just let him ride?”

“Go on out to the motherfucking car before I do take sides.”

Robert glared at Richie. He letting me know he serious. Without looking at Bee-bee, Robert slung open the door and slammed it shut.

“Man your cousin out of control,” Bee-bee said.

“He all right. We just tired from last night. He didn’t mean nothing by what he

said.”

“Uh-huh.” Bee-bee sat down, and nodded toward to the brick. “You ain’t walking out of here on consignment with that.”

“What you want for it?”

“What it’s worth.”

Richie re-took his seat across from Bee-bee. “Let’s talk turkey then.”

“Well, gobble gobble, Richie. I need 6-7-5.”

“Shit, dawg, that’s almost all our re-up. Can’t you cut a deal?”

“Ain’t no deals no more, homey. You got your cousin’s back. Cool. I’d do the same shit. But I don’t trust him—never did, tell the truth. I got to treat you like everybody else so long as you running with him. This business, baby.”

Richie reached into his pocket, flipped out a half-inch roll of cash, counted out \$675, and handed it to Bee-bee. “Hope you know you breaking me.”

Bee-bee smacked his lips. “You play your cards right and you’ll have twice that when you come back.” He slapped the girl on the thigh and licked his lips.

Richie opened the door.

“Which you’ll be doing without your cousin,” Bee-bee said, hustling the girl into the next room. “Lock that door.”

What Richie would never tell anyone was that he didn’t want his cousin involved in the decision-making process anyway. Robert smoked marijuana and spent money without considering how it would affect their business—particularly the larger picture, like how the boys would ever be able to afford more than a pound, and therefore make more of a profit, if they only had enough cash to pay Bee-bee off for the previous pick-

up. Don't got the brain for hustling. "Don't worry about him. He won't be back," Richie said. He shut the door without locking it. Do it yourself.

Once again, an uneasy silence marked the car ride home—until they reached Forest Hills. The cousins had only fought each other two times, with both occurring before they'd entered junior high. (Richie, thinking that it belonged to him, had accidentally taken Robert's baseball glove home. When Robert found out, he attacked Richie the next day at Richie's house. Both ended up with a bloody nose. After that, they behaved as if they'd signed a contract prohibiting them from fighting on penalty of death. These days, however, that contract seemed to be losing weight—at least to Richie.) Despite the fact that he had the AC on full blast, Richie still felt hot. He rolled down the window, but that only allowed in more heat. Fucking Florida.

"How you gonna say nigger out loud like that," Richie said, rolling the window back up. He cut out in front of a rickety Cadillac, causing the driver to slam on the brakes and honk. "Fuck you, bitch." He spit out a fan of saliva as he yelled this at the other motorist. It partially obscured his view of the thick oaks dotting the front yard of a modest stucco home. "You gonna answer me?"

"Is that spit on my window?"

"It ain't gonna hurt nothing."

"Man, that shit's nasty. I don't want your mouth juice on my ride."

The hatchback pulled up to a stop sign. Richie used the opportunity to face his cousin. "This ride ain't worth shit. It don't matter if there's any spit on it. Hell, it probably makes it worth more."

"I paid for this motherfucking car."

“Your momma paid for this car, just like I’m paying for your mouth.”

“Oh, you paying for my mouth?”

“Yeah, motherfucker. Bee-bee done cut off our consignment. Which means we got to have cash money every time we re-up, or we S-O-L.”

“So fuck him. What we need his loans for?”

“We need ‘em ‘cause you can’t stop smoking and spending.”

Honk, honk. Richie waved angrily at the driver behind him, and barreled through the stop sign. “We gotta step our game up. We gotta start thinking.”

“You call hauling ass through a stop sign with blow and weed in the car thinking?”

“You call dropping the n-bomb in our only connect’s apartment thinking? You call getting all in his grill thinking? You call doing all that, saying all that in the fucking hood thinking? Know what I call that? White trash bullshit.” Richie pulled into the neighborhood convenience store parking lot, where he had pre-arranged a meeting with Manny, the de-facto leader of the high schoolers responsible for selling most of their marijuana. The cousins had neither the time nor the inclination to set foot on campus, let alone attend classes.

“If I’m white trash, then you white trash,” said Robert. “We blood, remember?”

Sweat beads formed on Richie’s neck. He turned the car engine back on and pointed every AC vent at himself before saying: “That’s what I thought.”

“That’s what you thought?”

“I’m sick of this fucking heat, man.”

“You thought?”

“We gotta get a new ride, with new AC, or I’m gonna kill a motherfucker.”

“Oh, you gonna kill a motherfucker?” Robert, his lower lip sucked underneath his front teeth, opened the car door. “No, I’m gonna kill a motherfucker.”

Emerging from the store with a large Slurpee in one hand and a hotdog in the other was a gangly kid with a purple bruise on his temple. At first Richie thought the heat must’ve affected his vision, but once he saw the kid drop his Slurpee and hotdog and run toward the street after spotting Robert bounding toward him, Richie knew who it was: Quimby. Richie got out of the car and watched as Robert gained on Quimby in the parking lot.

“Is that Robert?” said Manny, his greasy curls shining even more than usual because of the sweat.

“Damn he dumb,” Richie said, as if talking to himself.

“Loco.”

“Watch your mouth.”

Manny stroked his struggling goatee. “Sorry.”

At the end of the parking lot Robert finally caught up to Quimby, slamming the boy against the side of a mini-van, where he began to pummel him. The blows came down wildly, indicating Robert’s rage: If he were in control of his emotions, the punches would, in turn, be more controlled. Nevertheless, Quimby squirmed and bled, his legs flailing about.

“You gonna do something?” asked Manny.

“Do I look like his babysitter to you? Huh? Do I look like a fucking wet nurse?”

“Cool out, bro.”

“Stay here.”

Richie bounded across the parking lot, and grabbed Robert's collar and, with some effort, managed to pull him off Quimby. "Get your ass in the car."

Blood drops were splattered across his crisp new Polo shirt. "How many times you gonna tell me that today?"

"As many times as it takes for your ass to listen."

"You ain't my daddy."

"Could've fooled me."

Robert spit on the pavement, and craned his neck around Richie to get a better view of his victim. "Shouldn't have been fucking with the big boys."

Other than a whimper, Quimby didn't respond. His face was a mess: busted nose, lips, and at least one missing tooth. Richie almost felt sorry for him, but, in a way, his cousin was right. Punk should've never stepped into the game.

"You best not say shit to no police," Richie said to Quimby. "You hear me? Not a damn peep, or I'm coming to find you."

When he turned to go back to the car, the owners of the mini-van—a squat Asian man and his wife—stared at Richie as if he'd done the beating. Richie just casually walked past them, without missing a beat. "He fell. He real clumsy."

Manny had accepted half the cocaine, promising that he could "flip that shit" with ease. During the entire transaction, which occurred at another convenience store down the road, Robert sat in the car, arms folded across his chest, sulking like a petulant child. Big baby. At least now the cousins had some cash—something to save, as Richie saw it. He didn't want to remain indebted to Bee-bee, one step away from achieving the promise of payment. New shoes weren't enough. Richie wanted a car, possibly his own

apartment. And Robert, whether he like it or not, would have to smarten up, or Richie would consider cutting him out just as soon as he could afford a place.

They arrived home to find Aunt Sheila, her hair frizzed out as usual, sitting on the couch watching a Golden Girls rerun—an image that further impressed upon Richie the need for him to strike out on his own. “Laurel’s in your room,” she said to Robert, who stomped into the back without saying a word. “What’s eating him?”

Richie shrugged. He didn’t want to talk with her.

Inside the bedroom, Laurel was already starting to dissolve into a fit of tears and concern. Knew she was gonna flip. She had her hair fixed in naughty-school-girl-like pigtails Richie had to admit were sexy. Indeed, her entire outfit—short shorts, tank top—and its revealing nature fixed Richie’s attention on her body, sending his thoughts into places they shouldn’t travel. She my cousin’s girl.

“Well, why did you hit him? I don’t understand,” Laurel said, pulling at Robert’s shirt to get a more full view of the blood.

“It ain’t nothing,” Robert said, taking a seat on the mushroom-shaped footrest. “He gonna live.” The puppy yipped and jumped at Robert’s knees, wagging its tail and snorting.

Laurel put her hands on her hips, and said, “You could end up in jail, Robert. You could end up in jail for something like that. I can’t ask my father to be your lawyer.”

“What the hell you talking about? I don’t need your daddy’s help.”

“You need somebody’s help. Both of you.”

“This ain’t really necessary right now, Robert,” said Richie, pulling off his shirt and stretching out on the bed. “Today’s been too fucked up for this shit.”

“I know what you’re doing,” Laurel said.

That caught Richie’s attention. Robert had reassured Richie on several occasions that, even if Laurel were to discover what they were up to, she wouldn’t care. Richie never fully bought into this promise, especially given Laurel’s propensity for fretting and complaining, but he went along with his cousin, hoping that the issue would never come up. Now it appeared that it had—at the worst possible time.

“Laurel, we ain’t gonna do this today,” Robert said. The puppy continued to bark excitedly at his feet.

“You’re going to end up in jail. You’re going to end up just like Richie.”

Now Richie sat up. “Don’t bring my name into this bullshit.”

“Why? You’re the one that got him started dealing,” Laurel said.

“What?” Richie said. “Who got who doing what?”

“Robert, is that how you want to end up? In jail?”

The puppy began snorting fiercely now. Mucus dribbled from its nose. “I really don’t need this shit, girl. I do what I want to do, when I want to do it. You need to get that shit straight.”

“You’re going to be doing it in jail. You’re going to be getting raped.”

Robert stood. “Nobody’s gonna rape me goddamnit. I’ll bust a motherfucker’s ass they pull some shit like that.”

“Fresh white meat. That’s what they’ll call you.”

“Cut that shit out,” Richie said. “Ya’ll ain’t solving nothing by acting like this.”

“Fresh white meat,” Laurel said.

The puppy’s need for attention become even more pronounced now that Robert was

standing. His excited movements spread mucus all over the carpet and on Robert's shoes. "Don't say that shit again."

"It's the truth. I can tell the truth. That's allowed."

"Here we go," Richie said, dropping back on the bed.

For the first time, Robert looked down at the puppy. "Stop that shit." Startled, the puppy calmed itself, but only momentarily. "I said, 'Stop that shit.'"

"They're gonna beat you and they're gonna rape you," Laurel said, her gaze fixed squarely on Robert. (She trying to get him mad.)

"Stop!" Robert said to the puppy, shaking his leg in attempt to shoo it away.

"Rape is a horrible, terrible, wicked, wicked thing."

"Stop!"

Laurel leaned in close, and said, "They'll put it in your butt."

"Stop!" Then Robert kicked the puppy so hard it flew clear across the room. It landed against the wall. It didn't move or make a noise. Neither did Laurel. Richie sat up in bed and looked at the puppy. It lay on the carpet for a few minutes, then rose to its feet, where it limped into the closet. Richie stared at his cousin and saw no remorse, only anger. Some time later, when Richie had already moved into Laurel's house, he would look back at this incident and, in a rare moment of honesty, admit that Robert's abuse of the puppy had made it easier for him to follow through with the plan that drove the cousins apart.

* * *

Even after Mr. Metti emerged from Laurel's bedroom and ignored Richie's attempt, admittedly feeble, at broaching the topic of Richie working at the law firm, Richie still

felt a sense of jubilation—of having achieved something. It could work, man. But when he entered the bedroom and found Laurel buried underneath a pile of stuffed animals, Richie suspected that a shift had occurred which could negatively impact his plan.

“You all right?” he said.

Laurel didn’t respond.

“Why you hiding like that?”

“Turn off the light,” she said. “Turn off the light and go away.”

“What I do?” Richie sat at the computer desk.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I didn’t do nothing and you know it.”

Laurel emerged from her stuffed animal cocoon and stared down Richie. “You lied about going to the buffet.”

“Oh, are you still on that shit?”

“You’re such a liar.”

“I came up here to comfort you, and you calling me a liar. That’s my thanks?”

“What if all this running around you’re doing—all this investigating—pisses Robert off even more?”

“I don’t wanna talk about this.” Whatever happiness, whatever pride he had retained from his epiphany at the dinner table vanished now. Back to reality.

“You two are like big, dangerous babies,” Laurel said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

Richie stood and swung at the air. “What I’m supposed to do? Wait for him to find us? Let him get the jump on me? Naw, hell naw, that ain’t gonna happen.”

Laurel perked up, sadness receding from her face. “Daddy is already upset. You

don't want to upset him more with some wild-west showdown."

"What he upset about? He mad at me?" Richie flashed back to Mr. Metti's face when he emerged from Laurel's bedroom. The word that came to Richie's mind: hollow.

"I had something I wanted to talk to you about," he said, lowering his tone.

"I don't know what to do. He's always asked so much of me."

"It's important."

"He's never done anything on his own. He's always piggybacked others." She clutched the stuffed frog with the obnoxious tongue.

"Let's take a walk." He held out his hand. "C'mon. I want to talk to you."

Laurel waited a moment—letting me know it's her decision—before setting the frog down and taking hold of Richie's hand. "Where are we going?"

"Just around the neighborhood."

"For what?"

"I have a plan."

"For what?"

"I'll tell you outside. I need some air."

Every light downstairs was off when the couple opened the front door—which creaked, much to Richie's chagrin—and walked out into the hot, sticky evening, holding hands not like lovers, but conspirators.

CHAPTER 10

A pale blue light diffused through the cumulus, and even Richie, despite the troubles he now faced, would perhaps always face, felt a sense of peace. Laurel clung tightly to his hand as if afraid he might run off. Save for a hint of white outlining the clouds, the moon did not show. But the stars, a few anyway, blinked at the empty streets shrouded in a thin fog, reinforcing the serenity emanating from the alien blue. Hope it don't never turn day time.

Stucco houses boasting two tones of pastels of varying size lined either side of the street, guarded only by thick St. Augustine grass coated in moisture and streetlights shining a weak yellow. Overtaken by the rawness of the evening—its poised motionlessness—Richie drew Laurel closer, and kissed her on the forehead.

"You haven't done that in a long time," she said. "Something's gotta be up."

"Don't think too much into shit."

They continued walking and, as they did, Richie noticed that the farther they got from the Mettis' home, the smaller the houses became.

"So what's your plan?" Laurel said, finally.

Richie lit a cigarette, and said, "I wanna work for your dad."

"That's your plan? I thought we were talking about Robert."

"I'm sick of talking about him. Every time I even think about him, I feel like I'm

taking two steps back, know what I'm saying?"

"He's not just gonna go away."

"Maybe he already gone. Maybe he just fucking with us 'cause he know that's all he can do. Deep down that motherfucker don't want to go to prison." Richie blew out a cloud of smoke not unlike the color of the clouds above in the moonlight. "Maybe what we should do is just forget him and move on."

"Where's all this coming from?" She did not look at Richie.

"I don't know. I just been thinking."

"It's just strange, that's all. I mean, earlier today you're all gung-ho about finding him, now you're all gung-ho about leaving him be." Now she looked at him, and said, "And what's all this about working for Daddy?"

"All this? It's just, I don't know, an idea and shit."

"What would you want to do there? What can you do there?"

Here Richie stopped. They'd come to a four-way stop sign, across from which was the junior high school's football field—a brown-green patch during the day, a dark, mysterious spread now. Football fields didn't resonate with Richie in the way baseball diamonds did, not only because he spent a good portion of his childhood sweating on the latter, but also because he liked the specialty of the it, the fact that you could only play baseball on a baseball diamond. Kickball don't count. The clay prevented you from converting it, really converting it, into anything else. When the 49ers played at Candlestick Park, it always struck him as silly whenever the offense drove the ball to the portion where the clay area marking the infield sat.

"You didn't never see me play baseball, did you?"

“Why we’d stop?”

“You didn’t know me then, didn’t know what I could do with a bat and a ball.”

“What are you looking at?”

“I had the size, for sure. That definitely gave me the advantage, but not too much. Motherfuckers always used to say that I could only knock a ball outta the park ‘cause I was big. And I always used to say back: ‘But big or small, the hardest thing to do is hit a baseball.’ They didn’t never say shit to that. Couldn’t. It was the one thing I took away from my daddy. The one thing he ever taught me.”

“So what’re you saying, that you want Daddy to teach you something?”

“Yeah. No.” He latched onto both her hands now. An intensity not unlike that which came before a fight bubbled within him. “What I’m saying is I ain’t never had no opportunity to get some kind of skill. Nothing that wouldn’t get me locked up, anyway. And since you’re daddy all about getting me off my ass and doing something more than stocking fucking groceries, I figured, hey, maybe I could get into the law. Don’t mean I’m gonna be a lawyer, but I could be one of them, what do you call it, paralegals.”

“And what if Robert won’t let you?”

Richie released Laurel’s hands and flipped around in frustration, facing the opposite direction. “Man, I’m sick and tired of him.” He turned back around, as if he’d heard a loud noise coming from that direction. “Fuck him. He ain’t shit. Who helped his ass when he wanted to fight? Who went to jail for his ass? Who hooked him up with the biggest dope boy around so he could make some money? Who? Who?” He poked his chest fiercely, startling Laurel. “I did. I did. I don’t care if he don’t remember it. I don’t care if he don’t know it. I don’t care. Period.”

“But he cares,” Laurel offered hesitantly. “He cares—otherwise he wouldn’t still be trying to hang on.”

Richie ran his fingers over his head, a half-hearted attempt at massaging away the burn that had begun to well up. “Naw, he ain’t trying to hang on. He know there ain’t nothing to hang on to.”

“Oh, yes he is.”

“No he ain’t. If he trying anything, he trying to hang us. Hang us by scaring more than he probably trying to actually hang us.”

“That’s what you think.”

“That’s what I know. I know my cousin.”

Laurel glanced at the field, a shadowy smudge extending into a cluster of trees a few hundred yards away. “No, Richie. That’s what you think you know. You didn’t see him today like I did.”

* * *

Robert sat on the edge of a chaise lounge at their apartment complex’s pool, and asked Laurel for the second time to stop pacing.

“I don’t know what you so nervous about,” he said to her. “You’re the one that wanted to see what it was like, whatever that means.”

Laurel stopped pacing, and surveyed the area. Up until this point, Richie had been studying the parking lot, waiting for Manny to show so he could make the transaction, but seeing Laurel stop made him nervous for two reasons: One, he thought she and Robert might be on the verge of another fight, and two, her legs looked especially attractive today. Gotta stop looking, kid.

Ever since Robert had beaten Quimby down at the convenience store, Richie had changed the meeting spot to the pool, which, because of its shabby condition—mold growing freely all over the tiles, graffiti on the bathroom walls—remained empty most of the time, making it ideal for doing business with Manny. Besides, the hatchback had finally broken down, leaving the cousins temporarily without transportation. While Robert had suggested they borrow Laurel's car, Richie didn't want her involved anymore than she already was: After three weeks of near endless begging, the cousins had finally relented and allowed Laurel to come to the meetings. He could only imagine the demands she'd make if they'd used the Acura her dad recently bought her. Not gonna happen on my watch.

Laurel's presence at the pool didn't make Richie happy. Her pacing and incessant questions irritated him, which meant that she was definitely irritating Robert. And if Robert reached his breaking point, a fight—loud, distracting, potentially violent—would break out between the two, and at the very least disrupt the transaction, at worst attract the attention of some do-gooder neighbor. With no car, the cousins didn't have many options for meeting places, and narrowing the field further could put them in the desperate position of having to make concessions to Laurel in order to borrow her car. What's more, Richie had found himself sneaking glances at Laurel: at her slender neck, firm ass, tan legs. He attempted to explain away the urges by reminding himself that he hadn't slept with a woman since before he went to W.T. Edwards, but that wasn't a satisfactory explanation. Something else going on, man. Something crazy.

Now she stood in front of Robert, the bright mid-afternoon sun reflecting in flashes of yellow off her blonde hair, hands on her hips, ass facing Richie. He wanted to turn away.

Once, Richie heard them making love while he slept, and her soft moans struck him as showing a completely different side of a girl he'd previously thought capable only of frustrated noises of complaint and anger. That same side of her appeared to him now. He turned back to the parking lot and lit a cigarette. To distract himself, he tried to remember the feeling of erotic exaltation that accompanied his last sexual encounter, but the memory fell flat. Done banged Naomi too much. Still, as always, he considered her an option.

"He's taking a long time," said Laurel, looming over Robert, hands on her hips.

"Shouldn't you call him or something? It's hot out here. Real hot."

Robert reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. "Stop talking."

"It's just a question—just an observation. Don't get mad 'cause you're nervous."

After a deep inhale, he said, "You the one look nervous."

"Maybe I am. And don't blow that at me," she said, fanning away the smoke. "You did that on purpose. You blew that at me on purpose."

"What you expect? You standing right in front of me."

Richie decided whether to get involved—not that it would do any good. Once the argument reached a certain point, neither of them backed down. It worried him.

"You disgust me sometimes, you know that?" Laurel said, walking over to the chain-link fence surrounding the pool.

"Takes one to know one or whatever." Robert reached into his pocket again and pulled out a little baggie of cocaine. He dipped a key into the bag and snorted a few bumps.

"Are you doing that again?" Laurel said.

“Yup.”

Richie said, “Put that away, man.”

“Man, ain’t nobody around here. It don’t matter.”

“Start thinking like that with little things, start thinking like that with big things, and ‘fore you know it, you’re sloppy all over.”

Robert returned the bag to his pocket and pinched the sides of his nostrils, snorting loudly. “You starting to sound like that nigger.”

“God damn you ignorant, man.”

“And you starting to sound like her,” Robert said, thrusting an angry finger in Laurel’s direction. “It’s like ya’ll are ganging up on me or something.”

“You gonna boo-hoo all day, sweetie,” Richie said. “Man, that white lady making you act like a bitch. Getting all emotional and shit all the time. Shit gets old.”

“Ain’t nothing making me act like a bitch, man.” Robert stood up. “Hell, I don’t even know why I’m talking to you about nothing. You ain’t too good at getting my back these days anyway. Guess it’s what I should expect.”

Richie snatched a hold of the fence, and gripped it tightly. The metal links were harsh, painful even. He gripped them tighter, unable to respond just yet to his cousin’s gross oversight. How he gonna forget my time in ‘Dub?

“Remember, Robert, that Richie went to jail for you,” Laurel said, almost in a whisper.

The timing of her statement spooked Richie even more than the fact that she’d said what he’d for so long only hinted at: that Robert was an ingrate. Richie entertained erratic notions of her studying his face out of the corner of her eyes—its expressions, its

faint movements—in order to unearth what he secretly felt. But he only allowed his conscious mind to drift along this cloud momentarily. In the end, he figured, she'd said what she said in order to piss Robert off, not defend Richie. Bitches ain't shit.

“Girl, you treading in some dangerous territory,” Robert said. “You treading in some family business. Shit that don't concern you one damn bit.”

“Well it's true,” Laurel said, raising her voice.

Robert tossed his cigarette in the pool, and said, “Don't say another god damn thing.”

“Don't threaten me.”

“Damn it, Laurel.” Robert approached her.

“Don't come near me. Stay away.”

“I said, ‘Keep your mouth shut.’”

She backed up closer to the graffiti-stained bathroom doors. “Stop walking. Now.”

A beep, beep sounded off from the parking lot. Manny sat in his car across from the pool. Richie didn't acknowledge him. Laurel continued to mouth off to Robert as he continued to gain on her: a sick dance of defiance and rage. Her strained expression—deep rivulets around the mouth, the result of her pressed lips, narrow eyes, the result of her attempt at maintaining a hard outer shell—struck Richie as, well, touching.

“You can't go back any farther,” Robert said. He was right: Laurel's back hit the bathroom door. No where left to go.

“Be smart for once in your life and leave me alone!”

She'd hurled her last spear. Robert charged her, full force. Laurel yelped, and pushed into the bathroom. Manny beep-beeped again, and again Richie ignored him. A thump came from inside the bathroom and still Richie couldn't bring himself to move.

He just stood there, inert, unfocused, as if he were back in a classroom. Manny impatiently emerged from the car: “Yo, man. What’s the deal? We gonna do this or not?”

Richie tightened his grip on the fence, turned, and said, “Stay right fucking there.” Then he bounded toward the bathroom.

Inside he found a horror show. At first it was all arms and legs, all bent figures, contorted and freakish. Then the image came into focus, first in bits and pieces, then in full view in bright color. Laurel’s panties were pulled down to her knees, and she was bent over the sink, her face held against the cracked mirror. Robert had his erect penis out, and was aiming it at Laurel’s ass, his face twisted into a ghoul’s wrinkle. Richie thrust an elbow at Robert’s face, cracking him on the bone surrounding his eye. Robert hit the tile. Laurel, having lost her balance, dropped to the floor, too. They looked pathetic: Laurel scrambled to pull her panties up, sobbing the entire time, while Robert winced in pain, covering his eye as if it might pop out.

The bathroom door opened, and before he could even survey the scene, before he could establish that, no, this was not the right time, Manny said, “Yo, man, ya’ll need to hurry your asses up. I gots business to handle.” Then he stopped, scrunched up his face, and said to Richie, “What the fuck ya’ll doing in here?”

Heat—equatorial heat—swarmed Richie, and, almost immediately the sweat began leaking from his burning head down his flushed countenance. He glared at Robert, who was struggling to his feet by pushing up off the partially unhinged stall door. A silent communication passed between the cousins. Richie literally felt as if he were steaming. Then he hit Manny so hard he bounced off the door and into Robert’s arms on the other

side of the bathroom. Robert scooped him up and dropped him onto the toilet, cracking the porcelain seat, and started kicking Manny in the back. Richie crowded into the stall and joined in. It was the most vicious beating either had ever doled out.

“I want him,” said Laurel.

The cousins stopped; they understood what she wanted, and made room for Laurel in the stall. Mascara running down her face, one strap of her tank-top hanging off her shoulder, Laurel entered the stall, paused for a moment over Manny, reduced to a whimpering and bloody cartoon, and began jumping—literally jumping—on his back. When they finally pulled her off Manny, Laurel lunged at Richie who, thinking she was going to start in on him next put up his arms in defense, only to lower them after Laurel thrust her hand on his penis, massaging it roughly. She turned to Robert who grabbed a fistful of her hair and, yanking her head back, shoved his tongue down her throat. Richie unzipped his pants and pulled out his penis, with Robert following suit shortly thereafter. Together the cousins tore off Laurel’s clothes, popping the buttons on her shorts and ripping off her panties and shirt. For some reason, despite all the rough movements—the thrusting and slapping that occurred during the next half-hour while Manny lay, barely conscious, in a pool of black blood—Laurel’s bra never came off.

Nobody said a word back at the apartment, though it did disconcert Richie, and probably Robert and Laurel, when Aunt Shelia, splayed out on the couch as usual, briefly directed her attention at the tatterdemalion, and said, “Ya’ll look like gutter punks. All of you.” They all shuffled back to the bedroom.

While Laurel showered, Richie broke up marijuana on a shoebox top. He enjoyed the process of “crumbling herb,” a phrase coined in the ghettos of the American South and

transmitted to the youth via hip-hop artists, like Black Ice, the ultimate purveyor of all things marijuana. Richie found Black Ice's hit "Weed Smokin' Natural as Killin'" particularly appealing, especially this verse:

*If I can cut the stalk of a weed plant,
Then I can cut the head off of a snitch, man.
If I can smoke a fat blunt to clear my head,
Then I can smoke a fat punk until he's dead.
Weed smokin' natural as killin'
Weed smokin' natural as killin'
If it wasn't, then why God make the plant?
If it wasn't, then why God make the man?*

On good days, when the cousins smoked, Richie would often hum, if not sing, the song. Today was no such day. Robert stood next to the dresser, and instead of splitting the cigar and gutting it of tobacco in preparation for rolling the blunt, he tapped out a small pile of cocaine on an old CD case, and crushed it with the corner of his driver's license—a crude, but effective method of grinding the rocks down if in a hurry to snort right away. Which certainly applied to Robert. His hands shook enough for Richie, seated on the other side of the room and concentrating on his own drug ceremony, to notice. The shaking could've been due to Robert's habit, which had grown worse and worse, or it could've been due to what the cousins did to Manny and Laurel. Richie knew where his anxiety came from. He knew the source. He knew the consequence could destroy him and Robert. Brutality had always been a part of life in Forest Hills—one which neither much considered, let alone worried about. Now things, for Richie at least, were different.

For starters, the cousins would have to re-establish their foothold in the high schools. Finding somebody they could trust and somebody with the balls to push that kind of weight wouldn't be easy, especially since they existed so far outside of the "jit" loop. Probably gonna have to walk them hallways ourselves. While this certainly troubled Richie—after all, he coveted the freedom large quantities of cash could buy—the real issue, the one that could alter the nature of their relationship, was what happened in the bathroom before Manny entered. What they did to Laurel, or perhaps even more damaging, what she allowed them to do. Robert's ego was as deadly to him and those around him as poison, and nobody knew this more than Richie. During the hot sweat of the act, no one said anything. They changed positions, contorted, twisted, bent awkwardly, sometimes painfully (Laurel squealed a couple of times) in an intricate set of movements designed not for optimal pleasure, but for optimal punishment.

Richie finished breaking up the marijuana, and scanned the cluttered nightstand and its half-open drawers for a cigar. When he couldn't find one, he glanced up at Robert, and asked, "Yo, we got any blunts left?"

A loud sniff was Robert's reply. Then another. Then another.

Richie tried again: "Yo, you got a blunt over there or what?" He felt a pressure building in his gut that drifted up into his head. Damn I need to smoke. "Robert, what up man?"

The rush of water coming from the shower stopped with a creak of a knob. Robert glanced at the bathroom door, then returned to his CD case.

Frustrated, Richie crossed the room and began rifling through the dresser drawers for a blunt. He could feel Robert staring at him. Richie slammed the final drawer shut,

leaving the tip of a sock dangling out, and said, “Where they at”

“You in my space, man,” Robert said.

“You the one that wouldn’t answer me.”

Suddenly, Laurel began humming a gloriously ecstatic tune. It was a tune you might encounter in an elaborate golden-era musical—one of pure bliss. The cousins exchanged glances. Robert returned to the CD case. Richie returned to the bed, empty-handed.

* * *

The news that Laurel had seen Richie didn’t startle him, exactly. The placidity of the evening still lingered in his mind’s-eye, rolling over him in waves of calm, preventing him from fully appreciating what Laurel had said, and what it meant. Richie maintained his focus on the football field, black save for the moonlight dappling here, there, until Laurel said, “Did you hear me?”

“I always hear you,” he said, taking a drag from his cigarette.

“I didn’t know what to do.”

He pulled on his cigarette with greater ferocity now, holding the smoke in longer. Quick reactions, whether on the baseball field or in a fight, had always marked Richie in the physical world, and he often allowed this skill to carry over into his thinking life as well. Indeed, this spillage of ability from one sphere to the next was the entire reason behind his scouring about Tampa these last hours for Robert. But the idea that maybe he could forget about Robert, that maybe the whole sad scenario would just evaporate into the air had seduced him out of this violent torpor, and thrust him into a new state of being—a new state of awareness. It could not last. A rude sadness sank into his stomach, where it fluttered like a butterfly newly trapped in a jar. The rage that generally

typified such situations hadn't come, and that, more than Laurel's news, made Richie angry. He did not know how to adjust to this emotional surge, and it frightened him. Bunch of bullshit, kid.

Richie turned to Laurel, and said, "Tell me the whole story."

She looked downward to Richie's feet, and began: "I saw him—his face. He had some kind of wrapping on his head—some kind of bandage. And his lips were curled up. Even from the distance I was at, I could tell that they were curled. They scared me, those lips, more than anything in his empty eyes. I sound like I'm a narrator in some third-rate horror film, I know. But that's how I felt. And helpless, too, helpless except for my car. I was in my car, which meant I could leave. Zoom off. That's what I kept telling myself: Zoom off."

"But I had your car."

"You're not listening to me Richie—you're not understanding. These were my thoughts, my fears, as I stood there, outside of my house, waiting for you—for you, Richie, to come home. And you never did."

It all devolved now inside him into a giant tangle of obsession, and he faltered, unsure of how to interpret the gothic tale Laurel had suddenly un-spooled in this strange evening. "I came home. What you talking about? I came home. I had your car. What the fuck? I had your car. I came home. Robert came here. He came here? To the house?" He pointed off into the distance.

"He did and he didn't."

"You ain't making sense." The four-way stop sign, even to Richie's subliterate mind, given the conversation, seemed to be some kind of omen, some kind of black metaphor,

though he could never articulate this feeling. What we standing here for?

“He came to me in a vision,” Laurel continued. “And now I know that what you’re doing is right.”

“A vision? What I’m doing? You mean looking for him?”

“Yes a vision. He’s a ghost that we see everywhere, even though we have no idea where he is. That’s why you’ve been looking for him. I know now that it was the right thing to do.”

“That shit ain’t what you been saying. Even tonight you was calling us—what’d you call us? Big dangerous babies. That’s it. Babies.”

“That’s before I understood, standing here tonight, that you’ll never have anything until you have peace of mind. And neither will I.”

“‘Cause he stalking us?” That was a word he’d never used to describe what Robert was doing. It was a bureaucrat’s word, and it only surfaced in his life when an official figure, say, a cop, said it in reference to some crime committed by a stranger against a stranger. Now he felt its power.

“He’s stalking us. That’s what I mean. Even when he’s not there he’s there. These last two days, since you found out that he’d called me, I haven’t understood what you’re going through. But now, as we stand here, I do: I understand that you have dreams, and that they’ll never be achieved until he’s gone.”

“But I can’t find him. The fucking cops can’t even find him.”

“You won’t have to now.”

“Oh, and how’s that?”

“You’ve already set the trap for him. You’ve already stirred the pot.” Laurel’s eyes

were steady. “This is a small town Richie, and even though Forest Hills and Temple Terrace may be worlds away in terms of how we experience the city at large, it’s only a few miles by car in between the two. And you’re only a few miles away from achieving what you want.”

“Your daddy fucking hates me. He ain’t never gonna trust me with shit. You heard him at dinner.”

“I did. I also heard him in my room. I heard him say that he wanted what was best for me, and that, by extension, he wanted what was best for you. He’ll do whatever I want. He just likes to think it comes from him. I have the power to make him think that way.”

Her dulcet tone comforted Richie. “I see Robert all the time, too.”

“I know,” she said, touching his arm. “I know. I should’ve appreciated that more, but I didn’t. Not until tonight, when I saw that face when I was waiting for you. When I saw those lips in the trees, in the grass, on the sidewalk. When I was worrying about where you were, and what might be happening to you.”

A car pulled up to the stop sign, across from them, its lights cutting through their existence. It drove by, the nameless face inside maintaining its forward-looking view.

“So you think he’s gonna step it up now that I’ve let it be known I’m looking for him?”

“It’s a small town.”

Too fucking small.

CHAPTER 11

That night Richie lay on the bed, Laurel's breath humming in and out beside him, staring into the darkness. Thin shafts of moonlight shone through the blinds, but that was all: He was alone. In a small fucking town, homey. Those words and the concept behind them tumbled around in his mind. Those words represented what he wanted: an end to the conflict. But where in those words such an end hid he could not say. The night wore on. Normally, when he couldn't sleep, he tossed about, the sheets twisting around him until he felt like a mummy. Not tonight. Tonight he lay still, a mummy locked away in a tomb without the gauze. It frightened him how calm he felt lying so still, for he did not feel he owned himself. Ownership meant much to him, and to his family, especially his father. Whenever Richie would arrive home from school with poor grades, as was the norm, or a poor outing on the diamond, as was not, his father would drag Richie out into the driveway by his ear and say, "Look at my truck. Ask how I got. Ask. Ask what it means to own something." Richie would fold his arms across his chest, a signal that no, he would not answer such questions. Then Richie would find himself dragged through each room of the house, where his father would point to the other things Richie did not own: the living room couches, paint on the walls, glasses in the cupboard. And then, invariably, they'd land in Richie's room. This always stung the most for Richie. Here was his only private space. Here he'd sit alone, dreaming of the future, the void that

loomed large in nowheresville with the stuff of his life: a 13-inch television, a Nintendo, a poster of some bikini-clad model on the beach. And his father would drag him—still by the ear—and sit Richie down on the foot of the bed, and make him point out all of the things he did not own, until his father was satisfied, that, now, boy, do you get the picture here? Do you get who's in charge? Do you get who owns your ass? This could take all night. There were a lot of things in that room Richie did not own.

Richie must've missed the alarm. Laurel sat next to him on the bed, all gussied up in her Sorority girl best, stroking his head. Her serenity, like the previous night's stillness when they walked into it and discovered a shared purpose for the first time in a long time, mellowed him. The violence of an alarm Richie did not like, though, like everyone else, he tolerated it as a fact of life.

"You ready for your big day?" Laurel said, almost cooing.

He rubbed his eyes, and scanned the room in a daze. "Big?"

"Big like this," she said, rubbing his penis through the sheets.

"Have you gone crazy?"

She stopped rubbing. "You didn't sleep last night, huh?"

He sat up a little, pushing the sheet down. "Not really."

"I can tell. Your eyes are red as beets."

"Oh, shit," he said, making as if to get up. "What time is it?"

Laurel smiled. "Don't worry, you're not late. I woke up early, and crept, quiet as a mouse, into the bathroom so you wouldn't hear me. You were snoring. Loud."

"Why you always gotta tell me that? How I'm supposed to stop that?"

"It's too early to be mad, Richie. Besides it's your big day."

“What the fuck you keep saying that for?”

“Take that back.”

“What?”

“The f-bomb.”

“Fuck, Laurel, it’s too early for this shit. I’m just talking. Just talking and waking up. Make some sense ‘fore I think this all a dream.”

“Daddy’s agreed to meet with you.”

Now Richie sat completely upright. “I hope you ain’t meddling. You know I don’t want people all in my business.”

“Don’t be a child. I followed through on a promise, that’s all.”

“You keeping promises all of a sudden?”

Laurel stood and crossed the room. “You could be a little more polite, especially since I landed you a meeting with Daddy and his partners at 6 p.m—at the downtown Hilton, no less.”

“You mean by the Bay?”

She scooped her bag off the computer desk chair, and went to the door. “Yup. I packed a shirt and some slacks and put them by the bed for you.”

Richie looked down: there was a bag. “Do I gotta wear a tie and shit?”

“No, you don’t have to wear a tie. Just wear your charm.” She winked and opened the door. “And I’m going to handle that other thing, too.”

“What other thing? Oh, wait, no ... Don’t you step in this shit, girl.”

“Too late.” The door shut.

Richie stumbled out of bed, threw open the door, and bolted downstairs. When he

reached the garage, Laurel had already managed to back the car down the driveway. He hollered at her to wait, but she didn't stop until she'd backed completely out and turned toward the end of the street.

"How am I supposed to get to work?" he said.

She smiled and pointed to the Honda parked by the mailbox: Mrs. Metti's car.

"Are you serious?"

"The keys are on the kitchen counter. Don't be late." She rolled the window up and zoomed off.

Yes the keys were there, and yes she'd apparently set up a meeting that could lead to a job opportunity—a way out of the grocery store—but no he did not feel good about it. She shady. Laurel hadn't been one for sneaking and creeping since high school, and the fact that she was smiling as she sprung two surprises, both of merit, on Richie in the course of 15 minutes put him on edge. Indeed, she'd dropped the news on him when he first woke up, when he was most vulnerable, least able to respond. To top it off, Richie didn't like the idea of taking Mrs. Metti's car. He scanned the kitchen: all quiet. The light above the oven hummed.

Upstairs more of the same—not a peep. Where the crazy old bird at? He marched down the hallway and into Laurel's bedroom, and shut the door, sealing himself off from the odd silence. When he finished showering, he realized his scalp hadn't irritated him in some time. He dried off, careful to cruise over his head with soft rubbing. So what if it don't dry quick. While he knew his anxiety hadn't been staved off permanently, he also knew that the diminished burn was a good thing. Still, the idea that Mrs. Metti would return right as he started the engine in her car—her car—frightened him, unbalancing his

easy state. He wiped the fog off the mirror. A strange sensation hit him: He wanted his scalp to burn. He wanted the pain to distract him, focus him on something else—that something else being the state of his body, not the state of his mind and, even worse, his life. Change comes slow; even Richie knew that. He knew it could be an arduous process. The slow death of his old life he'd measured in the diminishing returns of the cash knot he always kept in his pocket, wrapped in a rubber band. When he chucked the hustler's way out the window, he'd also chucked the money and the freedom it bought. Not to mention the prestige. The holy warmth of status. If he'd been smart and thought about the future a little more, he'd have saved and bought a car. If he had, he wouldn't find himself in this situation, staring at himself—his crooked nose, his red cheeks, his short hair barely concealing a sensitive scalp—in a bathroom mirror that didn't belong to him, in a house that didn't belong to him, fretting whether to take a car that, of course, didn't belong to him. Fucked ass life.

Alas, Richie made to the car with no problem. Mrs. Metti wasn't home. The sprinklers in the front yard sprayed recycled water—its foul stench perfuming the entire cul-de-sac—and a dog barked somewhere behind a wooden fence. Nothing else moved. On the way to work, Richie considered Laurel's strange behavior and found another fact to worry about. All up and down the streets, green surrounded him: trees, grass, and shrubs. He noticed all the green, and momentarily forgot he was motoring down a street crowded with cars gleaming in the wicked afternoon sun. The anxiety storm whirled forth. If Laurel were diving into the middle of his and Robert's business, Richie would need an equalizer. Viciousness begets viciousness. With his last connection to Forest Hills battered and draped over a cage full of pit bull puppies (he still heard their yapping),

Richie had no way of obtaining what he now needed: a gun. The tree trunks he passed now exploded, sending shards of splintered wood everywhere. Boom, boom, boom—and the bursts continued. Shrubs ripped away with wet splash—hot metal on slick leaves. Leaves reduced to mulch. Fuck yeah. He pulled into the parking lot of “Health Nuts Food and Beverage” with an evolved idea. Not just any gun would do; it had to be a shotgun. That shit raw.

Richie strode down the aisles, forgetting everything except his purpose, and faced down his newly acquired enemy in the frozen food section. Jamal, gloves on, stacked pizzas adorned with a smiling stereotype—the mustachioed Italian chef—with the dull rhythm necessary to engage in such work. It was a rhythm Richie knew well.

“We need to talk,” Riche said, standing over Jamal, who was crouched down shoving pizzas onto the bottom shelf. “Now.”

Jamal didn’t seem startled at all. “If you wants to go again, that’s fine by me. But I ain’t doing it here, white boy. I got a momma. Understand?”

“I think I can help your momma if you help me.”

“Don’t talk about my momma, man.”

“Them boys that scooped you up the other day—them boys with you mean-mugging me. They know people?”

“Man, shit, I gots work to do.” Jamal shoved another stack of pizzas into the freezer.

“And I ain’t giving up these gloves.”

“Have ‘em. They yours now.”

Then that stupid look—that same wide-eyed emptiness Jamal had worn when Richie challenged him—returned. “What you getting at?”

“You got people on the street, right?”

“Fool, I’m black.”

Richie checked behind him: just a woman on her cell. “I need a gun. Can you get that for me?”

Jamal stood and shut the freezer door. “I guess so long as you got cash. And so long as you don’t mean to shoot me with it.”

“Naw, man, I ain’t fixing to shoot you. This old beef. Not new—like you.”

“You wild, man.” Jamal wheeled the empty cart down the aisle toward the warehouse in back, and said over his shoulder, “I’ll see what I can do tomorrow.”

* * *

Laurel sat in the driver’s seat, chattering endlessly while the cousins waited for this new connection of hers to get out of school. All were sweating, despite the air conditioning running on full blast. The parking lot was filled with the cars of seniors and juniors, bare save for concrete and a chain-link fence surrounding the premises. The gate leading into the lot was locked so truants wouldn’t stand a chance. Or at least so hoped the administration. Because, of course, they had to leave some portion open so that students who were sick, or had to leave early for whatever reason, could do so without the vice principal leaving the cozy confines of his office and venturing into the Florida heat. Fucking high school jits. The arrangement didn’t sit well with Richie, but given what he and Robert did to Manny, they had little choice. It was either go with Laurel’s connect—some “Miami guy” she’d said—or risk upsetting Bee-bee for not scooping up packages on a regular basis. Indeed, he could very well move on to someone else. Can’t let that shit happen. Gotta stay correct. The cousins needed a high-schooler, and Laurel

claimed to have one. The ugly truth: Their business was no longer theirs until they landed another pipeline to their biggest customers—teens.

Word had gotten around that Manny eventually found his way to a hospital, where the doctors stitched him up over the course of a three- or four-night stay. The details were hazy. By the time word funneled out of Forest Hills and into the cousins' domain, facts changed or disappeared all together. It depended on whom the boys were getting their information from. And the eager young tough from the junior high school was not reliable, precisely because of his eagerness.

Laurel's car sat underneath a tree at the lot's far-end, the only bit of shade available. It didn't help, though Richie sure couldn't tell given the speed at which Laurel yapped.

"There's always so much to do at the beach," she continued, somehow venturing into this topic from a discussion on human deformity. "You can swim. You can snorkel—I love snorkeling—and you can rest, right under the sun, and it won't bother you. Not at all. Not like it is now, because you're at the beach. You expect that at the beach. You want it at the beach. Because if you're on a rainy beach, or an overcast beach, or worse, a red tide beach, things just aren't right. Something's missing. The stars are not aligned, you see."

Ever since the bathroom incident, Laurel had behaved as if the whole world were one giant picnic basket full of goodies just for her. She would drone on and on about frivolities of no import to anyone, least of all herself. The daytime smiles frightened Richie, especially in light of the fact that the night held terror for her. He knew this was related to the trio's experience in the bathroom, yet he said nothing, as did she. Richie wasn't even sure that Robert knew of her troubles at night. Robert wasn't home very

often when they were sleeping, preferring instead to wander the streets, sniffing cocaine. At least that's what Richie assumed he was doing. Richie didn't actually know whether Robert wandered or remained stationary, but given the effects of cocaine, that's how he assumed his cousin spent his high: pacing and chain-smoking and sniffing.

Laurel spent her nights shivering and moaning. From his bed, Richie listened to the moans and diagnosed her with "night terrors." He had a vague concept of the affliction, most of which was gleaned from a TV special he'd watched while stoned. But it seemed the most logical thing. Demons, he imagined, visited her in various forms while she slept. The shivers and moans were a part of the battle she waged nightly against them, and, thus, nothing to worry about. She'd get over it eventually. She'd win. She's strong. He repeated these three like a mantra so that he could get to sleep instead of worrying about her sufferings—her battle. Increasingly, as Richie fought to drift away to sleep at night, he began to see horned beasts emerging from a crack in the earth's crust. But they weren't attacking her. They were attacking Robert.

From the backseat, Richie stared at his cousin and saw a much more familiar animal than that of the devil: Riche saw a junkie. That's what Robert had become. Thinner, greasier, shakier and prone to quick, furtive movements of the head: signs of a delirious mind. Even now Robert kept looking back—always careful to avoid direct eye contact with Richie, as had been both of their practices since the bathroom incident two weeks ago—even though he knew what lay beyond. Nothing but an apartment complex and a gas station. And across the street? Another gas station, next to which was a McDonald's. Ain't nothing going on. But Richie believed Robert saw something, and, in turn, Richie saw something in Robert. What Laurel saw in Robert at night, on the

other hand, Richie couldn't say.

"Crank up that air," Richie said. He'd wanted to say that for a while, but Laurel had only just then stopped her disquisition on sea turtles and their "amazing flippers."

"It's as high as it's going to go," said Laurel. "We have to accept the things we cannot change."

"Just stop that shit," Robert said without turning away from his newest object-of-interest—a hallway near the school's gym. "You been at it for a while now. Time to cease that shit."

"I'm just talking. No one else is talking. I'm just talking, trying to find a way to pass the time," Laurel said.

"We wouldn't need to pass the time if you'd have given us the correct time."

"What correct time?"

"When the fucking final bell rings."

Richie hadn't heard either of them speak this much to each other since the incident, yet he knew they shared moments he'd never know about. It was now Robert's habit to drag her outside every time he wanted to say something.

"There's no need to cuss," Laurel said.

"So long as you keep quiet till this motherfucker shows, won't be no cursing."

Silence crept in, with Richie mulling over in his mind whether to interject on Laurel's behalf, or Robert's, or his own. After all, he was hot and bothered just like the two of them. Don't hear me bitching. Then the bell rang. Richie considered the strange the lack of movement that follows a school bell. All of that build up to the final moments of class, and then ... the world stops. If you're watching from a distance—as the cousins

always did during their final two years of school—it seems as if there may not be anyone in that giant building. Nothing but a ghost town—a rumor of inhabitation. And then human spillage. The endless chattering and forward rush to the parking lot.

“You sure he know we posted up out here in this heat?” Robert asked Laurel.

“I said yes,” she replied.

“Man, this cracker better hurry.”

“He’s Puerto Rican.”

“Then this spic better hurry.”

“You need to cool that shit out, man,” Richie said. “We need to do the damn thing with this man, and get the fuck out. Your foolishness ain’t gonna help nothing.” And then, softer: “Never has.”

“Worry about yourself.”

“I am worried about myself. That’s why I’m worried about your ass.”

Robert turned partially around in his seat, the leather creaking. “This ain’t the time or place, cuz. We’ll get to things when things need getting to.”

“You flying off to a place you don’t want to go, cuz.”

Robert ran his forearm over his mouth and nose and sniffed. “Oh, I’m always flying. Flying around and around, where can’t nobody see me.”

Laurel watched the cousins intently, her face a picture of concern.

“Think that shit scare somebody? You predictable as hell. It ain’t hard to find a motherfucker like you. A motherfucker with needs.”

“I only got one need, and that’s money. You seem to forget that’s why I scooped your ass up and put you on in the first place.”

“Put me on,” Richie said, poking himself in the chest. “Put me on? How you figure? I got Bee-Bee. I got the connect. I got shit organized with these jits, and then ...” he stopped himself. Surprised at his own restraint, Richie barely had time to process it when Laurel pointed and said, “Here he comes.”

Strutting toward the cousins, with a small entourage of tough guys all similarly dressed—long jean shorts that nearly reached their ankles, over-sized shirts and ball caps—the “Miami connect,” as Laurel liked to call him, stopped at the car and knelt down.

“Wassup?” he said.

Richie opened the door, surprising the kid. “Tell your boys to take a walk.”

“You the man or something?” the kid said, half-smiling. He had three horizontal lines cut into the sides of his hair, and his eyes were glazed red.

“Just ‘cause you cut them lines in your head, and just ‘cause you cut class to get high, don’t make you hard on the yard,” Richie said. “So, yeah, I’m the mo-ther-fuck-ing man.”

“Why don’t ya’ll wait ‘fore me by the car?” the kid said, digging into his pockets and chucking the keys to one of his boys. They walked off, but not without eyeballing Richie—just a bit.

“What you got for us?”

“Depends on what ya’ll got for me.”

Richie smiled. “What’s your name, homey?”

“Junior.”

“Junior, huh? All right, all right. Hop in the car.”

Junior sat in the back next to Richie, and said to Laurel: "What's up, baby girl?"

"What you just call her?" Robert said, facing Junior. Here we go.

"Man, ya'll some hostile dudes. I'm just trying to handle business. Let's squash this shit and make it happen."

"We'll let you know when it's squashed," Robert said.

For once, Richie agreed with his cousin. This Junior cat too big for his britches. But stopping this exchange before it got too heated was the quickest way to reinvigorate their business.

"All right now," Richie said. "Leave that man alone, Robert. He about business. He cool." He set a bag of cocaine in between he and Junior. Robert shook his head.

"Now we talking," Junior said. "What that is, like an O or something?"

"You got a good eye," Richie said.

Junior rubbed his chin, and said, "I can pay half up front, half when I flip it."

"Boy, what the fuck you think this is?" Robert said. "You need to come correct."

Then to Laurel: "I should've known you'd hook us up with some bullshit jit."

"Ain't no jits here," Junior said. "I got people through and through this here game. In Tampa, in Miami—we always roll correct. You don't wanna give me consignment? Cool. Fine. I can find someone else to serve me."

"Who gonna serve you when you ain't got but half? Another jit that done stepped on his product so much you can't tell if it's powder or BC powder? Naw, boy, we the only real game in town," Robert said.

"Like hell," Junior said.

"Like I said: 'We the only real game in town.' Period, point blank. Anybody that

goes snooping around for someone else might just catch one—point blank. Dig? That's how it goes, so you'd be wise to take half instead of rolling off elsewhere."

"I need it all. I don't need half. I don't got all the paper, true, but I made promises off top that I need to handle now. Can't go back on what I said. It's too late. I got somebody else lined up, but I went ahead and went with ya'll cause of Laurel. That's it. You don't need me. Cool. I'll be on my way."

Richie liked the kid. He was aggressive without being demanding—a real hustler. With that attitude, the kid must've been from Miami. And, more importantly, allied with people schooled in the ways of the streets. These boys ain't fucking around. Just to be sure, Richie decided to test him: "So you got yourself a little local connect. OK. Maybe this local connect good as us. Maybe he got this white all the time. Steady. But can he offer you his hand if something happens to you? Can he offer you somebody to step up to someone, knock them out the box if it comes to that? You got people, fine. But I bet your people is strong in Miami, not in T-town. Otherwise, you'd already be going straight to the source. You wouldn't need us. So let's focus right quick: We give you half, you flip it. Call us up, we'll come right back through with the rest. That way you meet all your obligations, and we don't have to worry about dropping someone for fucking us. A real, true hustler recognizes game when he sees it."

Junior nodded. "Still need the whole thing, but I tell you what. Seeing as how you extending yourself like this, I'm a put you on to something new. Then we can make a trade, see?"

"Man, you still ain't getting it," Robert said. "We cash money. Ain't no banter system here."

Richie literally bit his tongue to prevent himself from laughing at Robert's goof.

"You mean barter, cuz. Barter system is what you talking about. And it can work if Junior here got something unique. Something we can make something off of."

"I don't give a fuck what you call it, it still don't make no sense. Money is money," Robert said. "Trades are for Indians and shit. This boy might as well head on up to Seminole country, see if they want that shit."

Junior grabbed the door handle and made like he was going to bolt. But Richie interrupted him: "Hold up now. What you looking to trade?"

"Does it matter?" Junior said. "It look like your boy done made up his mind."

"Let's see what you got."

"Sheeit," Robert said, facing forward.

Junior nodded and pulled out a plastic bag full of blue pills. "That's what I got. I can give you like, I don't know, 30 for the other half of that white."

"What the hell is that? Aspirin," Robert said. "You think we got migraines or something?"

Richie stared at the bag a moment longer, still unable to believe his eyes. He knew what those pills were, and he knew, vaguely, what they did to you. But their cost and what kind of market was available for the cousins to sell them in wasn't as clear.

"You got ecstasy there, Junior?"

Laurel peeked into the rearview mirror. Robert, who appeared to be on the verge of launching another verbal attack on Junior, stopped himself and examined the bag more closely. Junior cracked a knowing smile and said, "They ain't just any e-bombs; they what we call down in Miami double-stacked Mitsubishis."

“You mean like the car?” Richie said.

Junior retrieved one from the bag and held it up to Richie: It had three mini-triangles stamped onto it, each of which served as the points of a larger triangle. It was indeed just like the car: That’s Mitsubishi’s symbol. “They’ll have you wiggling on the ground like a fish out of water. I’m telling you, they ain’t no jokes here.”

Robert wouldn’t let go: “That’s some raver bullshit. Them things for faggots that wanna rub lotion on each other, suck on pacifiers, and twirl them fucking glow-sticks. I ain’t about partying in no warehouse, listening to that bullshit house music.”

“It ain’t just for them, man, I’m telling you,” Junior said to Richie. “These things taking Miami by storm. They all in the clubs—and not just the house joints. They big in the hip-hop clubs, too. People be bugging out on this shit everywhere from the ‘hood to the suburbs. It’s what’s what, and it’s coming up here. Believe that. I’m already making it happen right here in school. Ask Laurel.”

“Yeah, I know a lot of girls that do it,” Laurel said.

“You know a lot of girls that do it?” said Robert. “Shit, I know a lot of girls that fuck, but that don’t mean I’m going into the condom business.”

“You said thirty?” Richie said. “Then count them shits out, Junior. You got a deal.”

“Hold up now. You ain’t fixing to just take that shit, Richie. That shit ain’t just your decision to make,” Robert said.

Richie couldn’t contain himself any longer. He leaned forward and snatched his cousin by the ear, and whispered: “Sit back.” Whether it was his tone or the fact that Richie grabbed his ear, Robert slowly sank back into his seat, a petulant child rebuked. Junior had momentarily ceased counting. “Go ahead on with that, man.”

Unfortunately, Robert didn't remain quiet for long. Soon after the transaction with Junior was completed, and Laurel had driven out of the parking lot, Robert started in. "I should light your ass on fire for this bullshit," he said to Richie. "Fucking gasoline."

It was probably the strangest threat that had ever been leveled at him. Richie took it as a sign of too much blow. "You'll thank me later." All along the streets were fast food joints, mostly non-chain, offering chicken wings, tacos, and burgers. Tucked farther back were strip malls containing insurance agencies and dentists—almost exclusively, it seemed to Richie. "When we get home, you should get some sleep, man. You should turn in for hours." They passed a vacant lot overrun by tall weeds and plastic bags.

"So you just giving orders now? About my sleep schedule and the game. You the man now, right? That's the world I'm living in?" Robert had yet to face Richie.

"Sleep, man. It's precious."

"Precious is precious. Silly shit. That's what I'm talking about." Now he faced Richie. "You like my ears? Like grabbing them? You like sleeping in the street, too, I bet. Or probably you won't have to, since you the one making all the money. You got all the right moves. The right stuff. I should just leave it alone, let you alone, go off alone. Alone and lonely."

Laurel said, "How about some tunes?" She clicked on the radio, and the sounds of Top 40 R&B—emotionally juvenile and crude—filled the car.

Without removing his gaze from Richie, Robert pulled up his leg and smashed the radio with the heel of his shoe. Laurel yelped and might've said something, except Robert threw an open palm across her mouth. The slap reverberated through Richie's consciousness, and he became aware of a powerful anger. "Pull this mother fucker over,"

he said to Laurel, who was driving with one hand, and covering her mouth with the other. Richie could see that she was struggling to hold back tears, but he wanted what he wanted. “Pull over!” The car skidded off into a gas station parking lot, and suddenly Richie felt a wild urge to laugh. Why did everything always go down at gas stations? In parking lots? In places where there were bound to be witnesses? The car screeched to a halt by a vacuum cleaner and a pay phone.

“Oh, it’s on, bitch,” said Robert, throwing open the door. “I’m gonna kill you you.”

“Stay here,” Richie said to Laurel. “Whatever you do, don’t leave. This’ll be quick.” He confronted Robert in the parking lot. There was no more talking. Robert caught Richie with a hard left to the eye, surprising him both with its placement and speed. Robert always lead with a right—usually a hook—and Richie, through the sharp pain pushing at his eye, realized that Robert had been thinking this moment through a lot more than he had. Richie put up his set, but again he’d miscalculated. Robert wasn’t trying to square up with him; he was indeed trying to kill him. The next punches caught him in the ribs and stomach, causing Richie to bend over. Bad move: He left his temple wide open, and Robert took full advantage.

While Richie rolled over the hood, he had the distinct feeling that he was flying through warm air, not falling on hot metal. The sun was a white badge radiating in the sky, filling it with heat. The fantasy came to an end as soon as he clapped his hands on the hood, damn near cooking them. Fucking Florida. Besides additional pain, the heat on his palms had another effect on Richie: It woke him up. A white-knuckled fist came at him again, and Richie, focused from the burn, managed to dodge it and strike a devastating blow to Robert’s throat. He’d wanted his cousin’s chin, but the throat would

do. Robert stumbled back gasping, clutching at his Adam's apple, eyes glassy and white. He appeared to Richie now as he had looked in the car: a weak greaseball junkie all out of options.

Then came the eruption. That's how Richie would later describe it: an eruption. That's what he told the police, and that's what he told Aunt Shelia. What he'd wanted to say to both parties was that it was a double eruption, since, in addition to the pop of the gun blast, there was the pop of the window, but he eventually decided it sounded silly. One eruption did just fine. The bullet didn't shatter the passenger window; instead, it created a hole right in the middle of it from which a web of fault-lines spread. Robert was still clutching at his throat, and staring stupidly at the window when the second bullet hit near the side-view mirror. Richie spotted a masked man leaning out of the car, a revolver clutched in a bandaged hand, aiming as if he were trying to kill both cousins with one shot. A woman at the gas pump was shrieking her head off behind the gunman's car, but was still, strangely, holding the pump up to her tank. Richie dropped to the pavement, and half-crawled, half-ran around the car to the driver's side. He opened Laurel's door and dragged her out when three more shots rang out in rapid succession, one of which collided into the dash. Another blast went off, prompting Richie to shove Laurel's face into the brown grass by the pay phone. It was then that he became conscious of his erection. Then of his guilt. He did not tell the police or Aunt Shelia this detail.

Richie lay on top of Laurel for what seemed like a long time, but what was in reality only about five minutes, his erect penis driving into her thigh. The sirens wailed in the distance, and before long the cops and the ambulance and the fire-truck and all manner of

noise-making vehicles were at the gas station, disgorging uniformed men who asked questions, checked pulses, and eventually loaded a badly wounded Robert onto a gurney and drove him off to the hospital, where surgeons would spend the rest of the day and much of the night trying to save the life of someone who'd threatened to kill his own cousin just moments earlier. And through it all, even after he'd gotten off Laurel, Richie's penis remained semi-erect.

* * *

While Richie was changing into the dress clothes Laurel had packed in the bathroom, Jamal came to him about the gun. Richie had just buttoned his pants when Jamal stopped awkwardly in the doorway, then re-composed himself, and said, "We need to talk about a price."

Richie put on his shirt, and buttoned it. "I want a shotgun, 12-gauge."

"You going to church or something?"

"I don't do churches. I hate singing. Can't stand it."

"The only time I get dressed up like that is if I'm going to church."

"This is something different." He shoved his uniform into the bag. "So what am I looking at for the 12-gauge?"

"Those ain't easy to come by no more."

"But not impossible."

The door swung open and almost clocked Jamal in the head. Terry peaked around the corner, and said, "Did I get you?"

Richie saw a young cashier, right on Terry's heels. She dropped her arm quickly, as if she'd been holding Terry's hand or tugging at his shirt.

“Naw you didn’t get me,” Jamal said. He must’ve spotted the cashier, too, because he said, “This here the men’s room.”

“I know—oh,” Terry said, realizing that Jamal was speaking to the cashier. He took a second, then said, “Ladies is, uh, on the other side of the water fountain.” He cleared his throat. “Just over there.” He smiled, then said to Jamal and Richie: “Three’s company, right? I will wait for you fellas to finish up. Great job today, really. Nice teamwork.”

The door shut.

“He must be scared of black folks. I think he’s racist,” said Jamal.

“Man, he was trying to fuck that chick,” Richie said, laughing at its obviousness and Jamal’s oversight. Dense motherfucker.

“Naw. Really?”

“Yeah, man, he do that shit all the time. Ask around. Everybody knows.”

“You can’t do that. You could get fired or sued—something.”

“Not likely when you’re the boss man. So what’s up? You got what I need?”

“I could grab it. Yeah, I probably can do that. But it’s gonna cost.”

“Spill it, man.”

“Like 500.”

That was steep. Richie suspected Jamal wanted to take him for a ride because of the fight, and because he was skimming off the top. “You collecting a finder’s fee or something?”

“Huh?”

Dumb. Real dumb. “Are you trying to get over on me?”

“This is a favor more than anything. A favor for someone I don’t know.”

“Uh-huh. All right, game peeps game. 500 works. We cool.”

“All right, bet. Tomorrow. After work.”

The store was empty when Richie left. He'd walked around the front a little, trying to see if he could catch Terry fucking the new cashier, but he found nothing. Outside, the thick heat wrapped itself around him, and he began to worry that he might dirty up his clothes with sweat before he arrived at the meeting. He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke drift upward, away from the store and into the stratosphere, far, far away. What Mr. Metti would offer him he could not guess, but he wanted to make a good impression, to show him that, despite his past, he could be trusted, even valuable. Usually, no matter how nervous he was, Richie could drum up a scenario, play out a scene in his mind before an encounter. Before he went to court, he always ran imagined exchanges through his mind—between himself and his lawyer, between himself and the judge. Unlike other fantasies, like that of becoming Tampa's premiere dope man, the important ones, like court appearances, were always rooted in a reality. It alleviated the surprise of a conviction, of being forced to don county oranges and hobble off to jail, shackled.

But the impending meeting with Mr. Metti was different. Richie couldn't even summon a positive exchange, let alone a negative one. The encounter was so far removed from anything he'd experienced before that he didn't have anything to anchor the rosy or the stormy to. And in that way, this meeting did not exist for him.

He stepped on the cigarette butt, and walked over to Mrs. Metti's car before being struck by a genuine fear—one that may very likely develop into a thorny topic: Mr. Metti would see Richie driving his wife's car. What would his reaction be? Would that end the conversation before it even began? Would Mr. Metti decide to inspect the car's exterior,

to see if any damage had been done? Would he kick Richie out? Scowl? Fly off into a torrent of rage? Richie looked across the parking lot and saw Johnny settling uncomfortably into his tiny car. The sight of a fat man squeezing into a small vehicle somehow comforted Richie. Despite all his problems, Richie wasn't fat. And, in the end, that was enough. He got into Mrs. Metti's car, flipped on the car radio, and jammed Black Ice, a smile slowly stretching across his face.

CHAPTER 12

“Your faces make me think my son is already dead,” said Aunt Sheila to Laurel and Richie, as she emerged from a taxi outside of the hospital. Night had fallen. The sign overhanging the entrance read “Emergency Room” in bright red. Aunt Sheila threw her cigarette butt on the ground and sparked another. “Gotta get prepared.”

Richie decided he’d smoke another, too. He’d already seen his cousin and spoken to the detectives. But he had little to say to the police, and they showed their frustration by saying they’d come back around, and that next time they’d be armed with more than just questions. The lack of specificity in these statements bothered Richie. Would the cops now go digging around, investigating Richie and Robert instead of the crime as a means to establish the gunman’s identity? Did they suspect the cousins were involved in drugs? Richie sucked on his cigarette and fondled the bag of ecstasy in his pocket. Least they didn’t search me.

“You wanna sit down?” Laurel said to Aunt Sheila.

“Been sitting all day,” said Aunt Sheila.

“Sorry we couldn’t pick you up, but the cops said we couldn’t leave until they were done.”

“You could’ve left. You could’ve given them an excuse, or a phone number.”

Laurel tried again. “They were real serious, real pushy.”

“Jesus Christ. Do you know who you’re dating?” Aunt Sheila pulled hard on her cigarette, and fixed a pointed stare at Laurel.

“Yes, he’s hurt.”

Aunt Sheila looked at Richie, then back at Laurel. “You think these boys don’t know how to talk to cops and pick an old woman up at the same time? Get it through your head: Your lawyer daddy wouldn’t approve.”

“He does approve.”

“You getting smart with me?”

“He’s met Robert. They spoke at my house—inside—during dinner. Daddy liked Robert.”

“He liked the Robert that day. He wouldn’t like the Robert that went out and got himself shot.”

“That’s enough,” Richie said after exhaling a cloud of smoke. “This kinda talk ain’t getting anybody any where.”

A siren wailed in the distance, growing louder and louder until the blue and red of the lights were everywhere. The ambulance pulled up quick, and the paramedics jumped out. The man lying on the gurney had his entire head bandaged save for the eyes, and when the paramedics wheeled him past and into the bright hallway, Richie heard a moan. Everybody gone here.

“Think you can wait for me while I go and visit my son? My son with bullets here, here, here,” Aunt Sheila said jabbing herself on various parts of her legs and finally her stomach, roughly where Robert had been shot.

Richie nodded. “We ain’t going no where.”

“Learn to speak fucking English, or you could be next,” she said before jetting inside.

Richie spit. He fingered the pills in his pocket. He wondered what they would do to him. The word ecstasy held no meaning for him, but if he’d chosen to connect his knowledge of the drug’s purported euphoric effects, he’d have known its definition. This did not happen. All he could consider was escaping this situation, and the intense feeling of guilt suddenly bubbling like lava within.

“Think we should go inside?” Laurel said.

“You think she wants us in there?” Richie said.

“Sometimes people need people even when they don’t know it.”

Those were the first clear thoughts Richie had heard her elucidate since the incident in the bathroom, and he didn’t know how to respond.

“Maybe I’m wrong. I don’t know,” she whispered.

The air was so thick with heat that Richie thought he could see little droplets of moisture. A mosquito hummed in his ear. He let it land and suck until the slight pain of the bite became too irritating, and he swatted it away. Standing there, Richie finally let himself think the shooting through wholly and clearly. In the smoke he blew out, he could see the horrible truth and the burden it placed on him. For he did not let himself consider the truth—had consciously stuffed it deep down—because allowing emotion to take over when talking to the police is a terrible mistake, a truth serum for the unknowing. But now, in the relative safety of a sweaty, sticky night and in front of this dumb fucking girl, Richie saw in the blue cloud that came from his lungs the hard truth of the bandaged hand and what now had to be done: Manny did it and he’s going to die.

“What should we do now then? Just wait?” Laurel said.

Richie shook himself from his trance, and said, "Fuck that. She gonna act all crazy, then we can bounce."

The streets were electric now, and despite the ecstasy now coursing through him, filled with a sense of violent foreboding. All around Richie swirled those emotions he'd strenuously avoided feeling so that he wouldn't overreact in front of the authorities, and now, rather than hit him with shock, with a clumsy but gradual stumbling toward a full realization of the day's events, they dropped on him like a safe. He sped along the highway toward downtown, the skyline graced with only a handful of buildings, each less dazzling in its construction and height than the next one. Tampa Bay shimmered and rippled in the half-moon light. It was a moat that Richie would soon cross with Laurel to the downtown castle, full of blood.

He rode the bumper of the car in front of him in the far left lane, then, zoomed around it just as the blinker signaled that the driver would move out of Richie's way. Too slow motherfucker. Laurel's car was fast, but not dangerous enough. He knew she wanted to say something as the yellow lights along the highway blurred past in a wild painter's streak, and he liked the fact that he was in control, that she was at his mercy now. That's when he laughed. And laughed. And laughed, filling the car with this high-pitched yelp from the rebellious backlands, where creatures of the night stalked furry white animals with no legs, no way of escaping.

And then she spoke: "I don't know where I am. I feel sooo fucking good." She dropped her seat back until it thumped to a stop, and laughed louder and harder and higher than Richie had. "Sooo fucking tingly!"

There was a video game in Richie's head now. The white dashes demarcating the

lanes became pixilated obstacles blocking him from proceeding. But his driving skills were deft. He was now playing “Mario Kart,” which he’d mastered during his early teens. He still lived at home then, and his father was still present enough to purchase his son a Nintendo 64 game console that came with one game. And Richie played it and played it, sober and stoned, until every racetrack’s twists and turns and pitfalls became his alone. He owned those tracks. The one lain across the shores of an exotic island, especially. Tampa Bay’s waters became the salty waters of that distant, cartoon memory, and the highway the track, fraught with disaster. He howled at the night, and a tremulous fever swept up from his core and through his scalp, erasing the burn and replacing it with ecstatic elevation.

Laurel peered at him, her pupils large and watery. “You’re a werewolf.”

“You’re fucking A right about that,” he said, sparking a cigarette. The hair follicles looming just beneath his skin, despite the fact that he’d shaved his entire body except for his legs earlier in the day, now sprouted like grass in the Florida rain. Up they went, tingling as they grew into long spider’s legs all over his arms, neck—even his face. Ah, that mask he wore hid it all, and he could morph his features into anything he wanted and no one would know. The hair became his armor.

“Where are we going wolfy?” Laurel said, giggling. “Wol-fy.” Giggled again.

“To the castle. Uh-huh.” He’d never sucked so hard and inhaled so deeply a cigarette’s smoke before, but enough was not enough now. It could never be, could never have been.

“First we have to cross the moat,” Laurel said. “Give me one.” Her fingers danced in the evening, awaiting a cigarette.

For Richie it was too much to process. How did she know that the moat was there, waiting for them to fall in or glide over? He zoomed past another car, barely missing its bumper. Too slow. How could she have peered into his mind, focused and clear? It was a raw connection, and nothing could explain it. He shook the thought.

Laurel's fingers continued dancing, and asking for the cigarette. "Give me one." She sat up. "It smells amazing—feels amazing, too, right?"

After another vicious tug on his cigarette, he handed it to Laurel. "Be careful with that," he said.

Laurel smiled and settled back. The long ash dropped onto her lap. She laughed, sucked, coughed, and grinned. "It's so bad for you. I fucking love it."

A warm rush slid over him at the word "love," and all traces of the werewolf disappeared. They exited the highway and took the same route you would take if you were going to the courthouse. While he was conscious of the fact that the streets were the same—the median, with its bright floral plumage and signs announcing downtown's revitalization, was still there—no memories swooped down upon Richie. Nothing negative existed for him. The world was a snow globe that hadn't been shaken up. It pleased him, and his heart bounced rapidly up and down, the danger of it bursting from his chest hardly touching him. The heart was not his life-source tonight.

The parking lot sat across from train tracks suspended above a tepid canal. Richie and Laurel got out of the car, and began walking toward the tracks. A station sat on the side of the tracks closest to the bay, and inside sat a man, hunched and unaware of their presence. Richie wanted to talk to him. He didn't know why. They continued on until they reached the tracks. It suddenly occurred to Richie that his eyes were, if not

permanently crossed, at least temporarily so. The tracks moved into focus one moment, out of focus the next, and it dizzied him. How I'm supposed to cross? An irrational fear of going blind hit him, then disappeared, hit him again, then disappeared. "You see that?" he said.

Laurel was standing right next to him, and staring straight ahead. "I can't see anything."

"Me neither." Richie felt her fingers touch his, and in the night, blistering and moist, he and Laurel faced each other and kissed. Tongues jockeyed for position, as if neither had ever done this with anyone, let alone each other, before. Teeth clanked together, but the vibrations it sent up through Richie's jaw, ah, nothing could replace that. It rattled his skull and floated to the stratosphere. When they separated, saliva ringed their mouths, evidence of their sloppiness.

"I liked that," Laurel said. "And I don't know why."

"Who's on the internet?" Richie said. "Who's on the goddamn internet?"

"Who? I don't know. Everyone, maybe."

"Christ, I'm fucked up. I'm fucking shaking." He clasped his hands together, but they continued jittering. "Let's go talk to that guy."

"He looks like my granddad. He was a blue-collar guy like that. Got good retirement though...God I fucking loved him."

Gravel crunched under their feet. They walked slowly. The tracks made each step a potential stumble, and that brought them closer to the edge, where the canal, reeking of recycled water, lingered with its terrible sludge below. Richie clasped Laurel's hand. Through his waving vision, Richie saw the old man in the station peer up and spot them.

He came out onto the tracks and hollered, “Ya’ll can’t be on here.”

“We just want to say hello,” said Laurel.

“Well, hello, but you can’t be on here.”

“There’s no train, we cool. We just wanna talk,” Richie said.

“If you come down any farther, I’m gonna take it as a threat.”

Richie stopped. There was the confirmation. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back and sucked in the thick air, waiting for a sign. Why were people in Tampa so suspicious of each other? He’d once heard his father drone on about how Tampa was the lightning capital of the world, and how those currents charged everything and everyone, placing them on edge. Now his skull really rattled, and his back felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck it. When he opened his eyes, he thought the moon had descended from the sky on a string, stopping just short of his face. But it wasn’t the moon—it was Laurel looming over him. “Are you OK? Jesus. Get up. You fell so hard. Sooo hard.” Another voice echoed in his ears—it was the old man. His silver whiskers gleamed, but his eyes were hidden in shadow. He might as well have not even been there.

“On your feet now, young man. I’m too decrepit and she’s too pretty to go and try to scoop you up. Only option is for you to get on your dogs, ’less you want me to call the ambulance,” said the old man.

Sirens did not appeal to Richie. He’d heard their screeching, seen their flashing all day, and now he wanted peace. He jumped up, startling the old man, who waddled back on his spindly legs. “Thanks for the help,” Richie said.

The old man composed himself. “You sure you good? That was a nasty fall. Great big boy like you drops on his noggin’ like that, well, he’s liable to shake something loose,

if you know what I mean.”

“I know,” Richie said, lighting a cigarette. “I know everything.”

So now he and Laurel were walking away from the tracks in the direction of the water and the performing arts center. It looked like something from a Greek tragedy, all white with columns. The promenade in the rear was positioned directly over the bay. That’s where Richie wanted to go. He snatched Laurel by the hand and practically dragged her that way, mumbling to himself the entire time. And moving his jaw. He was grinding his teeth so viciously that, even in his current state, Richie considered the possibility that there might be sparks shooting out of his mouth. He looked at Laurel; she too was grinding her teeth, her jaw shifting back and forth, like a porch swing about to fall off its chains.

When they reached the promenade, Richie forced Laurel to have a seat at one of the tables, while he surveyed the area. She asked for another cigarette with her dancing fingers. Richie obliged. “You gonna get addicted,” he said. She didn’t respond. She seemed focused on something in the water, and when Richie turned to see what it was, he too focused on it. Despite his vision, which was now breaking into several planes that ebbed and flowed into one another at random, Richie immediately recognized what Laurel was fixated on. It was a police boat. But rather than patrolling the waters, the cops were at the rear of the boat, where one appeared to be leaning over, as if preparing to jump in the bay. Then Richie saw what he was doing—puking. The other cop was patting him on the back. Richie laughed again—that same howling laugh.

Laurel said, “Those guys are ridiculous.” She took an awkward drag from her cigarette. “This whole world is upside down. I mean—it’s crazy out here.”

Richie knew what she meant. Back when he and Robert first began experimenting with acid, they'd come downtown and run the streets. Or they'd go to the airport, and explore its cavernous environs when the hustle and bustle of foot traffic was non-existent. His thoughts drifted back to the days before Richie fought two kids while his cousin slept in the car, to the days before Richie was arrested and jailed, to the days when they owned trouble, not the other way around. He felt his jaw quiver, and he clamped down even harder, consciously focusing on preventing his teeth from grinding. But this exercise was replaced by another thought. He, Richie Thorton, was capable of murder. He lit a cigarette, and as the smoke swooped down into his lungs, thoughts of handling a pistol, and of leveling it in Manny's face, and of pulling the trigger—bam!—overtook his brain. Again, he imagined himself as a werewolf. Only this time the image was too fantastical and therefore unappealing. He wiped it away and came back with another. It was of Richie Thorton, crooked nose and bald, burning scalp and all, armed and ready to take aim.

“Oh, my God. They're sleeping,” Laurel yelled. She jumped out of the chair and rushed to Richie's side. “That's unbelievable.”

All along the glass walls of the performing arts center were great brown and grey humps lined up like trash bags ready to be marched to sea. Richie had seen this before, these men with no homes, huddled together so that young toughs with bad inclinations would be less likely to isolate them and pound their face into hamburger for shits and giggles. The thought made Richie giggle. “They bums,” he said to Laurel. “That's how they sleep. Cops might come over, arrest 'em or throw 'em out, but they back the next day. They come back like fucking roaches.”

“I don’t like it,” Laurel said. “Ow!” She waved her hand and the orange sparks of her dying cigarette flashed off her fingers like mini-fireworks shot from her cuticles.

“Told you not to start smoking,” Richie said. “It’s an affliction and a disease and shit all wrapped up into one little pen that you light on fire and just...just fucking love.” He snatched Laurel by the back of her hair and forced her mouth open and spit in it. Then he licked her face. “You were begging for that forever. You fucking made me do that shit.”

She was breathing heavily. “Take it all. I don’t care. I don’t care about hospitals or gunshots. I don’t care who’s doing what. I just don’t care.”

“I’m gonna make you care,” Richie said. He smacked her cheek—not too hard, but hard enough to make a pop. “You’re going to see the end and the beginning tonight. Oh yeah you are.”

By now a few of the bums had rolled over and begun examining Richie and Laurel’s exchange. Richie noticed it. He felt his whole body tingle like one giant nerve ending being flicked by a brutal surgeon, but he did not want to react. He didn’t mind them. He just wanted Laurel—wanted everything from her. Can’t stop it now. He kissed her again, and again their tongues jockeyed for position, and again their teeth clinked, and again Richie felt filthy and empowered. Again he liked it. He worked his hands up her face and lightly poked his thumbs in her eyes. He wanted to blind her, to keep her from bearing witness to his struggle. She moaned. She lovin’ this shit. He thought of a porn video he’d once watched featuring a man, clad in a black leather mask, shackling a woman and whipping her nipples. Richie moved his hands roughly back down her face and neck and stopped on her breasts. He pushed them in a bit, then sharpened his hands’ focus and squeezed her nipples. Again she moaned.

One of the bums had stood up, and taken a few hesitant steps toward Richie and Laurel. “What ya’ll doing?”

Richie turned out to the bay, saw that the police were gone, and barged over to the bum. He smelled of burnt palm trees. “You lucky you a dirty motherfucker. You lucky I don’t wanna get some disease by knocking your ass the fuck out.” The bum’s face balled up, and he went back to his blanket.

Laurel walked up behind Richie, and said, “I want you to tear me to pieces. You’re a fucking werewolf. Eat me up.”

During the walk back to the car Richie periodically slapped Laurel’s ass, pulled her hair, and smacked her face. He never did these things to hurt her per se, but, rather, to let her know who was in charge. I’m the boss. In the car, he sped rapidly down the highway, honking the horn at anyone who got near his car. The ecstasy had traveled to the front of his brain, and begun working solely on his head and eyes. He still could not see very well. The clouds’ formations were clearer than they had been, more defined. Somewhere at the end of the earth was the sun, pushing slowly up from the bottom of existence, preparing to bring every detail the night hid to the surface. It wanted the humans to see where lived and what they did.

Laurel kept tapping her skull against the window. Richie had thought to ask what she was doing, but decided against. She want attention. Instead, he concentrated on the video game of driving. He concentrated on beating it, and crossing the finish line a winner. All of the other characters in “Mario Kart”—the lead character’s evil relation, Wario, with his twisted mustache, the princess, with her long and neatly coifed hair—were going to eat his dust. That’s how it had to end. There was no other way. But then

another thought occurred to Richie: When you get to the finish line, even if you are the winner, you still continue driving around the track while the next level loads into the Nintendo. And you have no control. You're not driving—the computer is, and you watch helplessly as it propels your character around and around. Richie exited the highway, screeching around the off ramp, making sure that whoever was behind him stayed there, and whoever was in front wasn't so for long.

When Richie and Laurel walked into the apartment, Aunt Shelia was sitting up on the couch, not lying on it, as was her custom. The TV wasn't on either. Cigarette smoke hung in the air. "Where have you two been?" she said. "Robert woke up, and you two missed it. You didn't even have the fucking decency to give me a ride home. You didn't even have that."

Laurel's lower jaw was still swinging, though probably out of fear more than the drug. Richie answered as best he could: "I ain't think you wanted us there. You didn't act like you wanted company. You wanted to be alone."

"If I'd wanted to be alone, I would've said something. Jesus fucking Christ! You live in a fantasy world, Richie, and I'm supporting you. I'm letting it happen. You're mother wants nothing to do with you. Nothing. So I take you in. And you can't even give me a ride. Fuck!"

She'd never raised her voice to him like this before. She was serious. "How'd he look?" Richie asked.

"Who?"

"Robert."

"Oh, him. Yeah, well, he's alive. He's alive and wondering where his cousin is."

She paused and glared at Laurel. "And his girlfriend." She shook her head and used her cigarette to light another. "Disgusting. Just a disgrace, a d-isgusting d-isgrace. DD. D and D, yes that's what you two are. Get out of my sight." She scooped up the remote and turned on the TV. A housewife stood next to a washing machine, claiming the detergent she was using could clean up any mess. Aunt Sheila settled into the couch, and said to the housewife, "You've never seen a mess, sister."

Richie and Laurel stood next to each other in Robert's bedroom. The feral sexual urges he'd had earlier had subsided, and that angered him. He wanted the freedom to act on them, but Aunt Sheila had stripped them away. They looked at each other dumbly. The ecstasy was still alive within him, but his vision had returned, a sign he would later recognize, once his ecstasy use increased, was the first of many that the high was wearing off. He felt numb. His senses had been so alive earlier, so present, and now it was as if they'd fled his body, never to return again. He wanted them back, right at this moment. The bedroom was gray from the marriage of the sun's first rays shining through the blinds and the dank mixture of cigarette and marijuana smoke. Fuck this.

Laurel started for the bed, but he stopped her, unzipping his pants in the process. She peered up at him, and when he met her glance, he caught himself in the mirror, penis hanging limply out of his pants, eyes heavy with the night's experience. He resented that image and subsequently grabbed Laurel by the hair and forced her down. After a slight hesitation, she took him in her mouth. He pushed the back of her head so that she was taking it all, and when she choked, he almost smiled. It wasn't pleasure he felt; it was control. At the same time, this control was blended with an acute sense of a lack of control. For this was Robert's girlfriend. She did not belong to Richie. In the recesses

of his addled mind sat the idea that his life was not his because of Robert. Because it was Robert who landed Richie in jail; and Robert who compelled Richie's family to abandon him to W.T. Edwards; and Richie hated him for it. Manny's beating too was a product of Robert. The ecstasy spoke to him loudly: Those bullets that entered Robert were his sons. He birthed them.

Richie dragged Laurel by her hair to the bed and bent her over. Another thought occurred to him: Robert and Laurel were at each other's throats constantly these days. His cousin had deteriorated into a dope fiend in part because he was stupid like that, but more so because Laurel had worn him down. By inserting his cock into Laurel, Richie was relieving his cousin of his largest burden. She was wet already, and Richie slipped right in. He pumped hard and fast immediately—no easing into furious sex here. This was all about the anger. Hate fucking. He shoved his hand into her mouth and gripped her tongue as best he could. He didn't want Aunt Sheila hearing them. He continued pumping, his heart steaming ahead. The room was lightening, and he could see all of her—the little dimples on her ass cheeks, the knuckles of her spine buried under smooth skin, the brown roots of her hair.

His throat was dry. This scratching pain seemed to be connected to his pounding heart, but he could not say why. He kept going. A full awareness of the act had yet to grip him. His heart and throat distracted him, as did the rhythm of his motion, in and out. When he flipped Laurel over, however, he knew what he'd done. In her face, partially covered by hair matted to it by sweat, Richie saw the torture of enjoyment. A conflict existed for both of them. They continued. Her legs sat on his shoulders, and he went in aggressively, trying to hurt her. He put his hand on her neck and squeezed. A small,

crooked smile erupted on her face. Take that shit. He bent down and pressed his forehead against hers. Skull to skull, he whispered directly into her mouth—so that the words would enter her body, so that he could own her physically and spiritually—this final thought: “We’re in it now.”

CHAPTER 13

The bar sat in a wealthy area of South Tampa called “Hyde Park.” Its outdoor patio, full of striking blondes and their dandies, jutted out toward the street on a finished wood platform, the railings of which were ringed by candles. Jazz music floated out from inside, catching Richie’s ear even as he focused on the patrons seated outside, sipping wine, their mouths open with laughter and conversation. These rich people were not the same type of rich people that inhabited Temple Terrace—they had a vibe. Where the Mettis lived, there were no bars, no central gathering points other than the supermarket and a lone Starbucks. But here? Richie surveyed the streets from inside the Honda. Couples walked hand-in-hand past the Polo Store, moms pushed strollers toward the movie theater, a bare-kneed child sat on a bench, kicking his legs toward a group of pigeons gathered at his feet as they pecked aimlessly at the stone pavement. Something’s goin’ down here.

Amid all this motion and light, smiles and casual struts, Richie felt inspired. He examined his shirt, a purple- and blue-striped DKNY fresh from the rack, and brushed it clean of non-existent lint. The urge to smoke before he walked into the bar seized him, but he buried it. Best not. He rolled up the window of the Honda, and as he did so he attempted to burden himself with another fear: Does Mr. Metti know I’ve got the car? He tried hard to make this scare him, to ignite the burn across his scalp. It didn’t work. This

must mean something.

The mahogany sign above the door read, “McShillers. Est. 1922.” How many people with this kind of money lived in the area in the '20s Richie could not say. But he imagined them all here with him now, a flowing parade of supportive folks in white linen pressing against his shoulders, encouraging him to enter with a confident lift of air. Inside, candles lit the entire space, save for a few giant lights encased in forest green glass hanging in choice spots. A hostess in a white button-up attempted to greet him, but he just pushed past her. He knew where Mr. Metti was; he could see the man's bald head bobbing up in down in laughter at the bar.

There were three of them: Mr. Metti, the thin guy with an athletic build and narrow face, and a corpulent one with a great mane of curly silver hair. All had their ties undone, and their suit jackets slung haphazardly over their barstools. When Richie approached, Mr. Metti greeted him with an “Ah, there he is—the man of the hour,” and pointed toward an empty stool in the middle of the lawyers. “What are you having?”

Richie briefly examined the bar, hoping to get an idea of what to order, but was only further confounded by the small, half-empty glasses containing something dark brown. “Uh, how about a Bud?” Silence. Richie saw that each man had his teeth gritted, perhaps to conceal laughter. Naw ... not that, right? The lawyers exchanged knowing glances. A gust of anxiety whipped through Richie—then he stopped himself. He checked the lawyers again, and although their jaws were still locked tight as if holding back a flood of saliva, he decided he was being paranoid. Mr. Metti had agreed to this meeting, had wanted Richie to have a plan, some idea of who he was and where he was going. He ignored their strange dinner table conversation a few nights earlier, when Mr.

Metti had undercut Richie's stab at laying out a blueprint of his future. That, too, in this new way of thinking and being, seemed simply ludicrous. Mr. Metti and his colleagues were here to help. Why else would they be at this bar at this hour waiting for him?

"You can't have a Bud at McShillers. The owner's Irish for Christ's sake," said Mr. Metti, waving his hand at the bartender. A 40ish man in a bowtie waddled over. "Get my future son-in-law a pint of Guinness. Oh, and make one of those four-leaf clovers in the head. Wow him with the novelty of that, would ya?"

Now the lawyers laughed. And now Richie discovered what he'd wanted to conjure only moments ago, what he thought would provide him with some sense of balance, of reality, hot and hard. The future son-in-law remark hardly touched him, because of this thought. Someone else might as well have said it to someone else. While the bartender poured the Guinness, slowly, so slowly that Richie thought he too must be in on this colossal joke, he imagined a four-leaf clover firing across his head. He fought the urge to scratch it.

"So where's the plan, Stan?" Mr. Metti said to Richie.

Richie continued to wonder how long the bartender would leave his beer sitting underneath the tap. Was this a test? Was he supposed to assert himself in the presence of the lawyers, to let Mr. Metti know he was serious? "I got one."

"Well hand it over," Mr. Metti said, leaning against the bar.

In the face of this request the four-leaf clover burn was nothing. Richie had forgotten the damn plan. "I had to leave for work so early this morning...I overslept. So I had to haul-ass, uh, you know, get their quick and all, and, you know..."

"Now that's an excuse," said the corpulent lawyer, running his fingers through his

curls.

The athletic lawyer chimed in: “That doesn’t get any play on the streets, does it now?”

“Not a bit,” said Mr. Metti. “Not a bit.”

“Naw, but see, what had happened was—” Richie tried to get it out, but it was useless. He was trapped.

“One of my clients,” continued the corpulent lawyer, “told me in prison, the kind of thing you say when someone is disappointing you—you say, ‘That don’t get no play.’”

The lawyers laughed again. Richie stared at the glass of dark beer sitting underneath the tap. He wanted to snatch it, gulp it down, and order a fucking Bud.

“I heard that when you fuck someone over, you get fucked—literally,” said the athletic lawyer. He threw back the rest of his drink. “That’s what I heard, anyway. But I’m no expert. I just know what I’m told.”

Richie gripped down the edges of his stool, trying to mimic the force with which his stomach was knotting and his scalp burning. “I really don’t know about all that.”

“Sure you do,” said Mr. Metti. “You’re fucking hard core, kiddo.”

The folks in white linen no longer floated around Richie. They were no longer holding him aloft and carrying him into the future they’d never seen. They were in the ground—dead. “I ain’t been that way for a minute,” Richie mumbled. Adding to Mr. Metti, “You know that.”

“Know what?” Mr. Metti said, twirling his pinkie around in a fresh glass of Scotch. “Hey, buster bartender, stir it up a little more next time, huh. I like it to breathe.” Then back to Richie: “What was that? What do I know?”

The athletic lawyer hunched over the bar, resting on his elbows like a bored student, and said, "He's making a go at you, at the whole pile of lies you've shoveled at us for the last year or whatever. That's when you moved in right...Richie was it?"

"Yeah, he's been there a year. And it ain't a pile of lies," said Mr. Metti.

"Ain't," said the corpulent lawyer. He chuckled. "Now you sound like a fucking gangster. Say, I believe, I do. I think you just proved it right there with that 'ain't.' That was down right sexy. I think I'm hard." He peaked down at his crotch. "Nope. False alarm."

Mr. Metti took a swig of his drink, and said, "Prove I'm not full of donkey-doo."

The bartender returned to the tap and brought over the Guinness. Richie peered into the glass and watched the foam clover slowly fade back into the bubbles. "Novelty," he mumbled.

"Yeah, you caught the clover," Mr. Metti said. "But let's get back to business here. That's old news. I'm sure you're duly impressed. Blah, blah, blah." A loud crash, like that of breaking glass, came from the other side of the bar. "Hark! Now it's a party, mates." The lawyers laughed again. The bartender rushed around to see what happened. "That's what you get when you don't stir the captain's Scotch!"

Two older women near Richie shot looks of disapproval at Mr. Metti, then returned to their low-volume conversation.

"I'm throwing down some money on this one," said the athletic lawyer. "I'm feeling dangerous. Why? Cause this kid's not dan-ge-rous."

"I don't know. Look at his size," said the corpulent lawyer, scanning Richie from head to toe as if sizing him up for a fight. (Stop that staring, motherfucker.)

“That’s what I’m saying. That’s what I’m saying,” Mr. Metti bellowed. Another crash, this time like someone falling into glass, came from around the bar. Mr. Metti stood up and tried to get a look through the liquor bottles stacked on the island. “All hands on deck. Someone’s gone overboard.”

Right after he laughed, Richie immediately felt guilty. Not for the bartender—he could care less—but for himself. It was a violent self-pity, one born out of a complete lack of knowing just what he was supposed to do. Indeed, if anything, Richie was glad the bartender was occupied; it left one less option on the table. Then he thought about it, and cursed himself again. He already done served you. Game over. He fingered the outside of the glass, allowing the sweat now forming on his palm to mingle with the cold droplets of moisture. Should’ve brought that piece of paper. But what if he had? Mr. Metti would be pleased that Richie followed through with his promise, sure. But what would he have said about it? The critiques would’ve been endless, Richie suspected. Still, what little comfort this offered him paled when pitted against the sheer opacity of the situation he now found himself in. Fucking confusing.

The corpulent lawyer tapped Richie on the shoulder. “It’s OK to drink that.”

“Yeah,” Richie said. “I was going to...I am.” Then in a kind of anxious conniption fit, Richie raised his glass and downed half of it, the suds tingling the back of his throat as it barreled into the pit of his stomach, where it stopped, warm and dissatisfying. Guinness, to him, tasted like a chocolate milkshake mixed with liqueur.

“Well all right,” said the corpulent lawyer. “That’s one way to drink.”

“Ah,” said the athletic lawyer with a dismissive, if sloppy, wave of his hand. “Any redneck fool can drink and beat his wife. But that don’t make him tough. I’ve got \$50

says this boy can't tell me a story that'll convince me, nay, prove to me that he's the stuff of tough."

Mr. Metti stopped surveying the crash area, and said, "I'll take that bet. Just one thing, counselor: How can he prove it to you? It ain't like he carries his rap sheet around in his back pocket."

"There's that ain't again," said the corpulent lawyer. "Third time, and I'm gonna whack you in the head."

"Richie, whack him in the head," said Mr. Metti, slapping the bar.

The two women tried to get the bartender's attention, but he was occupied with the broken glass. Richie wished it were that easy for him: give a wave and go. The Guinness swooshed around in his stomach—a milky soup he'd wished would leave him.

It wouldn't, which made him want to defeat it even more, to cast it out with a violent flourish. No pussy shit. He downed the rest of it. This time it burned. But he didn't care; he felt alive. "You a lie," he said to the corpulent lawyer so suddenly he barely felt as if he'd issued the challenge.

"Excuse me," he said.

Too late. "I said you a lie, man. You ain't about to hit him."

"Ooo," said the athletic lawyer.

Mr. Metti tapped the bar. "Ahoy! We have a challenge. Arrr."

The corpulent lawyer composed himself, and said, "Classic tactic deployed via unsophisticated means. I spot your game. But you won't distract attention away from the original topic: your putative toughness."

Richie smirked, a warm rush of adrenaline shooting through his veins. "I don't

understand a motherfucking word you just said.” The adrenaline made its rounds, from his fingertips to his toenails. I’m free. “And guess what? I don’t give a fuck.” He lifted up his glass and held it before the corpulent lawyer, then said to the athletic one, “Buy me another beer before I smack this fat fuck. You got three seconds.”

“Wait a minute now,” said Mr. Metti, all traces of pirate gone from his accent.

“No, it’s OK,” said the athletic lawyer, perking up. “You’ll do nothing of the sort.”

Richie set the glass down. “One.”

The corpulent lawyer peered around at his friends’ faces, and then said, “This is ridiculous. Childish.”

“Give it a rest you softy,” said the athletic lawyer. “You’ll be out 50 bucks, not a face.”

“Two.”

“Richie tell a story,” said Mr. Metti. “Tell a good one.”

“This one’s gonna be good,” said Richie without taking his eyes off the athletic lawyer. “Three.”

“Not getting a penny,” said the athletic lawyer.

The pop of flesh was loud and disturbing—even worse than the breaking glass, a natural sound in a restaurant, however disrupting. The corpulent lawyer, hand on the offended cheek, stumbled back, partly as a natural reaction to Richie’s swift and stinging blow, and partly out of sheer horror. The athletic lawyer had to stand to keep his pal from bowling him over. “You’re sick,” said the corpulent lawyer, hand still on his cheek, to Richie. “You’re sick!”

Mr. Mett’s face was blank. The two women at the end of the bar blew out of the

place, leaving a pile of cash by their drinks rather than attempting to flag the bartender down. While the clinks of utensils on plates, the cool melody of jazz horn, and the intense whispers of patrons searching for an explanation kept the place from going completely silent, the hum of happy hour fun disappeared. Now they see.

Something had changed, sure, but Richie was still too heated, still too hyped on his own disgust with the situation to sense it with any degree of clarity. Instead, he stood at the bar, appearing, outwardly at least, even more calm and collected than he had been when he chagrined Mr. Metti by ordering a Bud instead of a Guinness. For the first time during this entire ordeal, Richie had taken the initiative. The power rested with him, not with some fat pig lawyer and his partners. Mr. Metti had to see that. He had to see that Richie had taken the bait and swallowed it without getting hooked and dragged onto the boat. He would not be fed to anyone tonight. No, not tonight. That shit is real.

Then, as if to confirm this understanding with Mr. Metti, Richie said to the corpulent lawyer, "He owe you \$50." He nodded to him, then to Mr. Metti, and marched out of the bar, imagining the throng of ghosts in white linen bowing before him. And when he got into Mrs. Metti's car, he did so without worrying about anything, not even whether Mrs. Metti would care that he was driving it.

* * *

The afternoon after his and Laurel's romp downtown on ecstasy, Richie woke up with an intense pain at the base of his skull. It felt like a giant mouth filled with ragged teeth had clamped down on his head. Laurel was curled up under the covers next to him; she had a white streak of dried spit on her cheek. The fan whirled around above, circulating hot air. Richie sat up, rubbed the back of his head, and reached over to the nightstand for

his smokes. The alarm clock said it was four. He lit a cigarette, and coughed slightly when he inhaled. He tried again, only this time he coughed louder. His throat felt like a scab, itchy and raw. Fearing he might wake Laurel, he dropped the cigarette into an old beer can on the floor. He ran his tongue around the inside of his cheeks; they were torn to pieces. He swung his jaw back and forth; his teeth ached at their roots. What the fuck happened? He searched back through his memories of last night, and found only feelings, not causes. They rested inside him like sickly animals dying on a barren plain. Those strange sensations came back to him: the swarm of cold jubilation rattling his ribcage; the feeling of wolf's fur growing beneath his skin; the power of motoring at top speed down the highway, the other cars mere obstacles in a video game. They all roared back, but there was no bite. Eventually, he pinpointed the source of his skull-ache, and when he did, he was even more unsatisfied than before. He and Laurel's trek along the train tracks had been guided only by Richie's urge to pursue his primary inclinations as soon as they developed, without consideration. That old man in the booth had nothing for him—yet Richie had marched on. And fell back on his goddamned head in the process. Fucking silly.

Laurel sighed, and rolled over on her back. Richie watched her watch the fan. Finally, he said, "Ain't making nothing cooler," and stood up and shut it off. "I'm fucking thirsty. My throat feel like it's on fire or something." The fan slowed. Laurel continued watching it. "I'm gonna get some water." He moved toward the door.

"I should leave," she said, still looking at the fan. "I don't belong here."

"Do what you gotta do."

"Yeah, what I gotta do."

“You probably shouldn’t go out the front, you know. It won’t look right.”

“It won’t feel right either.”

“That window there ain’t too hard to get out. Just gotta clear them bushes.”

“I guess I’ll have to get used to that.”

“Like I said, it ain’t too hard.”

Laurel rose suddenly and started to dress. She had red marks all over her back, evidence of their night. “My mouth is ripped up.”

“Mine too. ... That shit is crazy, man.”

“Crazy,” she mumbled, slipping on her shirt. “Are you going first or should I?”

The casual way she said it stunned Richie. “I’ll go. Wait till I shut the door.”

She nodded.

Aunt Sheila sat on the couch, smoking a cigarette. The TV was on, but she wasn’t looking at it. She wore a patterned dress and had applied a large amount of make-up to her face. Her cheeks and lips were bright red, and her eye shadow was so dark that, from Richie’s position in the hallway, he thought for a moment that she’d been beat up.

“Rise and shine,” she said, standing up. Richie went into the kitchen. “You’re not even dressed. It’s four and you’re not even dressed.”

Richie opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water. Aunt Sheila plodded over to him just as he was taking a swig. “Throw on some clothes, and let’s go,” she said.

“Go where?” he said, taking a breath in between gulps. “I ain’t got no plans.”

“I want to see my son goddamn it. And I want to see him now.”

“Can’t we hold off till tomorrow?”

She slammed the refrigerator door shut, and said, "I'm watching you. Every move. You should think about repentance. You should think about your cousin. You should think about doing the right thing, and taking me, your aunt, to the fucking hospital."

Strolling over to Robert's bedside frightened Richie. He didn't want to see him. He didn't know what to say. There was nothing to say, really. It was best they take some time off. Either she would understand that, or she wouldn't. That shit on her. "I can't do that right now. I ain't feeling well."

Aunt Sheila grabbed the phone off the wall and started punching in numbers. "You keep it up," she said to him. "He may put up with this shit, but I won't. I am a grown woman, goddamnit."

The desperation with which she said that last bit almost made Richie pity her. But then he spotted the open pill bottle on the TV stand. Aunt Sheila cursed at the phone, hung it up, then started dialing again. "These people should really just answer this time. They really, really, really, really, really should. Really. Really."

She breaking down, man. Richie returned to his room and shut the door. He spent the next few days in bed, getting up only to use the bathroom or grab something from the kitchen. Sometimes Aunt Sheila was there, seated upright on the couch and smoking, and sometimes she wasn't. He couldn't say for sure, but he thought she might not be sleeping very much these days. In the end it her current state worked out for him. Laurel was able to come and go as she pleased, sneaking in through the window at night for sex, sneaking out when they were done. They didn't discuss much, except for her day at school or the pain in Richie's skull. It still hadn't gone away. She suggested he take some of Aunt Sheila's pills, but he told her it wasn't that big of a deal. But it was. Only

Richie wanted it to stay—forever. He realized that the first night he slept with Laurel again. She'd come through the window and immediately stripped naked. He flipped her around and bent her over the bed. Spit on his cock. Shoved the tip inside. It wouldn't go. "Hit me in the back," she said. He obliged, striking her on her lower spine with a semi-closed fist. She lowered her head, and said. "Now pinch my skin. ... No get more of it. ... There." He had a flap of her stomach skin clenched in his hand, and yanked on it. He felt moisture on his cock now. He pulled tighter on her skin and thrust deeper in. There was no pain for him, although he thought there should be. But, ah, his skull, yes, there was pain. There was feeling, and for that he was grateful.

During the day he drove to the different high schools and corner spots, trying to dump off as much of the ecstasy as he could. The other stuff—weed, coke—wasn't going nearly as quickly as it had when Manny was in the picture, but the fact that it was going was all that mattered for now. It kept Bee-bee from complaining too loudly, and money coming in with no hassles. At first, the ecstasy put many of the Forest Hills kids off. So Richie tossed some freebies around so they could try it for themselves at no cost, and soon enough they entire bag was gone. Turned a nice profit too. He got word to Junior through Laurel and set up another meet at the high school. Junior came sans crew, which Richie appreciated. He getting smart. And while Junior didn't say anything, Richie knew the fact that Robert wasn't there pleased the youngster. They made another trade with little conversation. Smooth like it should be.

Early one evening Richie was in his room smoking a blunt when Aunt Sheila barged in, phone in hand. Her red hair shot out from her head like hot wires, and the bags underneath her eyes had turned from purple to black. She rough. "You got a call," she

said, hurling the phone at his face. He had to drop his blunt to keep it from smacking him in the forehead. "Have fun with that." She shut the door.

"Crazy bitch," Richie mumbled, scooping up the blunt and sticking it back in his mouth. Then he said into the phone, "Wassup? Who this?"

"You next," said the voice on the other end in a harsh whisper. "I ain't forgot."

Richie's heartbeat sped up. He felt the blood run to his fingers. His knees started shaking. "I ain't forgot about you, neither fool. I ain't forgot about what we did to your punk ass in the bathroom. How you was all laid up and bloody, begging like a bitch for your mommy."

"I'm gonna blow your motherfucking face off! I'm a put holes in you and your bitch cousin. I ain't through. I ain't through."

"You know where I'm at, Manny! You know where I rest. Where you at? Where you hiding? I'm right here you ho-ass spic bitch. I'm right here. I don't look over my shoulder. What about you?!"

"Soon." The line went dead.

"I'm right here! I'm right here!" Richie threw the phone on the ground, cracking it. The blunt was again on the carpet, and he had ashes all over his face.

"Have you lost your mind?" Aunt Sheila was standing in the doorway, arms folded across her chest. "That was my phone. Now how am I going to get to the hospital?"

Still shivering with rage, Richie yelled, "Give it a fucking rest! You don't need to visit that man daily and shit."

Aunt Sheila's jaw tensed. Her eyes went from glassy to watery. "Robert's getting out today. Now how am I going to get him?" She bent down and grabbed a T-ball bat

from behind the dresser, and flung it at Richie. He ducked and it crashed into the wall above the bed, leaving two holes, one for the tip of the bat and one for the handle. She dropped to the floor and started balling. "Nobody cares. I'm always alone."

Richie walked over to her and knelt by her side. "C'mon, let's go get him."

She eyed him suspiciously, and then wiped her face on the same patterned dress she wore one month ago, the day Richie refused to take her to the hospital. "It's about fucking time."

When they were driving down the highway, ragged palm trees slipping by them, Aunt Sheila offered Richie a cigarette, and even though he didn't smoke menthols, he lit it up and smoked the whole thing. The pain in his skull was still there.

CHAPTER 14

What started as confidence when Richie left Mr. Metti and the lawyers at the bar, soon morphed into rage-fueled dread, and he became so distracted with painful solipsism, that he drove off the road and into someone's front yard. He turned the wheel quickly, tearing up the lawn, leaving a spray of grass and dirt in his wake. Thankfully, the street was empty. Fucking Temple Terrace. Don't nobody stay out past eight. The side of Tampa he'd visited tonight still intrigued him; he still wanted to be a part of it. But as he drove away down its palm tree-lined streets, past the houses with the wide front porches, he knew he'd never be granted admission. His confusion at what the lawyers wanted—what they were trying to do—had popped something loose in his mind. Rather than hold his composure and allow them to have their fun or whatever they were doing, contenting himself to consider it later, he instead yielded to his most base instincts. The consequences, he now knew, were yet to come. Fucking ruined it, man.

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd done the right thing. Ask and ye shall motherfucking receive. It didn't matter anyway. He'd know soon enough what he'd started. The streetlights were all on, casting a sickly orange on the houses and their beautified gardens, their basketball hoops, their mini-vans. Richie had the urge to yank the wheel and motor Mrs. Metti's car onto another lawn, and then ... Naw, that ain't right. Gotta stay strong. He continued driving at the speed limit, growing ever closer to

home. Suddenly, Richie was overcome with the sensation that he was no longer a man. He thought of himself as a bull with giant, flaring nostrils and hooves that gleamed. And his horns, his horns curled off the top of his head, their points as sharp and clean as porcelain. Yes, he should've gored the lawyers, raised them to the ceiling, and watched as their bodies slowly slid down his horns, blood oozing out of their chests. Mr. Metti shouldn't have pushed him just because he forgot the plan. There would've been another time.

Richie turned the car onto the street perpendicular to the Mettis' house and screeched to a halt. He killed the ignition and jumped out and started pacing, pulling at his forehead where his horns would be—should be. He started snorting and spitting, and then ... he dropped onto the hood, banging his head on it three times before jumping back in the car. He smacked the steering wheel and began muttering, "They don't know me. They don't know me. They don't know me. They don't know me." Where were the tears? He wanted to cry, to ball like a child abandoned to the Dumpster, alone and destined to die in filth. He wanted those tears to come streaming, to fill his eyes to the point of blindness, to overpower every other sensation that trembled up his spine and into his soul. Nothing came. No, no he did the right thing. Faggot motherfuckers were testing my ass. Fuck with the bull ...

The ignition kicked on. The shaft went from park to drive. The lights on all those pretty houses floated by him.

She stood in the driveway. Her pink bathrobe practically glowed in the night. She was an iridescent jellyfish lost on the land, searching for something to sting. When Richie pulled up, he knew it had to be about the car. That had to be why she was on the

phone, frantically yelping and pointing at him. The cops were probably already coming this way, their sirens screaming, the red and blue of their lights ricocheting off the windows of the neighbors' houses and cars. The dogs would sprint to the fences and bark at the strange, frightening sounds, and soon everyone would be out in their bathrobes, just like Mrs. Metti, yapping into their phones and pointing at him. At me.

Imagining this scene finally lead him to cry—only now he didn't want the tears. Only now he wanted anger, and he couldn't find it. It's over. Mrs. Metti shuffled down the driveway, nearly tripping. She was still on the phone, yelling and gesticulating wildly. Bang bang bang. Her fist was hitting the car window. Bang bang bang. She wanted Richie to open it. He stared at her through red eyes, and, for a moment, she stopped talking and met his ragged gaze with her own. Then she started talking again. Then she started banging on the door again. And then she finally slipped and fell on the pavement, where she lay, crying even more. The phone had tumbled out of her hand. She crawled toward it. Seeing this made Richie stop crying. Seeing this made Richie fill with hate. He burst out of the car.

"Where the fuck you crawling?" he said, looming over her. She'd finally grabbed the phone. "You can't crawl in the street. Don't you know that? Don't you know anything goddamnit?"

Mrs. Metti put the phone to her ear, and peered up at him, her face caught in a collapsing glacier of panic. "Laurel's dying," she mumbled.

"Fuck you say?"

"She's dying." Mrs. Metti handed the phone to him.

"What the fuck?" he said partly to Mrs. Metti, and partly to whoever was on the

phone. He heard a din of clangs and clatters, of car horns and, faintly, of whimpering. It sounded pained and feminine. He pressed the phone harder against his ear. "Laurel?" The faraway thump of bass mingled with the whimpering. Then a shriek—loud but not so loud as to make him think someone was holding the phone up. "Laurel?"

The voice on the other end screamed: "My face! It's final! Finally!"

The horrific yelling filled his consciousness. He thought he might burst open and flood the streets with his gore. The line went dead. Mrs. Metti struggled to her feet and snatched the phone away from him. "Baby, please just drive. Just hold onto the wheel. Don't let it slip. Don't—Laurel? Laurel?" She swung the phone at Richie and smashed him in the chin.

"Motherfucker," he said, falling back a bit. He regained his composure and swatted the phone out of her hand. It cracked open on the pavement, and the battery skidded along and away. He grabbed Mrs. Metti by her arms and shook her violently. "What's happening to you? Who's on the phone? Why is Laurel on the phone?"

"She's a mess, a bloody fucking mess!" Mrs. Metti said. "I can't do anything." Fell against Richie, and then slid down to his feet, sobbing. "I never could do anything."

"What are you talking about lady? What the Christ is you saying to me? Huh, you rotten freak? Cow. Cow. Mooo!"

Richie stepped away from her. He wanted out, to run away from all of it, from everything. But he had nowhere to go. The cul-de-sac he stood in might as well have been a fishbowl with a lid on top. When Mr. Metti returned, that would spell the end. Then he'd be forced out and back to Forest Hills, to hustling for every dollar, waiting for a bullet or the cops. He sparked a cigarette and began walking away from Mrs. Metti and

the house and toward the stop sign at the end of the street. Once there, he decided, he might go left, he might go right, but he'd go. Maybe just for a little while. The drama would fall to Mr. and Mrs. Metti. Whatever the crazy woman was wailing about didn't concern him. Laurel was probably in a mood, and looking for a little attention. Fucking baby.

The stop sign was just 10 feet away when he saw the headlights and heard the screech. A car took the corner hard, swerving into the cul-de-sac and right at Richie. The headlights blinded him. So he jumped, landing on the pavement face first. A vicious pain, like claws digging into his right cheek and eye, shot through him. And then cold. He rolled over and touched the right side of his face. It was wet. His hand: covered in blood. The car barreled right at Mrs. Metti's car, but Richie couldn't see who was driving it. And then it hit. Right into Mrs. Metti's car. A cloud of dust. The clang of metal. The trunk of Mrs. Metti's car was pushed up and into the back windshield, which was completely blown out. The car had been forced into the front yard by the other car, which, while reduced to a crushed can, was nevertheless recognizable as Laurel's Acura.

Richie released a cry and sprinted toward the car, blood streaming down his face. Mrs. Metti emerged from behind a tree, and she too began sprinting to the wreck. When he reached the driver's side, he knew Laurel was dead. Her head was slumped over the wheel. He heard Mrs. Metti try to scream, but nothing came out but a dry wheeze. Richie reached through the car where the window had been, cutting himself on the icicles of glass hanging along the frame, and gently pulled Laurel's head up. She was awake. And crying. And...completely naked. Yes, she was covered in blood, but she was naked, from head to foot. Her breasts were like two red mounds of slick earth, her legs

like twisted tree branches wet with sap. Richie let her head go and vomited on the side of the car. He spit and returned to her. Mrs. Metti pushed her way closer, still trying but unable to scream. Richie shoved her back. When she re-approached, he softly tackled her to the pavement, careful not to hurt her. He just wanted her to get the picture. "Don't fucking look," he said.

Laurel was shaking and making some kind of hissing noise, followed by a series of guttural yawps that cracked right as they peaked. Richie reached into the car again and took hold of Laurel's head. "You hear me? You hear me talking, girl? I'm talking. Do you fucking hear me god-fucking-damnit?"

"I went alone," she said. "I went alone."

"Where? Alone where, Laurel?"

"I'm so sorry I went alone. I'm sorry."

Richie realized that if he let her head go it would simply fall to her chest. He examined her arms: They just hung there, too. And her legs were so terrifically contorted that there was no way she could feel them, or else she'd be screaming even more. "Don't be sorry. Just tell me why you're naked. Tell me why."

She spit blood out of her mouth and onto the mangled steering wheel. "Two. Two. Robert and Naomi. Two. Two. Robert and Naomi."

"What? They made you this way?" He pressed his head against hers, mixing their blood. "Don't tell me. Don't tell me."

She was whispering now: "Two. Two. Robert and Naomi. Two." And then she stopped.

Richie snapped out of his trance and let go of her. Mrs. Metti was gone. He surveyed

the cul-de-sac and witnessed a scene he thought was meant for him. The neighbors in their driveways, dressed in bathrobes, on their cells or huddling together. The barks of dogs filling the neighborhood. The sirens coming closer and closer. The vertiginous red-and-blue lights surfing the horizon of Temple Terrace. This scene should have been made for him. He turned away from it, disgusted. He looked at Laurel, and tried to cry again. But he couldn't.

* * *

Aunt Sheila stood at the front desk, her left fist resting on her hip so that her arm made a triangle, her right arm extended, so that her middle finger was as close to the nurse's face as possible. On their way to the hospital, Aunt Sheila had taken two pills and smoked three cigarettes. Not once did they discuss Laurel. Richie thought it was a forgone conclusion that she would ask about Laurel, if only to figure out why she wasn't here to pick-up Robert. But she said nothing about Laurel—or anything else, for that matter. It was a silent drive, providing Richie with the space to consider what to say to his cousin. Not that he had much of an idea by the time they arrived. He figured he'd keep it casual, hand him some money, smoke a blunt or two, and talk about how they were going to get Manny. Indeed, during the drive to the hospital, Richie thought more about him than he did about Robert. Fucking punk. While he'd previously felt compelled to go after Manny because of what he did to Robert, he now felt he had even more of a personal stake in killing him. There was no other way. The kid obviously wasn't going to rest until he got revenge and both Richie and Robert were dead.

"You can't release a minor on his own," Aunt Sheila said, still giving the nurse the bird. "You're gonna go to jail for that, missy."

The nurse settled back in her chair, and crossed her arms. She's dealt with maniacs before. "First of all, ma'am, I wasn't here when they released your son. That was someone else. Second of all, your son is 18, which means he's not a juvenile. He's a legal adult. He can come and go as he pleases."

"Why wasn't I notified?" Aunt Sheila said, dropping the bird. "Why didn't somebody here have the decency to call a mother when her son decides to go off and plays lone ranger?"

"I don't know what that means, ma'm. All I know is that we a busy hospital, 24-7, and, as much as we might like, we can't provide the kind of personalized service you seem to think you deserve. Look around you." The nurse swept her arm from one end of the room to the other.

Richie had already taken note of the room full of people, all of whom were in various states of disrepair. The man with bandages over his eyes, who kept mumbling, and the kid with a giant whole in his lower leg were the two Richie focused on. But there were others in pain. Richie turned to the nurse, and said, "He didn't say nothing."

"Like I said, I wasn't on duty that day."

"His name Robert Thornton. You sure you right about him being gone for two days?" Richie said.

"Positive."

"This whole place is a sham," Aunt Sheila said to the nurse. Then she faced the room full of wounded. "A fucking sham. They're gonna amputate the wrong leg and the wrong arm. You might as well do it yourself with a kitchen knife!"

The nurse stood. "OK, now you have to leave. I'll call security."

“Fuck your security,” Aunt Sheila said. “I’ve got my own. See?” She poked Richie in the chest.

Richie said, “Let’s go,” and hustled her down the corridor and outside.

“I’m filing a missing persons report,” Aunt Sheila said, lighting up a cigarette. “This isn’t right. He must be drugged up or something. He could be wandering the streets. I could go home and see him on the TV on some show getting busted for amnesia.”

Richie rubbed his face and stared off and away. An old man was being wheeled out into the parking lot by an old woman, probably his wife, and loaded into a van. If only Robert were that old and helpless. He wouldn’t be such a pain in the ass. All you’d have to do is feed him. Aunt Sheila could bathe him. Crazy sonofabitch. Richie reached into his pocket and counted out \$50 and handed it to Aunt Sheila. “Get a cab,” he said.

“Oh, no. You’re not leaving me here. I’m not staying. I’ve got to go to the police. We’ve got to do something.”

“Leave that to me. I’ll find him and bring him home. OK? I got this.”

“You got this,” she said, mocking. “You got nothing, Richie Thornton. You’ve got no parents. You’ve got no friends. All you got is me and Robert, and you don’t even care.”

“Get a cab. I’ll find him.”

“The whole world won’t always listen to you. The whole world isn’t here exclusively for you. It’s here for everybody and nobody at the same time. And really, in the end, you become just like me: old and alone.” She stepped on her cigarette. “You bring him home in one piece, damn you.” She walked back into the hospital and picked up the courtesy phone.

There were so many places to look Richie barely knew which one to go to first. He had a wad of cash in his pocket he was supposed to deliver to Bee-bee. He decided to go there. At least that gave him a destination with a purpose, a destination that would end up yielding some result. The rest could be dead-ends. Richie assumed that Robert wanted to go after Manny, and that he wanted to go at him alone. He probably had arranged for a gun through an old Forest Hills connect, and maybe even gotten his hands on a car. Always something to prove. They'd never killed anyone before, but Richie knew Robert had it in him, especially given the circumstances. Indeed, Robert, it seemed to Richie, had been waiting his whole life for this moment. He wanted to cross that threshold, to become the worst of the worst, to solidify in his mind that he was a bonafide thug. He dangerous.

A fat old black woman sat on lawn chair at the entrance to the College Hill housing projects, where Bee-bee lived. She had a sign on her lap that read: "Drug Free Zone." When Richie passed her, she pointed furiously at it, and yelled something unintelligible. She must've had that sign only for the white folks rolling through, he thought. But there would be no white folks coming to buy drugs if the black kids didn't sell them. Fucking silly.

He parked in front of Bee-bee's apartment, where a group of black dudes stood, passing around a blunt. Richie tried to walk through them, but they wouldn't move. They just stared at him, a silent wall. If he were in jail, Richie would've bowled through them, but there was no need to jump off at these dudes—not in their neighborhood. He went around and knocked on the door. No answer. The black dudes had all turned and were focused on him, as if he were an animal at the zoo. His palms began to sweat. He

knocked again. This time the door swung open, and Richie, instead of seeing his friend, saw the barrel of a gun. A man dragged him inside and slammed the door. Another man came charging out of the kitchen and clocked Richie in the jaw, dropping him to the carpet. Both men knelt before him. One was bald, while the other had long dreadlocks.

“Ya came to de wrong place, master,” said the guy with the dreadlocks and the gun, which he had pressed against Richie’s forehead. “Ya gonna meet the man upstairs, yeah?”

“Not yet.” Bee-bee limped over, stopping behind the two men. He was shirtless, and his shoulder was covered with a white bandage. “You a dumb motherfucker to come back here, man. You should’ve waited till night time at least.”

“Fuck you doing, man?” Richie said.

“I’m just gonna do what you couldn’t do to me: blow your fucking head off.” Bee-bee tapped the bandage. “Bad aim. Bad luck, bitch.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Richie said. “You out your mind?”

The dreadlocked guy said, “Let me wash him now, Bee-bee. Let me clean the streets of dis filth.”

“Fuck, man,” Richie said. “I just came to give you your money. That’s it.”

“What planet you on?” said the bald man. “Money ain’t finna work this out.”

“Reach in my pocket,” Richie said, wincing as the gun was pressed harder against his skull. “Reach in there. You’ll see.”

“Do it,” Bee-bee said.

“I can smoke ‘im good now,” said the dread to Bee-bee. “Me no need no waitin’.”

“Check it, dawg,” said Bee-bee. “Let’s see what’s what.”

The dreadlocked man grudgingly shoved his hand in Richie's pocket, dug around, and pulled out a wad of cash. "The Reaper still calling, bwoi."

Bee-bee took the money and counted it out. "All here."

"Told you," Richie said.

"You think I don't know the game, fool," Bee-bee said. "You think I don't what you trying to pull. I see." He knelt down, too, and chunked the money at Richie. "Your cousin gonna roll up on me, try to smoke me, and then you come through trying to act like you motherfucking Bambi and shit. Naw, nigga. It don't work like that."

Richie tried to sit up, but was forced back down by the dread. "I ain't had nothing to do with that. I ain't know shit about shit. I just went to the hospital to scoop Robert. He wasn't there. They said he been gone for two days. Done spooked my crazy aunt with that shit." He paused, then let it out, "I ain't never even shot no gun, man."

The dread started laughing. "Him trying real tough. Him trying, das true."

"Itn't he though," said the bald man.

"What you gonna do 'bout this situation then, Richie? Cause I might as well kill your ass to get to him. Sounds right square to me," said Bee-bee. "Right square."

"You could do that," Richie said. "But he won't care. If he coming, he coming. Ain't got shit to do with me. Me and him finished. Been finished."

"And so are we," said Bee-bee.

The dread smiled and stood, removing the pistol from Richie's forehead, but still aiming it at him. "Dat is dat."

Bee-bee reached over and pushed the dread's arm down, lowering the pistol.

"What you say?" said the dread.

“He gonna make this right,” said Bee-bee. “Ain’t you?”

Richie hesitantly sat up. “I got you.”

“That’s right you got me,” Bee-bee said. “Or I got your ass.”

The bald man and the dread snatched Richie up by his shirt and literally threw him out. “We coming soon, mon,” said the dread. Then he shut the door.

The group of guys loitering outside was still there. As Richie stood and began walking toward his car, one of them said, “Dead man walking.” Laughter.

Richie heard those laughs all the way home. They sounded in his ears, reverberating and shaking his entire frame. I’m gonna kill him. Everything seemed to be collapsing around him, falling in large chunks that shattered in some chasm that grew wider and deeper by the moment. He had to get to Aunt Sheila’s and grab everything he could—the cash, the drugs, his clothes. Everything. A vague plan surfaced in his brain: He would steal out for a while and hide, trying as best he could to dig up information on where his cousin might be. In the meantime, he’d sell off the rest of the drugs to a few choice buyers so as not to attract attention. Don’t want Robert to know nothing. He had to take the power back, to lay in wait, and let Robert worry about him instead of the other way around. Chances are he’d come back to his mother’s apartment, and that was not the place for them to settle this.

Richie tried to imagine standing before his cousin and pulling the trigger, watching all that blood spray his life onto the concrete. But, despite his anger and hurt, Richie couldn’t do it. How do you kill your own family? How do you do it? His synapses blasted around in his brain—positively electric. Then the burn came on, fierce and unrelenting. He’d begun furiously scratching his head, sending waves of dandruff raining

down on his clothes, when he pulled up to Aunt Sheila's apartment and saw the ambulance. And the police cars. And Aunt Sheila, screaming and fighting a pair of EMTs and one cop as they struggled to cuff her. Richie stormed across the parking lot. Another cop jumped out of his cruiser and put Richie in a choke-hold. They hit the ground.

"Get off me," Richie said, struggling to loosen the cop's grip. "That my aunt. I live here."

"Easy," said the cop, rolling on top of Richie and pulling out a can of pepper spray. He aimed it right at Richie's eyes. "I'll fucking blind you, boy. I'll blind you so help me god if you don't quit fighting."

Richie stopped. He breathed heavily, his chest heaving up and down like a see-saw. "What ya'll doing?"

"Your aunt's going to jail," said the cop.

"For what?"

"You need to relax—"

"I'm relaxed, man. For what?"

"For helping your cousin nearly kill that girl, Richie." A plainclothes officer—fucking detective—stood near Richie, hands in his pockets. "Robert came here tonight looking for blood, my man. He came here looking for you."

Two hours later Richie was standing outside of the Temple Terrace police headquarters, smoking a cigarette. Detective St. Pierre shook his head. "That picture doesn't lie. You and your cousin do, but that picture don't. Neither does Laurel. I know you got your street code. Your ethics. Whatever. But I don't give a fuck about that.

You don't want to tell me why your cousin would leave Manny Vargas face down in a ravine with 13 stab wounds, fine. Don't tell me. You don't want to tell me why he'd come home and slash Laurel's tummy wide open. That's fine, too. We got him locked cold on that. But the Manny thing—the Manny thing could come back to you. We know what he was into. And we know he was in it with you guys. Prooving all that ain't gonna be as hard as you think." He poked Richie's chest. "I mean to put you away for something. Doesn't matter what. You're as dirty as he is and I know it. Rap sheets don't lie. All that money in your pocket doesn't lie. All those drugs in the house, they don't lie either. We got your aunt on that, true. Her name's on the lease. Yours ain't. But all we need is one witness. One person to say you lived there and that's all she wrote. The cuffs go on, and you go up the road for a stretch, just like Robert."

Richie pulled hard on his cigarette and then chucked it. "That all?"

"Remember my face." St. Pierre leaned in toward Richie. His pockmarks made Richie think of craters on the moon. "Remember it."

The moon was different tonight for Richie, but not because of the detective. He'd decided against shacking up with someone in Forest Hills. He wanted to be alone. So he walked five miles in the midnight heat to Lettuce Lake Park, where he truged through the forest and found the boardwalk and fort. Now he lay on his back on the second floor of the fort, which overlooked the Hillsborough river, listening to the frogs croak and the crickets chirp. The moon was taunting him with its glow and position above the world. He and Robert used to come to this spot and smoke joints when they were in junior high, long before they ever thought of dealing. They'd lay here and stare up, discussing the best way to make money. Fantasizing really. They knew the big drug dealers in the

neighborhood, had ridden in their trucks and watched them bring home girls. But no one paid them any mind. They were jits, tough jits yes, but jits all the same.

The moon was so fresh, so pure tonight. And bright. Richie closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of nature, finding no comfort in any of it, just more noise and darkness. Soon, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER 15

After calling her nearly every hour on the hour, Richie finally heard Laurel's voice. It was his third day at Donovan's house, and he was getting antsy. The guy had always confused Richie, and observing him in close-quarters did little to relieve the enigma. Strange dude. Donovan sat on a maroon, L-shaped couch in the living room, his feet propped up on a glass table, reading a book. As always, he was dressed in a white T-shirt and jeans and wore Flia slippers with white tube socks. A blunt burned in an ashtray, filling the room with the sweet aroma of herb. Cammy, a squat but stocky boy with dirty blonde hair dressed in nothing but bright yellow swim trunks, dozed on the other side of the couch, where it bent along the wall by the front door.

The morning after Laurel was sent to the hospital, Richie had awoken at the fort inside the park to the sounds of footfalls on the boardwalk. He heard children giggling, and then saw a family of four walking toward him. The sounds of the night had given way to a persistent insect hum, and a more oppressive, wet daytime heat. That's when he decided he'd had enough with nature, with being alone, and tramped the 10 miles to Donovan and Cammy's house. The boys had already heard what happened. And they knew what Richie wanted when he arrived, letting him in through the front door with no questions. They even found some clothes for him to wear, including the red Polo and tan cargo shorts he had on now. Yet, as the first day turned into the second, and news spread

that Robert was facing a 10-year prison term, Richie got the sense that they didn't want him there, that they were only letting him stay because they were scared and didn't want to confront him. Because neither boy said anything to him unless addressed first, Richie was convinced they didn't trust him, and that perhaps they thought he might be in the wrong. Though what if anything they knew he could not say. This unnerved Richie. Say what you gott say. He saw no need to put it out in the open, however, and discuss it or anything else of importance with them. They were serving their purpose.

Indeed, once he got Laurel on the phone, his feelings toward them hardened, for their usefulness could soon expire—so long as he and Laurel's relationship wasn't over. She represented an option. "When you get home?" he said to her over the phone, walking to the other side of the kitchen by the refrigerator, where Donovan couldn't see him. He frowned as he took in the mess on the table—beer bottles, plastic bags, crushed cans, and other party refuse overlooked more of the same on the tile, plus randomly placed piles of potato chips left as if for some animal to eat. He'd grown sick of the filthy life, in all senses of the term.

"Hospital let me out earlier today," Laurel said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You hurting still?" He, too, now was whispering.

"I got pills for that. So no."

"I been calling you. I wanted to leave a message, but I didn't know how your pops would act, know what I'm saying?"

"It wouldn't have mattered. I told my dad about you."

"What you mean?"

"I told how me and you had been together for a while now, how I hadn't been with

Robert. I told him Robert was just jealous, that he did what he did because he knew I didn't want anything to do with him anymore."

Donovan shuffled into the kitchen, his flip-flops sliding across the tile. Richie stood still, waiting to respond. Without acknowledging Richie, Donovan opened the fridge, grabbed a Coke, and returned to the couch.

"Are you still there?" Laurel said.

"Yeah."

"Well?"

"I don't know. I don't see how he gonna believe all that with the cops in his ear."

"He's going to believe his daughter over some cop."

"Ain't he a lawyer or some shit?" The scent of weed grew suddenly stronger. He poked his head around the corner and saw Donovan shrouded in smoke, the book resting on his chest. He went back to the conversation.

"That's working for us more than it is against us."

His heart beat faster at the word "us." What she saying? "How you figure?"

"I hope you understand."

"Just say what you got to say. Damn."

There was a pause. Then she said at an even lower volume: "Daddy's gonna see to it that they both go away for a long time."

Richie crossed his arms, crooked the phone in between his shoulder and ear, and said, "Who is they?"

"Sheila and Robert."

"Hmmm."

She raised her tone back up to a standard whisper when she said, "I knew you'd be angry. I'm just scared, you know?"

"Fear make people do some dumb ass shit."

"I know."

"Make 'em throw hands, throw bullets ... all kinds of wildness."

"Where are you?"

"But fear ain't no excuse. You a man, you got to man up. Robert ain't never did that. He always on someone else for shit he did. Gets it from his momma, I guess. Nothing to do."

"Are you OK?"

"I'm with people."

"Good people?"

"They all right."

There was a knock at the door.

"So you're gonna stay there?"

"For now."

"You have options, you know."

"Not too many. Robert fucked everything up. Manny, Bee-bee—everything."

"There are others."

Voices came to him from the living room.

"Like who? Much as I had is as much as I lost. Got some cash, couple maybe friends, but nothing solid."

"I'd still like to see you."

“Oh yeah.”

There was some low-volume commotion in the house, the settling of bodies into their new environment with new people.

“I’ll just say it,” Laurel said, burying the whisper. “Will you come live with me?”

Richie chuckled. “You been dropping more E or something? Been watching them Disney cartoons?”

“I’m serious. I already spoke with my dad. I gave him your story, more or less how it is.”

“More or less?”

“I told him you were abandoned by your parents, that you went to live with your aunt and your cousin because you had no where else to go. I told him you brought me to my senses—that you saw your cousin was as bad for me as he was for you. I told him we had plans to move out together, when I got out of school. You’d get a job, and I’d start taking classes at USF. I knew he wouldn’t want me out of the house. I was right. We made a deal, and you were a part of it. That is, if you want to be.”

Whoever was in the living room had obviously joined Donovan for a smoke session. The gurgling of bong water reached Richie, as did the inevitable coughing. It’s all them fools do. “When you want me to come?”

“Anytime. Now,” she said.

“Then come scoop me.”

Laurel arrived less than an hour later. Rather than spend time smoking weed with the two clowns who’d arrived while he was on the phone, Richie sat on the back porch, considering his hasty decision. Despite the fact that green algae had slimed its outer rim,

the pool still appeared fresh and inviting in the afternoon sun. Swirls of tiny brown insects hovered over the half dead lawn, and the air smelled to Richie like pure heat. Where he was heading, the lawn would be alive, the pool clean. Where he was heading, groups of Forest Hills boys with nothing better to do than puff blunts and rip bongos would not be allowed. These thoughts comforted him, but only momentarily. If they'd stayed in his mind, they might've remained welcome. But as soon as Donovan knocked on the sliding glass door, opened it, and said to him, "Some girl here to see you," Richie's skull began to burn, as if he'd lounged in the yard under the sun all day with no lotion.

Richie said his goodbyes to the boys in the room, Cammy barely waking from his fugue state to mutter "later." Donovan walked Richie to the door and opened it, squinting as the sunlight flooded into the dark, smoky interior. Because of the white glare of the sun, all Richie could see through the windshield of the Acura was the outline of Laurel's head.

"Damn that shit bright," Donovan said, resting his head against the door.

"All right then," Richie said. "Appreciate it."

"You gone for good or something? Or am I reading you wrong?"

"You good at reading books, not people, man," Richie said.

Donovan snorted. "Always and forever."

"Right." He turned to walk away.

"Everything's a circle, Richie," Donovan said, poking his head out the door. "It all goes around in the same loop. Round and round, man. Round and round."

"You need to stop reading so much," Richie said, standing halfway between the door

and the Acura.

“Or smoking,” someone inside called. Uncontrollable stoner laughter erupted.

Donovan squinted into the sun at Richie for a moment longer, then nodded and disappeared back inside.

All along the drive Laurel prepared Richie for what was to come. There would be a dinner with her parents. Her dad would grill him, though not too tough. He’d be firm but fair. The most important thing for Richie to do was to say as little as possible, and when he did speak, stick to the script. Abandoned by his parents. Saved Laurel from Robert. Wanted to change his life, etc. She said it was imperative that he not pretend to be some angel, that the way he looked and talked would give him away before he even spoke his first words. The thing was to be sincere in his desire to change. If he did that, he’d have a place to stay and a job at a nearby grocery store.

They pulled up Laurel’s house. The burn on Richie’s crown seemed to grow as high as the house’s two stories. To an extent, the anxiety he’d felt when he first encountered this place had stuck with him throughout the year he’d live with the Mettis. Maybe it was the wide front porch with the rocking chairs, like something out of Little House on the Praire. Or maybe it was the bright green lawn, thick and full of life. Or maybe it was the long and winding driveway, a concrete path to Never Never Land. Whatever it was, it still intimidated Richie. He felt like an imposter that first day, and the feeling never left him.

“Why you doing this?” Richie said to Laurel, wiping his sweaty palms on his shorts. They were seated in the car, in the driveway, the tan garage doors opening with an explosion – at least to Richie – of creaks and cranks and metal grinding on metal. The

burn seemed to amplify with every alien sound. “Why you taking me in here?”

Laurel smiled. “Why does the caged bird sing?”

“What?”

She laughed under her breath. “Because it’s natural.”

“You ain’t making no sense.”

She leaned across the center console and slid her tongue into Richie’s mouth. He wanted to pull back, just in case her dad was standing there, watching them, but couldn’t resist the temptation to have her. It distracted him. “Now do you understand?” she said, pulling back.

“I got you.”

She opened the door, and said, “After dinner, I want you to hurt me.”

The dinner never happened. Inside the house was a ghost town – not a peep. The quiet was welcomed by Richie, but Laurel seemed spooked. She prowled around, stopping first in the dining room (which she said she expected to be set already) to the kitchen (which she said she expected to be filled with the smells of a country-style home-cooked meal). Neither was the case. Save for the hum of the air-conditioning, there wasn’t a peep. Richie was grateful that he could explore this alien territory without having to speak to her parents. But, even without the strain of conversation, the experience nearly overwhelmed him. Fucking place is huge. The kitchen alone – with its racks of copper pots and pans, stainless steel refrigerator and stove, and expansive space – appeared pulled from the Home & Gardening Channel. And then dining room – with its long table, candles, and china cabinet – appeared pulled from an old Southern plantation.

These thoughts for Richie were vague, of course. What occurred in his gut was more powerful than what occurred in his head, and, as a result, the burn returned. He'd been focusing on a candle on the dining room table when he imagined it firing up spontaneously, and as soon as he did so, he realized he'd forced the issue, and sent a rash of hot pain across his scalp. Without noticing, he'd begun furiously scratching his head while continuing to stare at the imaginary flame, when Laurel came up behind him, and said, "Let's go upstairs."

The wood creaked and groaned as they climbed up, sending a new rush of the deep-chested pangs and flutters of anxiety whooshing through him. He hated the feeling. He wanted to tell Laurel, but her face was somehow harder now that they arrived here, less inviting. Later, when he would lie awake at night, listening to her slight snore, he'd remember this walk as the first hint that Laurel was something other what she'd presented herself to both him and Robert as. During such moments in the dark, he'd entertain the notion that she'd conned him into spending his life with her in this great big house, because she needed someone – anyone – to share the pain with. Richie was a convenience, not a boyfriend. Tricky bitch.

Light emitted from underneath a door near the top of the steps. Laurel whispered that it was her parents' room, and motioned for Richie to head the opposite way down the hallway to her room. He turned and watched as she entered the room, gently shutting the door behind her. The voyeur in him wanted to stay and creep closer so that maybe he'd hear what was being said, but he couldn't do it. He didn't want to catch a glimpse of this strange new life he'd embarked upon by listening to a daughter and mother's conversation. This was not a moral stance, but a practical one, because his sanity

depended on learning as little about these people as possible. If he knew anything of human nature, he knew that it was ugly and dark, and he did not need to remind himself of that, at least not right now.

Laurel's bedroom belonged to that of a little girl, not a young woman on her way to college. That first night, he'd have trouble sleeping amid all of the stuffed animals and creamy colors of girlhood. The pictures of silly girls smiling in exotic places were particularly disturbing. They mocked him, and it was all he could do not to tear them off the walls and rip them to shreds.

That's why, when Laurel returned, he snatched her by the neck and pinned her against the wall. She wanna be hurt, she gonna get it. Careful what you wish for, bitch. At first she was stunned, her knees quivering as if they were just removed from frozen water. But soon, she realized how to play the game, and became submissive, even when he punched her pussy. While he knew that move had raised the stakes, he barely considered it in the moment, because all that mattered now was that he get what he wanted how he wanted it, and she somehow understood. It was why, he suspected, she'd dropped to her knees and told him to pull off her shorts. It was why, when they were off, she'd turned back toward him, and said, "Shove it in my ass." Even as he spit on her sphincter and forced his way in her, the reality of what he was doing escaped him, and he drifted off into a dank alleyway in New York City, where he had never been. In his fever dream, he was a predator and she the prey. He pumped quickly and roughly, and just before he came, he cracked a smile: maybe he didn't need her as much as he'd originally thought. No, he only needed a warm body and an idea.

Laurel started crying. Richie lay on the bed, trying to get comfortable, thrashing

around, moving all of her goofy stuffed animals this way and that in an attempt to carve out a space to just be. He didn't know how to respond to her. She sat there, Indian-style, on the carpet in the middle of the room, weeping. She didn't even cover her face. It felt like a ritual, like she had some sort of schedule she was keeping. Richie fuck's me in my ass, then I cry, then I do the dishes....

Finally, Richie said, "I thought you liked it like that."

"Stop it."

"Stop what? I didn't say shit."

She sniffled and wiped her eyes, but they continued to leak. "This is none of your business."

"What planet are you on?"

"Oh, great. Now it's your turn." She looked at him sharply. "Go ahead, beat up on me, the only woman with any strength around here. The last woman standing."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

She affected a Southern accent, and said, "You want me to fix somethin' for you, hon? You want me to set it all out on the table nice-like and wish upon a star you come home?"

"You out your goddamn mind."

"Don't you be my fucking daddy. Don't you go asking me to do things, then not showing up. Half of life is showing up."

"Where you at?" Richie said, sitting up.

"I'm here, where I belong, which is where you should be, too. That's what I deserve. I'm not a child."

“What’d your mom say to you?”

“Don’t you blame her. Don’t you do it.”

“What the fuck, girl? Seriously, what the fuck are you talking about?”

She stood, and said, “My dad is out working late, so that’s why he’s not here. Get it? He’s working, all right? Working. As if ...”

“So what you saying? He wants me outa here or something?”

“It’s not about you! It’s about him, and what he wants—always. Just don’t do that. Don’t you do that ever.”

Richie stopped himself from cursing her, from hurling insults and storming out. These impulses for him were instincts, but his good sense had taken over, as had his imagination. Another night out in the park, sleeping under the stars, the hum of insects all around him, did not sound good. He’d go with it, for now. “I ain’t gonna do none of that. You hear me? I ain’t your daddy.”

“Good.” She drew a deep breath, then came over to the bed and curled up next to him. “Let’s spoon.”

So they did. He caressed her back and legs, whispered in her ear that it would be all right, whatever “it” was, and kissed her on the neck, gently. She needed to feel like a woman, and this he understood, so he changed the way he dealt with her in the bed for the first time to accommodate this new need. I’m a player. It worked well enough to put her to sleep, which was what he really wanted. He needed the time and space to think, to consider the newness of everything around him. And there, in the dark, he did just that, mulling over possibilities, such as what his new job might entail, how much money he’d be making, and who her parents were. How would they treat him? Were they really as

cool with all this as Laurel claimed? The fact that her dad didn't show up wasn't a good sign. What was worse was Laurel's reaction. He realized suddenly in the dark, with these freakish stuffed animals surrounding him, that he never asked after the mother, and that she never asked after him. She had to know that Richie was there, in her daughter's room, and yet the woman never came out to say anything to him, and Laurel never mentioned it. What's more, Richie never asked about it, either. And her father, well, that was a different story. Something up with that motherfucker.

Whether he knew it or not, Richie was slipping into his new living situation with an ease he'd never imagined possible. Later that evening, when her father came home and carelessly opened the door and stared, half-drunk, at the two dark lumps on the bed, Richie never woke up, so content was he to have a new option, even if it was one he barely understood.

* * *

Richie stood outside the hospital, smoking and pacing in the hot night, the image of Laurel's bloodied and battered body fresh in his mind. He couldn't shake it, nor could he shake the sound of all that metal collapsing on itself. Unfamiliar emotions mingled and mixed with a familiar one—rage. He'd felt it all the way here, when he drove a stone-faced Mrs. Metti in frantic silence, the ambulance lights blazing just ahead, the siren wailing and wailing, a cry for all those who couldn't. For me.

The other cars parted along the ambulance's path, allowing Richie to stay right behind it as he traveled at a speed that left no room for error. Somewhere in his mind he knew he must complete this part of the journey perfectly, but somewhere in his mind he also realized that to think about what could happen if he didn't would guarantee failure.

So he slipped through the wretched night, the brake lights of cars slipping past in a red blur.

It felt necessary and right, as the color matched his mood. Above him were bright white streetlights pooling on the highway like little messages from angels that he didn't see or care about. He wanted nothing but black and red, so it was. The trees lurched out from beyond the highway, and seemed to wrap every car on the road in their leafy embrace. He wanted bats to live in there, and as such a new color came to him—yellow, the color of their evil eyes. He saw their teeth and they were yellow, too. When they opened their mouths it was to screech in time to the siren before swallowing everything and everyone on that highway except Richie, the man on a mission.

His goals split in his mind's eye. First, get to the hospital and see Laurel and Mrs. Metti in, then get to Robert. But as soon as he split them he had to split them again. Mr. Metti would surely show up to the hospital at some point, and the question for Richie was whether he should stay and wait for him, or leave. Could give a fuck what he thinks. The incident with the lawyers at the bar was, Richie now realized, a precursor to what he was now dealing with, a warm-up exercise meant as practice for cracking down on Robert once and for all. He could barely imagine killing him back when Robert's actions had nearly caused BB to kill Richie. Even then it was difficult. But now? The inevitable had come to pass, and the anxious insecurity that the situation with the lawyers had stirred within Richie presented itself now as nothing. Nothing at all.

So he paced outside the hospital, trying to erase Laurel's mangled, bloody body from his mind. They were only able to spot the ambulance pulling up front, and the gurney being quickly wheeled out by the paramedics, before they disappeared inside. Mrs. Metti

had tried to flee the car and run for her daughter, but Richie had reached across and grabbed her by the pants and shirt and sat her back down. He caught a whiff of perfume, and it served to further imprint on his mind a thought that, given the circumstances, comforted him because it meant there was something here within his control: she was a woman, frail with emotion and the impulses it brings. Of course, he didn't think of it in quite those terms—it came to him more in the form of weakness. But the general sentiment was there, fresh, fulfilling its calmative duty.

He lit another cigarette, and decided that today would be the last day he would ever go to a hospital. Besides, once had done what needed doing, there would be no point—he could hardly expect to get away with it. The smoke heated up inside him, and he paused to consider the night. The parking lot was barely visible beyond a few feet in front of him, because the lights at the entrance were so bright—they shut out everything. What came over him next as he pulled on his cigarette can only be described as a state of being Richie had never known and could not recognize nor articulate, but there it was, and rather than think it, he felt it. It was peace. Not the bloodless kind. No, it was the kind that came with purpose, and his purpose was revenge, cold and deadly. Motherfucker's gotta go.

The doors opened behind him, and Richie would not have paid attention, except that as soon as they whooshed shut the man said, "So what are you gonna do about it?" Mr. Metti stood there, staring beyond Richie. His bald head was beaded with sweat, his eyes were bloodshot, and his face limp and ashen. "'Cause you gotta do something. Have you seen her? I mean ... She's not the same. Probably never will be, that much, that much in this fucked up fright fest is true." Then, almost to himself, "Oh, man."

Richie pitied this man before him, this rich cocksucker who, when it came down to it, couldn't do anything a man was supposed to do. He couldn't even protect his family. Punk ass. Richie blew smoke out of the side of his mouth, conscious of the way it contorted his face into an unnatural grimace. "I gotta do what the fuck I gotta do for sure. But what the fuck I gotta do and what you get to know ain't the same thing."

Mr. Metti locked eyes with Richie. "I could help. There's got to be something I can do."

"Nope. Nothing." He tossed his cigarette. "Just stay here. Stay here and be with her."

"Who?"

"You're daughter, motherfucker. Damn you sad. It's like you ain't never where you actually are. Like you got a stunt double or something you send out to do shit when you got other shit to do. And you know what? I fucking hate you for it. And so does your family."

"I have money," Mr. Metti said, lowering his gaze.

"That don't mean nothing now. That ain't gonna buy you what I can deliver, because what I can deliver you got to be born with. You weren't born with nothing but a silver spoon and a lie."

"That's not what I meant."

Richie stepped toward him, but left several feet between the two. "What did you mean then?"

"You're going to need something, right? A weapon—something. I can give you what you need right now."

A weapon? Richie had forgotten all about his deal with Jamal—that he was supposed to meet with the dumb bastard today. Indeed, now that Mr. Metti had raised the issue, Richie realized he needed more than his rage and the purpose and peace attached to them—he needed a gun. For once, Mr. Metti was in the right place at the right time saying the right things. Richie could never believe in fate or destiny, but if there were such things in the world, this had to be one of them. Spooky shit, man. He needed a plan. “I need \$500.”

“There’s a bank across the street,” said Mr. Metti, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his keys. “I’ll take you there.”

They got into Mr. Metti’s black Mercedes, which smelled of leather polish, and drove silently to the bank, where Mr. Metti withdrew the money from the ATM. When he got back in the car and handed the cash to Richie, he gasped, pressed down on the horn, then said, “I’m sorry,” and put the car into reverse.

“Stop the car,” Richie said. “Get out.”

“Oh, you wanna fight me? Is that it? Well, go ahead. Punch me with all your might.”

Richie was considering giving the man a little slap across the mouth, but then he started laughing. Cackling really.

“What’s so funny? That’s my daughter, you know? I raised her.”

Richie leaned his head back against the seat and allowed himself one final chuckle, before saying, “With all your might? Who the fuck says that?”

“Great. Just great.”

“Go ahead now,” Richie said. He nodded toward the door, then opened his and

stepped outside. He peered in, "I ain't playing, Mr. Metti. Walk your ass across the street. I need this here."

Mr. Metti stepped out reluctantly. As Richie rounded the front-end of the car, Mr. Metti said to him, "You better get this right."

Richie stopped. They stood there, staring at each other, as if they were sizing each other up before throwing blows. Then Richie said, "How does she look?"

Mr. Metti leaned against the car. "I haven't seen her. The doctors wouldn't tell me anything before she went into surgery. They just told us to go home and get some rest. They said they'd call us."

The two names Laurel kept repeating while she faced death in the wrecked car reverberated in Richie's ears. "They probably right," he said. "Ya'll should get home and sleep. Ain't nothing to do now."

"I don't think her mother's leaving the hospital. No way, in fact, she's leaving the hospital."

Richie nodded. "Best get back then." He walked over to the open driver's side door. Suddenly, Mr. Metti took hold of his elbow, startling Richie.

"Why didn't she tell me Robert had gotten out?" Mr. Metti said.

"Wasn't no point." Better let go soon.

"Don't you know who I am, who I know?"

Richie yanked his arm free. "That don't mean nothing when it comes to this here."

"Street law or something, right?"

"Something."

Mr. Metti studied Richie there in front of the glowing blue sign that read "ATM" for

a moment longer, then turned and began walking away. “Just make sure you don’t get caught,” he said over his shoulder. “Laurel will want to see you when she wakes up.”

Naomi. The windshield as he drove toward her house began to fog up, and it wasn’t until then that he considered where he was going and what he was going to do. He’d called over to “Health Nuts” and asked to speak with Jamal, whom he prayed was still there. Otherwise, Richie would have to find a knife or something else to use.

Thankfully, Jamal answered, and, although he sounded annoyed, Richie didn’t care. All that mattered was that the deal was still going through. Richie would have his shotgun.

All of these logistical concerns—getting the car, the gun, and driving itself—were almost, Richie realized, ways of avoiding what he had to do to find Robert. Because in order to do that, he would have to find Naomi. So when the windshield fogged up, he thought of the last time he’d seen her—the last time he fucked her, when he’d had her bent over the dresser and was pounding her from behind, her breath spreading out on the mirror in a violent shock of white. She was so alive then, which in turn made him feel alive at the time. And it was that memory—the reality of her tan skin, the scar on her face, their shared experience through the years—that made his hands shake. He gripped the steering wheel tighter and flipped on the defrost to wipe away the fog. The fan hummed loudly, eating the layer of moisture away slowly but surely.

All of a sudden he was hot. He rolled down the window, and was greeted by the moist night air, which provided no relief. Outside Tampa was dead. Only a few cars shared the road with his, gliding past gas stations and fast food joints and office parks just as he did, but with no purpose. At a red light, he turned to find a black woman, her thick hair frizzing out wildly in all directions, driving the car next to him, bobbing her head to

a beat he could not hear. He turned on the radio when the light changed, but all he got was an earful of corny R&B. No Black Ice to pump him up, to get the adrenal violence flowing through his blood stream. He shut it off and was immediately struck with a sense of emptiness which, coupled with the heat, served to make him feel lonelier than he ever had. This journey belonged to him and him alone, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Prison would surely follow, but to think about it served no purpose. He had to do it.

Yet when he parked outside “Health Nuts” and watched as the last customers filed out into the near-empty parking lot, pushing their carts and holding their bags and making sure the kids looked both ways, it was all he could do to keep himself from peeling off in Mr. Metti’s Mercedes and never coming back. And there he was, lumbering along toward his car, not looking at anyone and presumably not thinking about much. Johnny opened up the door to his Dodge Neon not 10 feet from Richie, squinted at the young man, and then said something Richie couldn’t make out. Suddenly, the urge he’d had to flee left him, replaced instead by a familiar face and the prospect of a familiar conversation.

“What’s that?” Richie said, shutting the door. “It ain’t easy hearing through a car.”

“You can’t hear anyway. It’s all that crap rap you listen to,” Johnny said.

“Better than that countrified bullshit you rockin’ to.”

“No way, buddy. That there sends the right message—one of truth, you hear.”

Johnny’s face went serious. “I was just saying to you that’s one fancy automobile you got there. Was wondering how you came about that on a stockboy’s salary. I said it to you while you were in the car ‘cause I didn’t want to hear the answer.”

Richie lit a cigarette. “It’s my girl’s daddy’s ride. I ain’t steal it.”

“Didn’t think you boosted it. You got other means to get money than that.”

“You always got something to say before you know all the facts, Johnny. You should listen more before you talk.”

“I trust my eyes, son. That’s what happens when you grow old and fat in the joint. You learn to trust what you see. And what I see is a young man doing the same dumb youngster shit I was doing before they came and got me and through me in the pen with a bunch of sons-of-bitches. Oh, hell, I already told you this. You know it, even if you don’t want to. Might not be too late, if you act right and accept the way things are, the way you got to move up in this world.”

Bass that had been rattling in the distance grew closer, as did the rattle of an old muffler. Richie peered behind him and saw a blue Ford Tempo equipped with dark tinted window rolling toward him and Johnny.

Johnny noted it, and said, “Them’s the sons-of-bitches I was talking about.” He tapped the roof of his car. “God speed, boy. I ain’t gonna wish luck, but I’ll wish you the lord.” (Do he really know?) He dropped his heavy body in the car and took off.

The window of the Tempo lowered and the music rushed out even louder in a torrent of hard constanents and violin strings and even harder, more pronounced bass. Richie knew the song—it was Black Ice’s “Rage Against the Blue Crew.”

Funky ass cops don’t catch me when I dusted

I won’t get busted, I’ll just start bustin’

Rat-a-tat-tat on that ass and I’m gone

Leave your wife crying, “Oh, my god, he’s gone!”

Jamal poked his head out of the Tempo, and said, “You a lucky cracker.” Laughter came

out from inside. (Punk showing out for his boys.) “C’mon, man, get in.” He opened the door. Richie slid in next to him. Two black guys, both with hair braided into cornrows, sat in front. “Pull around to the back,” Jamal said to the driver.

Richie, feeling the bass rattling inside his ribs, said, “You might want to turn down that music.”

“Fuck for?” said Jamal, bobbing his head to the beat. “This the real shit, partner. What you know about that?”

“I know loud music attracts attention, know what I’m saying.”

Jamal smirked, and tapped the driver’s shoulder. “Check this, homey. Cracker says we should turn down the music.”

The driver parked the car by a Dumpster bursting with folded cardboard boxes behind the store, now just a concrete block—no signs, no activity. The driver leaned forward and lowered the volume, then said to Jamal, “What you say?”

Jamal smacked his lips. “Shit, let’s just do this.” Then to Richie, “Let’s see the money.”

Richie reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. “Now let me see mine.”

The driver now stared at Richie with yellowish eyes, sunken cheeks. He look sick. “Go to the trunk. You see it, grab it, then bring the money to my man here,” he said, nodding toward Jamal.

Richie nodded and opened the door. Thanks to the one flickering light in the trunk, he spotted a duffle bag buried underneath a bunch of dirty white T-shirts and gym shorts. He tossed them out of the way and unzipped the bag. There it was—a 12-gauge pump action shotgun. There was even a box of shells in the bag. An odd, pounding sensation

erupted in his chest and traveled upward to his temples. A thick knot formed at the back of his throat. The night air stung his nostrils. His hands clammed up. This real. He closed the trunk, and walked around to the back door, which was still open.

“Like that cherry on top, cracker?” Jamal said. “That there is because we such good friends.” He chuckled. “Life-long and shit. Roll dogs. Ha, ha.”

Richie tossed the money roll onto the seat next to Jamal. “Later.” He walked off, the duffle bag feeling as heavy as a corpse.

The phantom weight lingered for the whole 30 minutes it took Richie to drive to Naomi’s condo. It made his turns slower, sloppy and uncontrolled. He could hardly breathe. He rolled down familiar streets as if in a fog, registering no sensory detail, no scenes. He was on auto-pilot, focused squarely on his finally destination, and feeling the weight on his arm the entire time.

The lights were on in Naomi’s bedroom. He sat in the Mercedes across the street, smoking and staring, not imagining what would happen when he tapped on the window, but what it would feel like to see her. It would be like chewing his arm off to rid himself of the phantom weight. He took one final pull from his cigarette, then opened the door and flicked the butt onto the ground. There was no movement anywhere in the neighborhood, just the occasional flicker of blue light in a window. It was almost as if everyone knew he was coming, and stayed in doors to give him his space. This did not comfort him.

He walked across moist grass and came up to the bushes in front of her window. Moisture had collected on their leaves, where it sat in miniature puddles, further indication that, yes, the sprinklers must have been on earlier. A slight crack in the

curtains made it possible for Richie to see a small corner of the bed, but that was all. Unless Naomi was sitting in that exact spot, he wouldn't be able to tell where she was in the room—if indeed she were even in there. Without thinking, he reached over the bushes rapped gently on the window. He spotted the play of shadows in the room. He stepped back, the bushes snapping and crackling into place. His shirt was damp around the lower chest and abdomen.

A shadow darkened the curtain. It stood there, unmoving—then a hand peeled back the curtain. She wore only a yellow T-shirt and had her thick black hair pulled back in a tight bun, her face covered in a white substance. She squinted and pressed up against the window. Again without thinking, Richie waved. She cupped her hands tighter around her eyes and pressed further against the window. Obviously, she couldn't see out. Richie waved again, and suddenly, his heart jumped inside him, as if he'd been shocked by electricity. Naomi held up a finger indicating to whomever was out there to wait, then she closed the curtains and disappeared. She coming.

Clouds hung in the night sky, their outline made present by the moon hidden somewhere behind them. The whole scene looked like a painting on velvet. A door creaked open and shut on the other side of the wall. Still wearing only the yellow shirt, Naomi came to the edge of the sidewalk and peaked around. Richie grabbed her hair, unraveling the bun, and her shirt collar and dragged her so forcefully across the front of the condo, past her bedroom window, to the other side shrouded in darkness that she often couldn't keep up, and thus dragged her feet through the wet grass. Richie slammed her against the side of the condo, gripping her throat between his fingers. She let out a little wheeze and moaned. He now knew what it felt like to see her—it felt like red.

He pressed his forehead against hers, and said, “Where’s Robert? Tell me now, bitch.”

She choked as if she were trying to say something but couldn’t. The color of her eyes wasn’t visible. They looked like black pearls. It made it easier for Richie to hurt her. “I’m a let go. You yell, you die.” He released her slowly. She tried to double over and cough, but Richie stood her up straight. “Where the fuck is he?”

With a sudden burst of ferocity, Naomi said, “I hope she’s dead.”

Richie unloaded on her with a closed-fist shot to her stomach. He let her drop to the wet grass, where she clung on all fours, gagging before finally spitting out a chunk of bile. The sight and sound made Richie gag, and he too eventually vomited, leaving the taste of spicy heat in his mouth. He hated her for what he was doing. He kicked her in the ribs as one might kick a disobedient dog—not hard enough to break anything, but hard enough to make it yelp. “I had your back, bitch. You had me always. And now look at you.” He bent down and picked her up and slammed her against the wall. Drool slid down her chin. He fit his against her chest and pushed against the bone in between her breasts. “You weak, and you sad.” Then he added, more to himself than her, “Laurel ain’t got nothing now. Legs all broken up. Face cut to shit. ... Blood every where, man. ... It’s all been one long nothing.” To Naomi: “I don’t care anymore.”

“You never did,” she said, and a crooked half-smile slid across her face. “That’s what made you so damn sexy.”

His bit his lower lip as if for courage and pushed against her chest with his fist, hard. “I’m gonna crush you like a grape. Talk.”

She gagged again but did not throw up. “He’s at Lettuce Lake,” she said, gasping.

He eased up on her. “At the fort.” Again there was the sick, crooked smile. “But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

Robert never had much of a flair for the subtle, of course, and so whatever doubts Richie might’ve had about Naomi’s answer were immediately wiped away. He was there all right. Where else would he be? Shit don’t change. “Let’s go,” he said, again grabbing her by the hair.

“I can’t go with you, Richie,” she said, wincing in pain. “What about my mother? She knows I’m outside. She’ll wonder where I went in my fucking T-shirt and panties. You’ll get caught, you jackass. You always do.”

Up until that moment Richie had been marching her through the grass and toward the Mercedes, but now he wanted to stop and make one thing clear to her. “I don’t give a fuck,” he said, even though the very thought of being arrested and thrown into handcuffs scared him to no end. This real.

What he said to her in the parking lot registered in her eyes, which seemed to drop into her stomach, where they stayed. She don’t want none. While Richie wanted to believe her new-found docility was genuine, he didn’t trust it, so he had her strip naked and sit on the floor, instead of the front seat, with her head tucked underneath the dash. He promised not to take any hard turns or slam on the brakes in return for her cooperation. Still, during the drive to the park, he’d occasionally pinch the small of her back or rub his fingers through her ass crack just to let her know he was watching her. There was nothing sexual in his touches—it was pure control. It didn’t matter—Naomi hardly made sound, save for the occasional snuffle, which didn’t sound like it was accompanied by tears.

Richie pulled past the small wooden sign reading “Lettuce Lake Park,” next to the hitch post, his headlights illuminating thick forest on the other side of the small concrete lot. He cut the lights and engine. Somewhere in blackness was his cousin.

“Can I lift my head now?” Naomi said in a muffled voice because her face was against the floor.

Richie studied her a moment, then said, “Why ya’ll do it?”

“My fucking back hurts, Richie. I’m serious.”

“You could’ve just come after me, caught me slipping some time. Wouldn’t have been hard.”

“You’ve been after him since he got out. He knew it. He was scared.”

A vision of Robert, eyes and mouth agape, face drained of blood, a cartoon figure in the darkness, shrieking, came to Richie. He slapped the steering wheel and the vision went away. “This is a fucking joke.”

“Please, can I get up. I won’t do anything.”

“Oh I know, bitch.”

“How did you know it was us?”

Cicada chirps sounded off dully in the night. “You sure he at the fort? You sure he ain’t waiting just right there.” He waved his arm at the world beyond the windshield. “If he is, you the first one to go. I promise you that.” He knocked on her spine as it were a door. “Go one, get up.”

Naomi struggled out from underneath the dashboard and positioned herself awkwardly on the seat, folding her arms over her breasts. She embarrassed. Afraid.

“What are you going to do with me?”

Keeping his eyes locked with hers, he reached down by his seat and popped the trunk. She jumped at the sound of it unlatching. Her fear made him feel weak. “You gonna lead the way.”

Once he retrieved the shotgun from the trunk, he allowed Naomi to wrap herself in a soiled blanket Mr. Metti had in the backseat, but he would not let her dress. He reasoned that she wouldn’t run away if she were naked, though deep in his being, he sensed that, if things got hairy, she’d make a run for it, tittles and ass hanging out and all.

They walked along a concrete path flanked on either side by chirping forest that was partially lit by the moon hiding behind the clouds. A strange prickly sensation came over Richie, as he loaded the shells into the gun, cocking it with an almost ceremonious pump once he’d finished. The metallic grinding stopped Naomi, and Richie nearly ran into her, such was his singular focus on what he’d been doing. He was becoming the mission. Only way to be.

“Go on,” he said to her back. “Nothing can stop this, you might as well get used to that.” His strength had returned.

“You were always the fighter, huh?” Her voice quivered. “With your stupid little boxing matches in your backyard, bloodying the older kids for extra money. You always won, beat ‘me sometimes with one hand. You were so fucking proud of your little victories. But they were hollow. All that sweat in the summer, all that effort, just to end up in that house with her. Makes me sick.” As if for emphasis, she stopped and retched. Wiped her mouth when she was finished, and continued on without looking back. (Tough chick.) “So this is the little march to victory in your adult world. Excuse me, your perception of the adult world. La-dada, Richie. Think Black Ice is gonna write a

little ditty for you? Think anyone will remember this little spat between you two little boys?”

The concrete suddenly became wood, and their steps became thuds that, to Richie, echoed into eternity. Sweat trickled down his cheeks, formed on his palms, loosening his grip on the shotgun. Panic set in, mingling uncomfortably with the heat moving all across his body, onto his head. His eyes stung. He stopped. “Stop.”

Naomi turned around, “Starting to make sense? It’s coming down.”

Richie rubbed his eyes and leveled the shotgun at her. “Say anything you want about me. Anything. I know what’s going on. I seen everything clear from this day back to before I ever met you. You want to know a secret? I never said nothing about it before, ‘cause I knew no one would get it, but I’m a say it now, and you ain’t gonna say shit, are you?”

Naomi stared at him, dumfounded. “I know everything.”

“You don’t know this: I can remember being born. I can. I can remember the lights, the blood—all that blood—and I can remember the sticky feeling on my skin of my mamma’s hands, like they were afraid of me.” The night swarmed and spun around him, and inside he knew that he was experiencing a kind of re-birth in telling a tale he’d always wanted to be true, and in his excitement, his desperate grab for the thing that he wanted to be so near but knew would never come to him, he forced himself to believe, through announcing an experience that existed only in this moment, amid all this heat and fear and sweat, that he was somebody—that he had done something long before that mattered, and he would do something again, tonight, that carried even more weight and meaning in this world than a memory he’d couldn’t have collected. He would make her

believe it, and in so doing she would sense the gravity of it all, of the two cousins colliding in this nowhere, this city called Tampa, and relate it for all the world to hear, and they would remember. They would remember that Richie Thornton was alive. “You hear me? My mamma’s hands were afraid of me, and I felt it in my little baby’s heart. I couldn’t say nothing. I just screamed instead. And I been screaming all my fucking life. I thought people heard me but they didn’t. Not even you. Well, guess what? I’m gonna scream tonight. I’m let this hear shotgun scream and everybody’s gonna hear it. The whole world’s ears are gonna fucking bleed.”

Tears came down Naomi’s face. Sometime during his mad speech, she’d dropped the blanket. Richie pointed at the blanket with the shotgun. “Wrap yourself back up and get walking.” It took her a moment, but eventually she followed his instructions, and the continued on.

Bullfrog croaks issued from several hundred feet away, which meant the Hillsborough River, fetid and steaming, was near. A mosquito bit Richie’s forearm, but he paid it no mind. Instead, he took it as some cue from nature to bolt over to Naomi and stop her from walking. Below the thick cumuli outlined in moon-white was the fort, dark and unbending. He whispered in Naomi’s ear, “Move slowly. And stay close.”

His heart boomed, drum-like, in his chest, with a rhythm so powerful Richie thought he might go limp. They reached a railing, beyond which sat the river, black and alive with bullfrogs. He peered up at the second floor of the fort, where he had slept the night he’d left his aunt’s apartment and his cousin’s life forever, where they both had enjoyed bad weed on borrowed time as youngsters, and tried to spot something, anything that would indicate Robert was up there. Nothing stood out. Still holding the shotgun out

before him, he walked over to Naomi, and whispered, “Where he at?”

The answer was not what he was looking for. Above them a twig snapped, followed uncannily by a horrific boom that bounced off the forest in ever decreasing decibels. Somebody was trying to shoot them. Richie thrust the shotgun into Naomi’s back, dropping her onto the wooden walkway with a violence that caused her to shriek out in pain. Another boom rang out and bounced off the forest, splintering the railing where they had just been standing. The boom of his heart swallowed Richie, and, rather than question it, he continued on. Gotta move. Now.

Another shot zipped through the trees. With one hand Richie scooped Naomi up on her feet and forced her to run, naked, on his other side. He would be her shield. Up ahead, past the footbridge that led to the fort, there was a large, thick oak. If he could get her behind it, he could focus on his attacker. Two more shots rang out as they clumped and bumped across the walkway toward the oak. It wasn’t until he reached the oak that Richie realized he was alone. So singular had his purpose been that he didn’t notice when Naomi fell to the wood, gripping her stomach. Now that he was safe behind the tree, he could see her balled up figure, a dark, unmoving mass. Naomi?

The gurgling was so fluid and strained that, under different circumstances, Richie might’ve gotten sick to his stomach. But here, with yet another shot overpowering the bullfrogs’ song, Richie took it as a good sign. His back to the oak, he peered out over the footbridge at the fort, and saw a figure on its second leaning over with something extended outward. A mini-explosion erupted on the side of the oak near where Richie was positioned. He gasped. “Naomi!” He didn’t fully accept that it was indeed he who yelled until his echo came back to him, hoarse and high-pitched. It was a madman’s yell.

All he received in return was more gurgling.

“That’s what they call futile!” The voice surfed the light breeze and hit Richie like an eagle falling on its prey. Not only was Robert out there shooting at him, but he was also taunting him. Another mini-explosion on the oak. “You know what that means, Richie? It means can’t nothing change it.”

Again, without fully accepting that he was saying it, Richie called out, “It is what it is. Right, cuz?”

“Now you talking, boy.” Robert’s voice was somehow deeper, as if he’d gone through puberty or some other sort of transformation.

His heart steadied, Richie swung around the oak and blasted the shotgun in Robert’s general direction. He heard what sounded like a body falling to the wood, followed by sounds of pain. Emboldened, Richie bolted over to Naomi and crouched behind the railing, which was fronted by a thick palm. Confident that he was shielded from Robert, Richie set the shotgun by his feet, and rolled Naomi over. Her face was serene save for her trembling lips and the thick glaze of sweat, giving Richie the impression that she had just been unfrozen from a block of ice and was waking up to her new world. He followed her arms down to her stomach, and all hope of a reawakening vanished. A seething hole gushing black blood. Richie vomited.

“Can you hear me?” he whispered. Naomi said nothing, just stared above. Richie was about to address her again when the palm’s leaf cracked violently. This time, Richie felt the bullet rush past his ear. He raised the shotgun up and dropped it on the rail for balance and cried out, letting off two rounds that shook up the whole planet. The bullfrogs croaked no longer.

He stepped over Naomi and rushed down the footbridge, letting off another poorly aimed round as Robert, still a black figure pressed against the clouds outlined in moon, made his way down the stairs. It was a game of chicken. Richie stopped long enough to pull the shotgun up and against his shoulder, taking careful aim. Bam! Part of the steps behind Robert, who had made it half-way down, burst, and he stumbled, rolling down the stairs and landing in a heap at their base. A liquid plunk followed. He was unarmed.

His shotgun still at the ready, Richie cautiously approached his cousin, all frantic business. He down.

“This isn’t yours to win, motherfucker,” Robert called out in a pained tone. He sounded as if he were on the verge of crying. “This is mine.”

Richie stopped walking, but kept the shotgun aimed at his target. “You hit?”

“Fuck you think?”

“Where?”

Robert let out a cry, half hurt, half rage. “My head. I can feel it in my head and my chest. Happy?”

“Does it hurt?”

“I’m used to it.” He started laughing, as did Richie. They shared this moment of stupid giggling for a moment, and Richie almost allowed himself to enjoy it. Then Robert said, “Stop! This ain’t your laugh, bitch. This my laugh. I started it. It’s mine and you don’t get to have it—ever.” He was struggling to turn his body over. “Can you see my face?”

“No.”

“Good. Then you can do it.”

“I ain’t doing shit I don’t want to. Stay there, motherfucker. One more move ...” His cousin had started to crawl.

“Have it your way.”

“Why you come after her like that, man? Shit didn’t have to go down like this.” The hot sting of vomit sat at the back of his throat. He forced it down.

“I knew a dude in prison. Little guy. Called hisself Peedy. Didn’t look like much. Wasn’t much.” With some effort, Robert completed his turn, but he was still blackness to Richie’s eyes. “Everybody started betting on who’s bitch he was gonna be. Had a pot full of names, all the usual suspects. Dude asked me if I wanted in. I said yeah, but that I didn’t wanna pick no name. So dude says to me, then how the fuck you figure on betting? And I said I’m a bet Peedy there gets got for the year’s over. For I get out. Long story short, Peedy ain’t never had time to girl up with anybody. He got a toothbrush carved into a sick blade stuck in his eyeball for he had the chance. Dead and gone.” He spit. “Things are what they are, and they happen the way they supposed to. You ask me why I did that to Laurel. That’s my answer, motherfucker. ‘Cause that’s how it was supposed to be. What the fuck, you know?”

A lone bullfrog croaked in the distance. This answer did not satisfy Richie, and he felt a new wave of heat-rage roll over him like a freakish summer fog. “You gonna die out here. You know that, right?”

“Fucking A, dawg.”

“You scared, I know you scared.” Richie wasn’t sure of this, but he wanted it to be true. He wanted to guess at something and have it be correct. He wanted his own truth.

“I ain’t giving you that. But you giving me that gun.”

Richie couldn't help himself—he laughed. “How you figure?”

“You gonna leave it right there at your feet. Turn around, and walk the fuck away. You gonna give me this one thing. You gonna let me do this, alone. Don't worry. I won't start moving until you check on Naomi. But I'm a tell you right now I got her in the gut with that Glock, no question. That's a big hot bullet in her belly. She probably already gone. But you can have your moment. I'll give you that.”

The idea that Robert was in a position to give Richie anything was so absurd that Richie wanted to laugh again. But instead, and again without thinking, he bent down and set the shotgun on the footbridge. It made sense only if he didn't consider it. “Remember: I gave you this. I gave you the power to do this yourself. In the end, this my moment.” And with that, he turned and walked away.

When he reached Naomi, he could still hear his cousin crying out that it wasn't Richie's moment, that he had to take it back, that Robert deserved to own this one last bit, but Richie paid him no mind. Naomi was dead. Mosquitoes had begun to buzz all around her frozen features, doubtlessly feeding on the oil-slick of blood that had oozed of her stomach, through the planks and into the river. Hope you didn't feel it.

Shortly after Richie caught sight of his car, he heard the shotgun blast ricochet through the forest. He got into Mr. Metti's black Mercedes, on the ignition, and drove off, the air-conditioning cooling his hot body, toward the hospital, where he hoped might be able to see Laurel, and she him.

VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Kevin Michael Capp

Home Address:

2549 Ivoryhill St.
Las Vegas, Nevada 89135

Degrees:

Bachelor of Arts, Creative Writing, 2003
University of South Florida, Tampa

Special Honors and Awards:

Journalist of Merit
Nevada Press Association

Publications:

"The End of Las Vegas"
Las Vegas City Life
September 27, 2007

Thesis Title: The Burn: A Novel

Thesis Examination Committee:

Chairperson, Douglas A. Unger, Professor, M.F.A.
Committee Member, Dr. Beth Rosenberg, Associate Professor, Ph. D.
Committee Member, Dave Hickey, Professor, M.F.A.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. John Tuman, Associate Professor Ph. D.